

That View of Blue, Blue, Blue

by Keeley Young

She wakes to a little ringing in her head, the chime of a bell. The bell for the door, the one that rings with every open and close. It's mostly the two of them, that ring the little bell. Then why is it chiming in my head, she thinks to herself, tucking her feet into the fur slippers beside the bed. Always neatly arranged, so she doesn't have to scramble for them. Her eyesight isn't always so perfect in the mornings. The house is clean, but no more than usual. There aren't socks out of place; there aren't cupboards left swinging against their hinges. That'd be some act of treason, she thinks to herself, popping the kettle onto the stove. A tea will help with the chime of bells, she thinks. The house is silent, more than usual. She pokes her head out the window in the door. The smell of melting wax seems to engulf her, but she barely notices – she's eyeing someone out there, up the hill.

Her slippers crunch against the fresh, absorbing undergrowth, like tiny little nymphs kissing at the fur, saying a morning hello. Not that nymphs of this part of the woods would want to kiss you, she thinks to herself, laughing, softly enough for no one who could be close to hear her. She's almost alone, out here. "What are you doing up so early?" The fair-haired girl sits upon a wooden stool at the top of the hill, a glass jar in her hands.

"I'm bottling the clouds –" the girl says, tightening up the lid of the glass jar. There's another by her foot, which she reaches down for, replacing the filled-up one in its place.

"It's too early to be bottling the clouds, sister" She stares out into the beyond, where the clouds nestle themselves amidst the sunshine. Half have drifted into the bottle, it seems, where gaps let the brightest of the sun slip in, cascading down in tubular brilliance.

"No, it's too late. I forgot yesterday," the other sister mumbles out, gripping tight to the glass jar. There is a windstorm swirling, but it isn't outside, in the great wide world. She takes another breath, moving the glass jar toward the skies, until her sister's voice halts her. A calming voice, a reassurance.

"And we had a thunderstorm, and it shook the house, but there is no stress..."

"The thunderstorm could have knocked over our house, Leva, you must understand that –" she pauses, taking another look down at the glass jar in her hands, as if it could hold up the world with its confining shape. Leva is glancing at her, reassuring again, always the calmer one.

"Our house still stands. That is what I know," she says, kneeling down, reaching out to hold her sister's hands, but they remain clutching tight to the jar, as she stares inside of it, lost in it.

"Leva –" She shifts her eyes to meet her sister's, something inside of her limping down from the clouds, though not wanting to. Just knowing her sister must be right, because there is the house, down the hill, where it has always been.

"Our house still stands. The thunderstorm would have been good for the village, anyhow, they always do complain about a lack of rain, or a lack of danger, or a lack of something." She's gotten distracted by the village, now that Leva has brought it up, somewhere over there, beyond the ring of woods surrounding their home. They see the villagers, when they journey into town – friendly people, people who don't ask too many questions either. She feels for the jar, had it slipped out of her hands?

Leva cradles the empty glass jar, protecting it in her bare arms, like she would if it was a child – she'd do the same if it was topped up with clouds, of course. Tisbe sighs to herself, staring deep in the eyes of her sister, reflecting off her irises. "The thunderstorms are friendly to them..."

"Thunderstorms are not our enemy. And anyhow – we have reason to have forgotten." They turn back to the house, a cabin of two storeys, if anything. Without words, they understand each other.

"The visitor." Tisbe takes up the glass jar by her feet, protective of it now more than ever, now that she has bottled up half of the clouds for the day – now that there couldn't be such a thunderous storm as there was yesterday, when they had been distracted. The visitor had come. Plans had to be disrupted, then. They didn't like thinking of it now, but they'd forgotten about it yesterday.

“Indeed,” Leva whispers out, staring down at the house, comfortable up here on the hill. “Go check on them, sister. You can bottle the clouds once he is fed.” Tisbe rises up to her feet, exhaling. The clouds won’t move too much in half an hour, or so. They’ll be waiting for her, as they always do. Tempting her.

As Tisbe descends the hill, clutching tight to the two glass jars, having taken back the empty one from her sister, Leva watches in curiosity, mostly, yet something else lingers in her mind. It is thoughts of this visitor of theirs, some foreign man to them...now who could he be, beyond his name?

He had called himself Nillke, said he had been wandering the woods for someone, anyone, for a few days, because every step in those woods and you feel yourself lost, wondering if you had seen that rock circle before, or that growth of fifferblye flowers before. Perhaps, then, Leva thought to herself, brushing a hand against his head to check for his temperature, he is unsure of what the fifferblye flowers do when their pollens come across a human nostril.

They cause him to forget, of course. Silly flowers.

Nillke woke this morning with a bit of the expected, then – memory loss, a headache, again, but his fever seems to be dying out, Tisbe thinks to herself, pottering around the room for something. She’s seemingly forgotten what, maybe there was a pollen drop left clinging to his clothes and he blew it off into her nostril, but then she remembers – light bulb moment, Tisbe! She was searching for a telaon root, somewhat of a rarity in the village but you wander out yonder in the woods and find a crop of them, typically at the openings of caves, growing out of the rock. They taste of wolfskin, rough and oddly salty, but it clears your head. The world pops out into shimmering detail, once again. Some of the village kids stumble upon it, curious, and think they’re tasting magic. Telaon is nothing more than a gift left behind by a curious botanist who thought he could see heaven.

She crushes the root up, thinking to herself, little thoughts about the visitor. Leva comes inside, closing the door behind her, soft, subtle, like she almost floated in through the door. Her feet aren’t that soft, Tisbe reminds herself, smashing at the root in the stone bowl. She made the bowl herself, once, a blue moon ago. It was awkward to hold, sometimes. Sometimes it would edge this way, almost tip over, because part of the base, the base she made, is not too stable. Her little mistake, then.

Leva wanders over to their guest, taking another look at him again. He’s got a stubbly face, maybe shaven a few days ago, and his clothes weren’t terribly torn – little patches here and there, holes where he might’ve caught on a branch, or a fence, if he came from the village. Where did he come from again?

He seems too out of sorts to answer a question, but he’s awake, at least. His breath seems ordinary, much like his hair, the colour of the wooden floors she steps on as she moves around him, sensing him out. He doesn’t remind her of a knight, or a king, or any noble man who may have ill intentions pretending to be in dire need, so they keep him in bed, he must be just that – a poor man lost in the wood. Leva glances over at her sister, Tisbe, preparing a remedy of sorts over by the window. She has a view of the world, Leva thinks, knowing they don’t get to see much of it. The wood is their world, as the village might be his, or beyond might be his, he could be from a seafaring town, for all she could tell. He had no hooks sticking out from his pockets, but that would be dangerous, carrying around hooks where they may slice through flesh with any tumble. She tries to think less of his origins. She tries to think of what he may offer when they can nurse him back to health. Not a reward, of sorts, no, but she believes people offer things unseen. Tisbe has always offered warmth. The visitor, who can say.

And she watches him, breathing, adjusting to the light, as Tisbe carries over the stone bowl with steady hands. “Here we are, sir Nillke, something for breakfast.”

“No need to call him sir,” Leva whispers under her breath, trying to coax the visitor into a sitting position in the bed. He’s awake, just, but putting him upright helps. He starts to yawn.

Tisbe almost spills the bowl as she inches to pass it to him, steadying herself. “Get him to hold his hands out, Leva,” she whispers, staring at his palms, “or else I’ll spill it all over him, not that it would burn.” What she means is the wrong parts of his body would heal. His arm would start to remember how it acted in a past life. His elbow would remember some spell and try to curse his lips. What they want is for his soul to heal, and his mind, and his heart, not the limbs that propel from them. Or else his stomach could remember the exact sense of the telaon root and try to replicate it every time, strangely, and he’d get sick of eating foods that taste sweeter, and richer.

Leva lifts his hands, and he understands, his mind must be less foggy now, he went out like a flame doused in water last night, after they had spent most of the day nursing him to some semblance of health. The woods had ravaged him, bitten off his capability to survive on his lonesome, lucky he’d stumbled upon the house of the sisters, then. Another hour or so and he’d been dead at the foot of a cave, telaon mere inches from his head. It blends in like moss, though. He has the stone bowl in his hands now, spooning some of the liquidy-paste into his mouth. He squirms at the taste – Tisbe tried to make it sweeter, adding pinches of this and that here and there, but telaon is strong, bitter, and pangs at that first taste. He’d think they poisoned him. But within seconds the coursing telaon root will shape him back again.

An hour or so later, when Tisbe has finished bottling up the clouds, tucked them where they should be now, the visitor stirs again. He calls out a name first, a name Leva mishears, or doesn’t hear at all, and she comes into the room, confused, unsure, and he’s gasping, he must be suddenly remembering his stay in a stranger’s home in the midst of the woods, with – oh my – very sweet and lovely women tending to him. Leva pauses. He’s reaching his hand out, for her. She inches toward him, but does nothing about his hand, she’s always thought it irksome to touch a stranger the first time she meets him, in case he has a pocket blade stashed in his sleeve. Not that their visitor, Nillke, has much to do with sleeves, his shirt has short ones, not quite long enough to hide anything underneath.

“I remember a bit more of why I was wandering,” he says, shifting in bed, propping himself up a little more. Leva moves, reacts, as if to help him, but he doesn’t need her assistance, he’s a grown man with limbs that remember some more, now, and not from telaon root spilling upon them. He must be improving, she thinks, and promises to hear what his new light bulb idea is.

He clears his throat, sighing to himself, taking in the room a little more. It is Leva’s bedroom, but things have been neatened, so he thinks it’s some guest bedroom, as if they have the space for invited guests. They can make the space for the weak, she’d thought when they found him, collapsed. He takes another breath before speaking. “I was out on a journey, I think,” he utters, turning his attention to Leva now, beaming at her. “I was searching for something, in the woods, that I’d heard of.”

She tilts her head, curious, wondering what perhaps he could be searching for in the wood, when most of what you find out here is not all that rare, beyond telaon root, which perhaps could have been his bounty? Well he has found that, she thinks, hesitating to ask if it was a root or a plant or a flower that he’d set out to find, if it was something tangible she could point him in the direction of, once he was back on his feet. But she didn’t want to give away all the forest’s secrets so easily to the visitor – a stranger, in the end.

“You were searching?” she says cautiously. “I hope for more than the meaning of your soul, Nillke, I do hope you can remember for what.” He smiles, earnestly, and feels the cloth blanket with his fingers, fingers they scrubbed clean yesterday, when they had found him. The visitor. Not the intruder, because at least he hasn’t lunged at them, he is too weak. Nillke in bed shifts a little more, to his left, closer towards Leva, but she doesn’t notice.

“I’m sure my memory will come back to me sometime,” he utters, “thanks to your very kind nursing me back to health, I must say I am very grateful.” He grins like there is something stuck in his teeth and

she is looking to pick it out, but his teeth are clean of food, mostly, except for the grittiness and build-up, for he must not clean them, of course not, not someone like him. He's been in the woods for some time, too. Enough about his teeth.

"You are welcome, indeed," she says, returning the smile, though not as wide. Nillke and Leva stare at one another for a moment, unsure of what to say next, and in a hush, she excuses herself from the room, saying goodbye to the visitor, for now, of course. "I'll be back for your dinner, Nillke," she concludes, closing the door behind her. For a moment she collapses back against the wood, sighing to herself. Perhaps there is nothing to his searching, she thinks, exhaling. Perhaps he was out looking for something fabled, like the mafetta, such a species that couldn't possibly exist.

Leva pulls out a vial from her pocket, glancing out the window. Day is weaving its way through the hours, she thinks, catching a droplet of sunshine in her eye. She tucks the vial away. Where has that Tisbe disappeared to?

Tisbe washes her face in the stream, having rested the two glass jars of clouds beside her. She'd thought of leaving them outside the door to the house, before her walk in the wood, but who knows if someone out and about too would see them, snatch them up, maybe even release the clouds back out into the world, for yet another thunderstorm? Two in a row is dangerous. It could spell the end, she ponders, splashing another handful upon her pores, tickling her nose. The glass jars chink as droplets fall upon them, tickling them too. They don't shatter when you throw them, not that she admits to trying, not around Leva – just to herself, here in the wood, where she's in her solitude bubble. She collects the glass jars in her arms, turning back from the stream. If she had the hands, she would tear off a handful of the telaon root from that nearby cave. But her hands are full with the jars, and they're too precious to risk tucking under her elbow.

The clouds cannot ever be released again, from the jars.

She picks her path back towards the house, leaping over rocks, ducking underneath vines that could strangle her easy, her thin neck like any tender morsel, and they would find her there, strung up like dried out meat, on offer. On show, because everyone would hear about the girl they find in the woods, would someone find her? Her sister would. Leva would untangle her before any wandering villager could see, and bury her near the house, a little way away from the door, so Leva wouldn't cross the grave every morning, because by then the duty of bottling the clouds would be hers, too. More for Leva to manage, oh she would hate it, Tisbe thinks, leaping over a few pebbles laid out in a ring.

No more morbidity, Tisbe, she whispers to herself, nearing the house. There it is, just any ordinary cottage amid the wood, not atop the hill, as expected, but just below it. A strange view, but the way they intended it to be, when they built it. How many years ago, Leva? She almost asked aloud, although her sister must be somewhere inside, nowhere close. Tisbe barely remembers when they picked the spot. They had known they needed to bottle the clouds, then.

But Leva had not started to meditate with the wind, yet, had she?

No, I don't think so. And she steps closer to the door, smiling to herself.

The wood is beautiful this time of year.



The visitor is asleep, but Leva and Tisbe keep him company, glancing over at each other every now and then, as they carry out the odd jobs leftover for the day – Leva stitches up a torn hole from one of her dresses, the one she was wearing yesterday, while Tisbe is beginning preparations for dinner by peeling wild quaternips, and humming to herself. All seems peaceful, all seems quiet, and what is it, a few hours before the downing of the sun? Nillke's chest rises and falls, rises and falls. His memory seems better.

Improving, after all, and it must have been the telaon root fixing him right up, bless the species for its enriching nature. He was awake when Tisbe got home but fell asleep not long after. Sleep is where you heal the most, my dears, Tisbe hears in her head, in her mother's voice. It seems a forever ago when she was around, to heal them with not just her remedies, but her words.

Leva is quiet, eerily so, focused in on her stitching. Sometimes she would take a stool outside and sit by the door, glancing up at the world around her as she stitches, when she needs to. The branches in these parts of the woods do like to tear their way into dresses, and scrape against skin. But with the visitor, she's inside, making sure if he needs anything she is there to leap up and help him. He doesn't seem to ask for much. A sip of water every now and then, water they fished out from the stream – fresh water is better for a healing soul. He would be gulping down pure nature, after all.

The visitor doesn't talk too much, either. When he wants something, he asks for it in short sentences that can sound like demands, but Leva excuses it, because of the telaon. Who knows what it could be doing to his innards. A few words is enough to understand he needs water, and often enough too, he must be dehydrated still. She returns to her dress after pouring a mouthful of crystalline water down his throat. She hears him gulp, a heavy sound, means he's quenching himself with nature. She sits back down, taking the dress in her hands again. One of her favourites. It's starting to look almost too patchwork to be a dress, more like an amalgamation of mistakes she has weaved into the fabric, fixing them in turn, making sure there is no need to fret over the mistakes any longer. The dress is pretty in her eyes but wouldn't be so to the villagers. But everything is a matter of opinion, she thinks, threading the needle.

Nightfall comes as Leva and Tisbe prepare for dinner, scraping the peeled quatnips into a large, round pot of boiling water settled upon the stove. Leva had just come in from checking her traps – nothing much, today, but a little rabbit they can stew with the vegetables. They left the door open to Leva's quarters, where the visitor lay, seemingly asleep at the moment. He stirs, every now and then.

"He looks peaceful, sister," Tisbe whispers, glancing over to him from her distance.

Leva shakes her head, beginning to skin the rabbit. "It's the root, sister, as it is expected to do."

"A root cannot change a man so extremely," Tisbe utters.

"Don't you remember when you bit into it that spring morning?"

Tisbe stares down at the pot of boiling quatnips, frowning. "I am different, I am susceptible to change far easier," she says, stirring a wooden spoon in the pot. It bumps into the quatnips as she awkwardly tries to weave in and out, trying to be elegant, dainty. Her movements are sloppy.

"Fancy word, sister," Leva utters out, finishing up with the rabbit. She's always been much better at preparing meals than her sister, but they don't ever air this – they forever and always assist each other in the kitchen, no matter the circumstances. "The smell of this will stir him to walk, I swear it."

"You have such faith in a hasty recovery for him," Tisbe says, tapping the spoon on the side of the pot, tired of bumping obsessively into each and every quatnip.

Leva smirks, mostly to herself. "Ours is not a home of sickness, Tis," she whispers, "It never has been." She hacks into the rabbit meat, tearing through flesh, chopping it up into sizeable pieces. Beside her, Tisbe backs away, no longer feeling useful in the kitchen. She tugs at the shoulder of her dress, noticing the smirk fading from her sister's face. She is getting serious in the kitchen, Tisbe thinks, and turns away, glancing into what is now the guest bedroom – glancing at Nillke.

She gently shakes him awake, not that supper is at all ready for him to eat. He groans, but it is a soft groan, of interrupted sleep. He looks peaceful, still, she thinks to herself, inching backward away from him. "Supper's almost ready, Nillke," she says, a whisper out like the wind, as he batters his eyelids awake. There's something charmed about him, about the way he wakes up. It's rhythmic.

Tisbe and Nillke lock eyes, smiling at one another. He shifts until he's sitting upright.

Supper is ready – Leva has scooped out three bowls of the rabbit and quaternip stew, filling the bowl for the visitor just a smidgen more. He should eat up, if he feels like it, to get his strength back – and she makes sure to be cautious with his bowl, not even a droplet of stew may slip out from the edges of the bowl tonight. With hers, she’s almost careless, plunging it down on the table, but nothing spills.

Tisbe has helped Nillke from the bed, and here he sits, either sister to his side, the spoon drooping from his fingers. “What were you two nymphs whispering to one another?” Leva takes up a spoonful of stew, feeding herself as she waits patiently for a response. Tisbe is unusually quiet.

“Tisbe?”

“I was hoping to remind him of his journey, sister,” she says, stirring the spoon through her stew, “nothing more.” She slurps down a spoonful of stew, gulping. Her cutesy smile lingers on her face as she glances over at her sister.

“And did he remember much, Tisbe?” Leva smiles, casting another glance to their visitor.

Tisbe breathes, inward, outward. “He is starting to, yes, sister. Things are coming back.”

Nillke spoons another mouthful of the stew into his mouth, past his lips, past his teeth, and he smiles, pleased by the taste of rabbit and quaternips. He pays little attention to the conversation, merely enjoying his supper as the sisters pause, unsure of their next move.

“And what did he remember before supper, Tisbe?”

Tisbe takes another breath. “He was travelling to another village,” she says, her eyes not once straying from her sister’s gaze, “a village on the other side of the wood, he thinks.” The visitor is quiet, spooning himself more of the deep-coloured stew.

“He must be headed for Haighmere, then,” Leva suggests, slurping down more of the stew, seeming to drop the subject entirely. Even just because she is hungered, and weary of stirring things with her sister again. They continue supper in silence, almost. The guttural chorus of slurping comes with every spoonful from the visitor, but neither sister minds – neither sister comments. Likely, they are comfortable he’s eating again, by himself, without them labouring over him to make sure some of the rich-coloured liquid drains down his throat, not outside it.

“Haighmere,” he whispers out, his bowl of stew emptied by now.

“Famed for their trade,” Leva says, smiling out at him, then to her sister, spoon to her lips. “Where you in the market for something, Nillke, or did you have something to sell that you’ve seemed to misplace?”

“He can’t remember yet,” Tisbe replies for him, his eyes darting side to side.

Leva sighs. *Of course*. “Of course, one step at a time. Understandable.” She tries to mellow herself out, she’s started thinking that perhaps the pair of them are lying to her, but of course not – yes? Of course there could not be anything fishy to their earlier conversation, she was merely attempting to jog his memory – yes? Leva breathes. She trusts her sister. Tisbe smiles widely at her.

“I promise we will let you know as soon as he remembers more, sister.”

They wash the dishes after supper, scraping off the fleck of quaternips from the bottom of the deep pot off the stove. Nillke sits by the window, overlooking the hill, an eyesore blocking what could be the most magnificent view. Leva and Tisbe never once sit where he is, staring out that window – they prefer to take stools up the hill, the short journey, and overlook the village with the wind curling itself around each lock of hair, around their ears, around each strand of fabric clinging to their bodies. But he’s too fragile to wander outside, in case the wind toys with him and topples him off the cliff, to be spiked through his chest on one of the pine trees deep beneath.

They pause from their duties, every now and then, to catch a glimpse of what he could be mesmerized by. The moonlight, perhaps. Some unesa flowers growing at the foot of the hill, the same ones Tisbe noticed this morning, perhaps. Or he could be lost in thought, she thinks. No one can know.



In the morning, Tisbe is back upon her stool, back with the two glass jars, although this morning she brought a third, in case – she woke up with a sneaking suspicion today could prove to unleash a nasty thunderstorm, if she were to forget to bottle the clouds, like overhanging moss this morning, spreading all throughout the blued sky.

She likes to whisper good tidings into the jars, the moment before she seals them shut. Clouds cannot escape so easily when they are confined to jars, but those first few days she was cautious – what if I did not slam the lid upon the jar, and the clouds shot out at me, zapping me with their lightning magic? She whispers sweet nothings inside the jars, things of the sort like *hope there is golden rays of sunshine for three weeks*, and *the quaterns nourish your absence of disaster*. She doesn't think the bottled clouds listen, or that her words can change the weather, but she likes whispering to her clouds, hers, they are, now that she can befriend them from behind the glass.

Some days she only bottles half the clouds, if she expects a little rain will come, to feed the woods. To feed the village too, she thinks. But for a week or so she has been cautious. Then she had forgotten when the visitor arrived, and Leva had pretended to be calm, but she could tell from her eyes that it was worrisome. It is as if some monstrous storm is coming, and they can sense it, but that would be simple, would it not? Tisbe caps the first of the glass jars. Better to be safe than to be sorry, she thinks.

Leva is inside, stitching up a hole in the visitor's shirt. He sits opposite her, his bare back against the chair, his chest like that of a bear, yet he looks too thin, too measly to be something of a predator like the bear. He says he woke this morning feeling better still, and that he remembers more, now.

"I was headed to Haightmere for an uncle," he utters out, scratching his back, "My mother's family lives in Haightmere, you see, and she died perhaps a week ago."

"That is terrible news," Leva responds, gulping down her heart in her throat. She thinks of her own mother. The heartache of losing one's mother. She almost pricks her finger with the needle, but doesn't make any fuss over it, in case he notices and asks, prods, leading down that winding path to talk about her mother. What is there to say other than seem like she desires to be comforted? It has been years, she reminds herself, threading the needle back through his shirt. It will be fixed in no time.

He smiles, sympathetically. "Indeed. I know now," and he says this as he wipes his forehead, "that I couldn't have consoled myself until I reached Haightmere, and...and then the memory is blurry again."

"It will come back," she whispers, pausing from patching up his shirt to smile at him, their eyes meeting like the sun meeting the moon upon its descent in late afternoon. Nillke scratches his shoulder, breaking their stare, seemingly lost in something behind her, outside the window. He seems to like that he gets the view, always, she thinks to herself, dipping her head back down to finish patching up the little hole in his shirt. It took her longer than expected, because of his distractions. Not his torso, no – it will forever be his words, few and far between, that distract her.

Outside, Tisbe collects firewood. A butterfly starts to dance around her head, circling like a halo, and she smiles at it, whenever it darts by her eyes. I smell like flowers then, she decides, for a butterfly has fallen in love with me! She bends down to pick up a fallen twig. It reminds her of something you could use to walk up a mountain with, albeit far too tiny, and far too short. If you were a bunny rabbit perhaps. If you were no taller than my knees, she thinks, placing the twig back down on the forest floor. The butterfly lingers above her head, circling her. Nothing seems to distract it.

She carries a bundle now, tied together with some twine, so as to not stumble and spill all the logs everywhere. The axe she has tied to her back, sheathed and rubbing against her skin. They take turns finding firewood. Not since they were in cradles was there a man to chop down trees for them –

they've gotten comfortable with an axe, because they wish to be comfortable in front of a burning, and they wish to have cooked food, and now they have a visitor – and Tisbe freezes up, because there in front of her is a vision of the past. Standing a few feet away, or a mere stride for the creature, is a gargantuan woodland bear. But it hesitates. It neither leaps headfirst at the shorter, more petite woman, nor does it bound away, for perhaps her butterfly ring of protection will repel him – the bear. She gives the bear a courteous nod, glancing around for the butterfly. It perches upon her hair, wing and wind meeting, but neither brushing past the other. Perhaps like Tisbe and the bear.

But Tisbe knows now the bear is an illusion, from an earlier day. She came face to face with and wondered nothing then, nothing beyond what will come of me if I step forward, will this bear slaughter me? Now she breathes. There are twinkles of light at the corners of the bear, as if the image itself is becoming flat, like a surface, merely something she can swing her legs beyond. She pauses. The illusion bear's chest rises with every breath, almost humanistic. Bears have never meant to hurt me, Tisbe understands, all the sudden. The illusion bear has come to help, then? She finds a smoothed rock to perch upon. The world surrounding her is vivid green, one grand patch of moss and ivy. The illusion bear is fading with every moment she sits, and ponders, and wonders, perhaps I must wander these woods more and roar, call to a woodland bear, wonder when she may come. Tisbe sighs. Her illusions, like her memories, are not always easiest to interpret. She wakes in the middle of the night to dreams of flying frogs, sometimes, flying through cloudless skies – and wonders what that means, to see something impossible in a world that must be possible?

Up above, at least, no storm brews. No cloud threatens. Tisbe watches the butterfly float through the last remnants of the illusion bear, misting its paws, dispersing it finally. The butterfly circles her head once more, forgetting the past with it.

I must head back home now, Tisbe thinks to herself.

She lingers at the door, because she's stumbled on something unexpected. Leva stands by the bed, by the slumbering Nillke, with the deep pot raised above her head. She's frozen still, a tree in winter.

"Leva," Tisbe whispers out, afraid to wake the visitor.

Leva lowers the pot an inch. "Shush, you'll wake him."

"I was whispering, sister," she says, her voice even softer, "what are you doing anyhow?"

"I think he could be danger," Leva utters out, glancing down at his figure. He's in deep sleep again, because she dosed him up with more of the telaon root. Even that could be risky, she thinks to herself, but decided in the moment she needed him knocked out, if she wanted to bang the deep pan over his head...if she wanted to kill him.

"You are jumping to conclusions, sister," Tisbe whispers, inching closer towards her sister. The pot hangs up there, above the bed, above the visitor, above the two sisters – it doesn't move much, merely sways to and fro, with Leva's arm wobbling from, what's this, could it be a change of heart because of her sister? Her sister, the one to always inch her down from the cliffside, inch her away from making such sharp decisions.

Perhaps, she thinks to herself, if he remembers everything when he wakes, we can set him off in the morning and forget about him, she thinks. But the pot sways above her head. Her arm has stiffened up there, as if it is committed to the act.

"Sister," Tisbe whispers, "there is to be no saving grace for us if we murder a man for being confused." She has a point, Leva thinks. If only she could convince her arm.

The visitor, thank heavens, has not stirred from his slumber. He lets out a heavy sigh, deep in sleep. His eyelids are pillows themselves, little closed-up clouds, the way they should be, clouds, Sealed in shut. Leva starts to lower the pot from its poised position, being careful with herself, watching it with

both eyes, until she squeezes it tight to her stomach, shakes her head, and trots off with it back to the kitchen. She smiles back at her sister, who followed behind her.

“Thank you, Tisbe,” she says, out of earshot for the visitor, “You do keep me sane sometimes.”

“Not always?”

Leva laughs, pushing the pot into the back of the top cupboard, barer now than when they had moved in, remarkably. “I can keep myself sane most of the time,” she whispers out, closing the cupboard quietly, “but I do need my sister’s shoulder to rest upon every now and then.”

They smile at each other, and the moment dissipates as Leva shakes her head, up on her tiptoes again to retrieve the pot, beginning preparations once more for supper. They have more quaternips, but no rabbit today – they had to root through the cellar for something preserved they could serve up tonight, with boiled quaternips. Tisbe chose an eldish relish, made of the wild, bulbous vegetation that grows on the riverbank. They keep a few jars in the cellar, always.

“Dinner is vegetables and vegetables, then,” Leva says, with a toothy smile. Tisbe is too distracted by the world outside to comment – she watches as a little rabbit torments them, bounding up the hill.

She smiles. “Oh sister, why don’t I leap out from the house and trap a rabbit with my bare hands?”

Leva shakes her head, tossing the quaternips for tonight into the boiling pot of water. She glances over at her sister, sitting there by the window, and she notices the rabbit, briefly, disappearing towards the pinnacle of the hill. “You think yourself the best hunter, Tisbe,” she says, smiling to herself, “when you have those jars to help you, always.”

Tisbe turns away from the rabbit, away from the hill, back to her sister by the stove. “The jars aren’t for rabbits. You know that,” she whispers out, just loud enough for her sister to hear. She hops up from the stool, moving from window into the kitchen, her footsteps hollow and silent. “It’s wrong of me to trap rabbits in jars. Their limbs tangle up.”

Leva sighs, stirring the pot. “I know, sister,” she says, “now go make sure I didn’t scare our visitor.”

Tisbe shuffles out of the room, into the bedroom, cautious, crossing her fingers behind her back.



In the middle of the night, Leva thinks she hears a noise. Well, she hears many noises in the night, the gusts of wind, the rustle of trees, but this sound is something else. Something beyond the sounds of the wood, something human and void of nature, void of that essence. Because nature is an essence we all possess, her mother would say, sparingly, only when she or her sister felt their connection to mother earth slipping. You have nature within you, Leva. She thinks, perhaps, there are humans wandering the wood at night, for some strange reason, just now searching for their missing person – Nillke, the visitor. But she opens her eyes and notices the door swinging on its hinges. The wide wood surrounding the house seems as silent as ever. But someone is awake downstairs.

“What are you doing awake, sister?” Tisbe is sitting at the table, writing something into her journal.

She glances up at Leva, lingering on the bottom step. “I had an idea for next time I fail to catch a rabbit,” she says, continuing to write down in the leather-bound book.

“You didn’t wake Nillke, did you, coming down here?”

She smiles, shifting in her seat. “I checked on him, Leva. He’s sound asleep, still.”

“Good, good,” she says, “come back upstairs when you’re finished.” Tisbe nods, glancing down at the pages of the book once more, her neat handwriting a perfect fit for the page, not a smudge in sight.

Leva turns, beginning to climb back upstairs, until something pauses her. “And Tisbe?” She turns, glancing to her sister. “You left the door open, silly.”

Tisbe pauses, then shakes her head. “I am sure I had closed it, sister. I know not to leave it swinging.” Leva inhales. She exhales, shaking her head. *I must be delusional*, she thinks, and makes her way back to bed.

At a normal hour, with the two glass jars in her hands, Tisbe sets off up the hill to entrap the clouds, after she says a proper good morning to her sister. “It’s a beautiful day today,” Leva says, waving her off. Indeed, the sun shines bright this morning, like the morning before, and the chirp of birds is not still, is not hushed by the sound of thunder. Strands of grass tickle her toes; the wind whispers its good morning, weaving itself past every lock of hair. The wind smells of pine needles this morning, she thinks, clinging tight to the glass jars. Not once has she tripped climbing this hill. The earth is soft, but firm, and anything upon its surface from the door of the house to the tip of the cliff-face is sparse – the way the sisters like it, for their safety. A sort of pathway from their door to, strangely, the safest spot in the wood. The hillside.

Tisbe uncaps the first of the glass jars, staring out at the world beyond, below the clouds.

“I suppose you all would like to know why we bottle the clouds away,” she whispers out, speaking to the village down there, in the distance. Her glass jars are impregnable. They trap the clouds inside, and you down there, she thinks, you wonder why rain is so sparse. She lifts the jar upwards, as if her limbs stretch higher than expected, as if they can grow to the size of tree trunks, or the there is something inside of the glass jars that tempts the clouds, that draws them nearer and nearer.

“As I tell you each morning, villagers,” she continues, eyeing each marshmallow puff collapsing into the jar, “we all have our chores, that keep us from floating off into some struggling current.”

She smiles to herself, capping the first of the two jars. “Sometimes we let you have your rain,” she whispers, tucking the first jar underneath her stool. The empty jar sits idly beside it, and she reaches down, plucking it up in her hands, the cool touch of glass against her fingers. “Those days, if we can help it, we spend the night outside of the house,” she continues, “for there are things villagers would never understand about Leva and Tisbe...”

She shakes herself off, snapping out of her train of thought. She begins to unscrew the lid of the second jar, focusing once more on the task at hand: *I must bottle the clouds, completely, each morning*.

“You’re very convincing, you know,” she says, peering down at the village, “some days I do almost tell you all my secrets.” The village has no chance to answer back, and she smiles at it, at the roofs of every house and little shop, at the crackling streets, and then pauses, with the jar in her hands. She nods at the clouds, the last of them remaining in the sky, taunting her. The glass jar is almost leaping from her hands like a lovesick puppy – it knows what it has been meant to do, since creation.

She bottles the last of the clouds for today.

A gust of wind envelops her.

Tisbe sets the glass jars down by the door, inside, out of the way. The house seems quieter, but only, she thinks, because Leva is not standing there in the kitchen, or sitting at the table with a chore, so perhaps she is out behind the house, sitting in her peace. Tisbe checks out one of the back windows, stepping through the visitor’s bedroom, once Leva’s own room. Behind the house, nothing but the bare patch of grass they keep that way – living, breathing, but emptied of anything else, so there is ample space for Leva. They each take one side of the house, then, with the hill almost inscribed with Tisbe’s name. How she wishes Leva would materialize in the backyard out of nowhere.

She would have told me if she had planned on wandering off into the wood, Tisbe thinks, crumpling up that idea as she steps out of the bedroom and towards the staircase.

Then it dawns on her. The visitor, Nillke, was neither in the main room, or in the room, so where is he, also? Her limbs freeze up. Will she wander upstairs and find them in bed together, because perhaps Leva’s questioning of him turned into some form of desire for him? No, Tisbe thinks, slamming that

idea over the head with a broomstick. She wishes a butterfly formed a halo around her head once again, but there was no critters inside the house, as there seemed to be no other humans. Tisbe creeps up the staircase, catching her breath. She's calming herself down already.

The door swings on its hinges, again. She hears a voice coming from inside the bedroom.

"Tisbe?" The voice is wrong to be her sister's, the voice is off, the voice sounds different. She shoves the door open with the palm of her hand, curious but cautious, taking each step like she walks upon a string – this string may snap at any moment, Tisbe, she thinks to herself, breathing out. "Thank the heavens you're back, Tisbe." The door swings back, and she stands in her bedroom, but everything is different. Not merely the voice. Not merely the visitor.

He has his arms wrapped around her, tightening in like an anaconda, or at least that is how it seems to her, wrapped in his violence and vengeance. The visitor is a danger, sister, Leva wants to whisper out, thinking back to the moment she could have brandished him with the pot from the kitchen. Forget the past, Leva, she tells herself, staring into her sister's eyes. He was waiting for Tisbe.

He has more on his mind, then, she thinks.

The visitor eyes Tisbe with a smirk. "Come closer, Tisbe," he murmurs, tightening his fingers around something in his left hand, but neither can see it, not without some tidal wave of force prying back each finger. Tisbe inches forward. She's hesitant, by the way he feet move, by the way she clasps her hands, and unclasps them, trying to paw at the wind. But the room is still, and hushed, and the wind brushes against the outside walls of the house, but cannot come inside.

Leva gulps down a breath of air. "They were not wrong about fifferblye flowers," he says, spitting his words like venom, "but it didn't affect me half as much, like it doesn't affect the both of you."

Tisbe swallows a tongue. Or she wishes she could, so as to not speak to him again. But her words come out smoothly, strangely. "What would give you that impression, *Nillke*?" His name collapses out of her mouth like thick paste.

"Two sisters in the woods, bottling the clouds," he whispers, poking a finger sharper into Leva, "neither one could have come from the village. Neither one could possibly be human."

Tisbe inhales, and exhales, heavy. "Our grandfather came from the village." Leva glares at her.

"Your grandfather must've been a foolish man."

She wants to leap right at him and tear his ears off with her teeth. But she refrains herself. It takes all her energy to keep herself still, frozen, but her sister stands clutched tight to his stomach, and there would be no way to hurt him without shoving her into the furniture in the process, or worse. He has her in the perfect position. She would be slain.

Tisbe smiles, giving him a performance unexpected. "We are not afraid of you, visitor."

"Then why did your sister run from me when I awoke and asked her where the clouds are kept?"

Leva tenses up. He tightens his grip around her.

"The clouds are kept in the sky, silly," she whispers, an answer he'll bury her in.

"You will never know the truth about us," Tisbe continues, inching toward him. The visitor does nothing but stare back, deep in her eyes, his arms wrapped tight around her sister. It is a standoff, and yet, neither aims a gun at the other. His grip on Leva begins to loosen, strangely. She can feel the circulation flush back in, feel the air tickle her skin, and she struggles out from his clutch, kicking him backwards. All seems too simple. He must have another plan in mind, Leva thinks, crumbling into a hug from her sister. Her mind drifts from thought to thought. The visitor is combing his hair with his fingers, looking dejected.

"I was told the sisters upon the hill were stubborn and separated from the normalcy of the greater world," he whispers out, loud enough for them to hear clearly. Tisbe and Leva stare at him, swallowing their breaths. *What does he know of us?* They cling to each other.

Leva inches forward, still clutching Tisbe's hand. "Who told you about us, when we keep to ourselves, always?"

He shakes his head, smirking. "It was never a person, no," he says, taking a step forward, purposefully, "I just listened to the rain, when you let it come out."

Tisbe freezes up, forcing herself to catch his stare. "But it is a rarity for us to let the rain come."

"Tragic, that is," he mutters, "but I waited. I would have waited forever."

He frowns. "Why is it exactly that clouds must be bottled in jars?"

But there would be no answer, not from either sister, standing their ground, clinging to each other.

Nillke tilts his head, inching forward from his position across the room. He's silent, an unnerving silence. The corners of his lips twist into a smile, a weak one, a hesitant one, but a purposeful one.

He takes another step forward – the sisters take another step backward. "I don't want to hurt either of you," he utters, inching closer, closer, pushing them back further, further.

Leva clears her throat. "Beyond knowledge," she says, her voice weakening, "what else do you want?" He takes another step. His feet are soft against the wooden planks, a whimper of wood with every step, but never a bang, never a sound to frighten. He's slinking from his spot towards the sister.

"I came here to ask you to stop," he continues, dipping his head. "If only you could stop." The visitor snaps his head back up, staring right at the sisters, twisting his lips into a dreaded smile. He inches forward, again. He's trapping them back, up against the wall. Leva feels the wood press against her, wishing she could snap away something to whack him over the head with, wishing she could do something to knock him back into that slumber he was in again. But nothing, nothing around her feels loose, nothing around her breaks. Tisbe inhales. She struggles to force her breath back out.

Nillke takes another step, tiny squeak from the floorboards. "Where are the jars?"

Tisbe gulps, remembering the two by the door, wishing them away as if they could poof, just like that, bam, the jars are in the someplace safe. But no, they would be downstairs, sitting by the door, sealed shut, at least. She exhales. "Down. In the place you belong," she mutters, tempted to spit on him, "in hell."

He stands inches from them now, pressing himself up against Tisbe, caught staring in her eyes, the pools of them. But the glue does not stick. She gulps down fear, like bruised quaterns, like rotting rabbit. A vomit sort of taste is in her mouth thinking about something rotting. But a rotten thing stares back at her, finding something in her eyes. "Hell is make-believe," he says, spitting each word out. A droplet flecks her cheek.

This may be the moment you perish, Leva thinks to herself, rolling thoughts around her like clockwork. *He doesn't know how to find the jars. He doesn't know who we are, truly. He cannot break us.* She knees him in the stomach. "You idiot," he hisses, pressing his palm to his stomach. But the pain seems to disperse from him, and her gut sinks. Her stomach knots itself up, in a bow, perhaps, ready to unwind itself and unwind itself until she screams in pain and collapses down to the ground. No. The pain in her stomach settles itself, and he's stepped back a few paces, but his stare remains, tense, bitter, controlled. Tisbe has made no moves, her legs glued down to the wooden planks. "Feel like getting to know your visitor a little better, Leva?"

An arm of wood branches out from the wall, gripping her wrist. The bones crackle. Searing pain shoots through her body, and she screams, and yet not once does her stare cast upon the unwanted visitor shift, or fade, or break. She spits out at him.

"I will ask nicely one last time: tell me all about your glass jars of clouds. Otherwise," and he smiles, a toothy grin, a creepy glare, and another limb snaps free from the confines of the wall, skewering Tisbe's right leg. Her scream wakes the nocturnal critters of the forest, waiting for darkness, when it has come inevitably too soon.

“Don’t,” Tisbe whispers out, breathlessly, glancing over at her sister. She wants to say more, to tell Leva to not tell him the secret, any secret, but the pain courses itself through her body and she grips tight to her leg, the wooden branch of an arm tearing itself from her flesh. It’s agonizing, for her, but the visitor has a charmed grin upon his face.

Leva hesitates, not tempted to leap out at him again. “You are the kind to sulk when he cannot have what he wants,” she says, trying on a grin when her insides are all murky, all choppy like rapids. “I call the wind upon you, Nillke.”

He straightens up, smirking, snidely. “We both know the wind does not obey you, Leva.”

A snap. He calls in some tongue she doesn’t recognise, and two branch-arms break out from the walls, winding their way around her. She is locked back in the grasp of madness once more, now limbs of a mythical, mystical tree – this one can grip me, mama – where once it was his arms. His arms, arms she once thought of as weak. Because he hadn’t been moving, he hadn’t seemed strong at all. Tisbe was tightening her fingers around her leg, boring into the flesh with her nails, hoping to carve out the pain from the puncture. Her screaming has halted, at least.

“Give in, bottlers of clouds and wind-meditators,” he continues, inching toward them, “after years of searching, I have found the women who seek to create a world that cannot harm them.”

Leva bites her lip, staring at him. Beads of sweat trickle down her forehead. The limbs attached at her hip, at her stomach, are like a tight hugging, but she feels the most uncomfortable she has ever been. Her sister lays upon the floor, her head against the wall, less fearful of the animate tree-limbs than she expects of herself. Her right leg is limp – I might as well chop it free with the axe, she thinks, if she could free herself from him first.

“I had fifferblye pollen daubing me, when you discovered me,” he whispers out, sitting down now, somewhat of a bored expression being shoved back in with every word he speaks. “And not a single affect did it have on the pair of you.” He smiles, a sort of reminiscing smile.

Leva exhales, a twig poking itself into her stomach. “Did you have your picnic in it?”

“I suppose it says something of who I am,” he whispers out, “that I could be bathing in a forget-me-so flower and merely forget a few things, like the name of my uncle.”

“Congratulations,” she says, spitting at his feet, “there is not a single human walking the wood.”

She licks her lips, glancing over at her sister. Tisbe struggles to keep herself awake, drifting between fields, drifting out of the conversation. She has not spoken in some time, but that remains the most human part of the day.

“Spit at me once more, Leva, and I will have your organs pouring out your eye-holes.”

She grins, passing through the pain, as best she can. “I have a heart twice the size of yours,” she responds, trying to blink him away, “It will never fit through the sockets of my eyes.”

“I am bored of your resilience,” he snaps, rearing another limb from the wall, to skewer straight in, from back to front, carving a circular hole in Leva’s chest. Tisbe screams, aware of nothing but that twinge, that limb pulsating itself through her sister, and she sees everything all at once. Her sister’s eyes are bleak and lifeless, by now. Her scream echoes, as if the room empties out of blockages, like that visitor of theirs, who clambers to his feet now, towering over Tisbe. Like she is now the village, and he the hill, he the cliff, and he the house too, and he the bottles as clouds are sucked out and away, oh rain would help me, as the village, she thinks. But nothing is coming to save her, not with her sister fallen down limp now, and branched limbs retreating back into their hidey-hole in the wall.

“What...what fascinates you so much about clouds, and rain?” Her voice vibrates, somehow, as if the last of her sister’s power courses through her, too, blending in with the pain and the hurt.

He chuckles, inching closer to her. “All I wanted was to know the why,” he whispers out, and she bites her lip, gnaws down on it. It’s her refusal, a matter she can avoid now, if she is to die too.

She pauses. His face has contorted now, now that he has slain her sister, now that he has revealed himself to be what, a charlatan, an abuser of the darkness, a treehugger with pursuits of vengeance? But his face is the same, all the while. He wore no physical mask, and he had forgotten many things, when he had succumbed to the flowery pollen. She'd noticed that, in his eyes.

Yet still, the visitor persists to be an enemy, like that of the clouds.

"We all keep our secrets," she responds, with a grin. The pain in her leg has dimmed, over time, but still she has not moved since she collapsed down to the wooden planks of the room, staring up at him, hoping under her breath that a swift kick to her head would not come and knock her down, for good. "Had...had the pollen not affected you, like it would a human...would you have twisted the life from my sister then, and myself, too...would you?"

He runs a hand through his hair, contemplating. She notices now, properly, the scar that sits above his eyebrow, jutting upward from his forehead. He sighs. "I would have found another reason to be in need of your care, of your nurturing," he says, with a sense of impatience arising, "for it was never solely about doing you harm, Tisbe."

"No, of course," she says, "You searched out the secret of the hiding clouds."

"A secret you bury under enough dirt for the wood."

"We bury nothing...I suppose it will now just be me." A light in her mind dims. She lowers her head, glancing once more at her sister. Leva is lifeless, as she shall remain.

Nillke falls into a silence, yet his eyes remain resting upon Tisbe, in her scarred-up form, collapsed down there upon the wooden planks. He exhales. An ember burns in his iris, the glow of the sun. Every smudge of his face is a trillion times more detailed closer up – she noticed that every time she'd help him eat, such a mistake glancing into the past to that.

She stares up at him, rabbit caught in a trap eyes, for once she can resonate with the critters they eat for supper. His eyes stare back. Neither has spoken in minutes, how it seems. And yet...a thousand words escape from behind their lips, and she narrows her eyes at him. The room is cold. Void of winter wind, and yet, cold, chilled, frost-bitten. Tisbe inhales, gulping down air.

"You can search forever for your solutions," she says, her voice soft, "but my sister and I were comfortable with never leaving our home, or the wood."

"You are comfortable only because you alter the world around you to fit."

She exhales, wishing somehow she could warm up her innards. "If you found where my glass jars are hidden," she begins to ponder, tilting her head, "what would you do with them?"

He pauses, staring down at her. "There would be no sense in unleashing every cloud from its glassed-in prison," he says, another branched limb untangling from the walls, slithering around Tisbe's stomach. "But I need not bother you with my secrets," he continues, smirking, the limbs tightening around her. He towers over her. Her body is crouching closer to the ground now – alarmingly, to her, he appears as if a giant, dazzlingly ginormous from her eyes. "Something always must be buried."

He gives her no chance for parting words, no chance to whisper out a goodbye, as the branches that once leapt out from the wall, miraculously, now tighten around her, squeezing out every last breath. She turns blue, then purple, then ice white, fading through every phase. In a gasp she is gone. In a breath, a heavy, heaving sigh, the visitor takes a seat upon the bed, staring down at the slain. A gust of wind finds a crack, somewhere in the walls, or the floorboards, and kisses each cheek one last time, first Leva, then Tisbe, and slashes at the visitor's face, and yet leaving nothing more than a touch. He barely notices anything. He runs a hand through his hair, with a pause.

The house is quiet again.



He wanders around the house, tearing apart everything. He throws the heavy pot, the one for cooking the quaternips and the like, he heaves it across the room. It slams into the wall with a twang, and he searches the kitchen, still, frivolous and rampant. He finds nothing out of the ordinary, expecting that he should, should find something so miraculous it belongs in his hands, not theirs. Though their hands are limp now. Dead hands. Cold like waterfall water, cold like rain. But not sticky rain.

The visitor – though now the house is neither theirs, nor his to claim – wanders back upstairs. He runs a finger along the wall, as it gathers dust by the minute, and he’s smirking to himself – for who else in the world is there to smirk at, as the wind passes the house by. He re-enters the room, that fated room, where limpness has settled upon the bare wood. He nudges Tisbe’s body further out of the way, grunting as he moves closer towards the bed. But underneath it he finds nothing, as if the place itself is an empty vessel, as if no one has lived here.

“Do you not have keepsakes, ladies,” he says, glaring down at two corpses, not expecting but waiting for them to speak, to talk, to awaken from the dead with dreaded speech, something cursed this way comes. Leva and Tisbe stare back, unmoving. He hadn’t paused to close their eyelids, to let the spirit wander out free after the passing. Their cloud-bottling, wind-meditating spirits are trapped beyond the irises of their eyes. Watching their once-visitor rooting through their belongings.

“Oh right, you have nothing!” He bellows out, storming out of the room, back down the stairs, back into the room he had been sleeping in, told to him as Leva’s room, where she had slept before him. Why had she taken the room downstairs, he wonders to himself, flipping the pillows, tearing them apart with talons for hands, why, she could have overseen the world from upstairs. He shakes himself out of the notion of Leva upon some balcony, hands clasped, overlooking the world beyond her. He thinks to himself, surer, *she needed to be closer to the door, to flee*. Her bedroom is empty, too, empty of anything noticeable. She had the tools for her sewing, her fixing up around the house, settled upon a table, a balanced act – now the tools litter the floor, a mine field, a safety hazard for the foot. But he moves on from that room, chooses never to step back into it. It’s a shrine to Leva, a shrine no one acknowledges. The door at the front of the house swings.

He retraces his steps back to the pot. It isn’t dented, it isn’t scratched. He imagines quaternips back inside of it, bobbing up and down, and he remembers the putrid taste of them. A taste of dirt. But they’d promised they washed them, and they’d boiled in the pot, and served up clean and polished. Quaternips always will taste of their motherland. Mother Earth.

He carries the pot back to the cupboard but doesn’t replace it – he stares at the lip, at the handles, at every intricate detail, until he realises the pot is ordinary, plain and simple. He lunges it back toward the room he slept in, listening to the clatter as it tumbles down, crashing into the doorframe.

“Ah, shush now, pot,” he whispers out, a harsh whisper, a spit of words.

He tears into every cupboard, behind every door, staring back up that hill, for something, anything. The world beyond knows what he searches for, but offers no hints, no clues. The wind takes its slumber outside, swerving around the hilltop.

Nillke, if the visitor had not lied about his name, too, slams his fists against the table.

The house echoes.

Nightfall settles, the visitor with his feet up upon the table, kicking at the thin veil of air lingering in the house by the hill. The pot boils on the stovetop. The flicker of the fire lights somewhat of the room, otherwise he sits in darkness, wallowing in it. The quaternips boil. The visitor stares at the wall, when staring down at his feet, or the floor, starts to bore him.

He has found not having woodland women to torture leaves the house rather empty, inside. Tomorrow morning he'll search again for what he seeks. Tomorrow, when darkness ceases to shroud him, he'll move on from staring at ceilings. But for now – his supper is ready.

He feasts on quaterns, and a rabbit they had caught in one of their traps. Easy enough to find, the traps were. In plain sight, for the rabbits to find. He's scooped a portion of the stew into the bowl, the stone one, the only one he hadn't smashed earlier in the day. It seems indestructible, this bowl.

As if there is more at work here than pure truth.

Of course, he thinks, she'd been bottling clouds.

He digs into his supper, burning his tongue.

He boils the kettle, staring out the window, up the hill. The new morning is duller, for clouds come in and encircle the sky, and the visitor smiles to himself. "Rain will come," he whispers to himself, wandering back through the first floor of the house, searching for hidden doors upon the walls. Nothing. Nothing he can find, at least, unless there's some hidden door behind the cupboards. Doors that would lead nowhere, he thinks, remembering how the house looks from the outside – small, petite, hidden beyond the canopies of the wood.

He wonders if they have some cave in the wood, where they hide their treasures, where they hide their collection of clouds in bottles. He'd have nowhere to start, when every cave could be home to a bear, or every cave could lead to a pocket of water, and he could drown before he finds their collection. Perhaps, he thinks, they part water with their hands too, perhaps this, perhaps that. He slams his hands into wood. Banging, pounding, foolish to think this will achieve anything for him. But his anger halts. He hears a grumble, coming in from the east.

Rain.

Thunder.

Lightning.

A crackle, the whip of the sky, hits the roof of the house. The visitor sits by the window, upon a stool he dragged from the corner, staring up the hill.

There are corpses rotting upstairs, he thinks, and the sound of rain is beautiful. Leaves suckle, pools creating themselves at the roots of the plants scattered here and there, and the wood seems otherworldly, separate completely from the world once known by Leva and Tisbe, sisters of the forest.

"You did them dirty, sisters," he mutters out, watching a harmless bunny rabbit bounce past the path of the door, disappearing further off that way into the bushes.

The world is the way he would see it, now. The world is his.

Rain pours down upon the roof, splattering out with raucous wailing, and the sound of something crashing brings him out of his stare. A piece of the tiling, from the roof, lays wasted outside the window. The door upstairs swings abruptly, incautiously, vacantly. Out of instinct, mostly, he races up the flight of stairs, slamming the door shut on its hinges, blocking out the deceased laying lifelessly upon the wood-planked floor. They stare at emptiness, as does he. Back downstairs he heads. The outside world is a dull, sullied grey-and-black, and he stands inside the house by the hill – the house the clouds rain down upon, no matter the season, no matter the weather.

The door at the front of the house is torn away, flinging itself with the wind, flinging off the precipice of the cliff. Thud. As loud as the whip and click of thunder and lightning. The rabbits hide now. The leaves shrivel in, sheltering themselves, as another bolt clacks against the tiles. More of the roof slides away, the joyride toward the softer grass. Nillke stands in the emptied-out doorway, watching as chaos overwhelms the skies, encircling the house.

But I need the bottled clouds, dammit, he screams inside his head, as a loosened tile flicks back in the wind, and knocks him unconscious.

..

He awakes with a searing pain in his head, and the cool wind weaving itself through each strand of his hair. His shirt is torn, a minor knife-like cut through the abdomen of it, but nothing is human about it. He concentrates the head pain away. His mind is clear, focused, concise, perfect enough now to realise the damage that surrounds him. No wall stands of the house. Toppled over furniture, or furniture still standing, such as the cupboards, dots the space around him, forming those familiar rooms, and he's beneath the table – or he would be, yet there the table is, feet away from him, edging itself closer towards the cliff-face. The sun is brighter. The sun gapes down at him, where not a single cloud surrounds it, as it had been days prior, when clouds would be jarred. The clouds have parted, then, he thinks, beginning to pick himself up off the ground. The stairs are leftover, planks of wood climbing to nowhere, and he wonders where the previous tenants of this hovel live now. Their bodies must have been flung into the wood, in the wind, and the rain. In the storm. The goliath storm, that broke down their cabin in the wood.

Nillke starts to wander around the debris, lifting broken hunks of wood, shuddering them back down to the torn-up earth. He finds that stone bowl, still unharmed, underneath a collapsed part of the wall. It glares back at him like a possessed doll, but a bowl has no eyes, no mouth, no arms, no hands. He hurtles the stone bowl at the staircase. It collides with the wood, and for a moment, he's about to rage and scream, for how could I bowl survive everything – and then it shatters, the bowl splitting into five perfect pieces. He sighs in relief. The bowl had been tormenting him.

But his respite fades with every breath, and the glass jars of clouds seem nowhere to be seen. For yesterday's jars seem to have vanished, too, before he had come downstairs. Had the wind carried them away? The visitor slams his fists into the staircase, falling to his knees. The wood is bare against his flesh. A stairway to nowhere. He closes his eyes, opens them hoping the world has changed once more. Nothing. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he notices something. A circular carving, into the step, barely noticeable.

He scrambles the broken pieces of the bowl in his hands, after he has set the table upright again, and he places them down. Organising them back into form, the pieces snap back together, without the scars of shattering. There is magic in this bowl, he thinks, so perhaps there is magic in the carving. He cups the stone bowl in his hands, feeling for a pulse inside of it, in between the skin of his fingers and the centre of the bowl. It warms to his touch, but does not glow, or strike out with a sting of magic. He turns around, back towards the staircase, and moves for the small circular carving. For what else in the ruin of a house would fit perfectly in that ring, if not the regenerative stone bowl?

He clicks the bowl into place, listening for a whirring sound, or a flash of light, but the ruin is quiet, silent, except for that sharp click as bowl slots into carving. The stairs begin to fold in on themselves. Disappearing into the wood, moving beyond ridges, for another staircase to appear, tonguing out into the darkness. Down, down, down. The cellar.

He takes a step, then another, strangely unsure of his surroundings. The one room of the house he has yet to explore, hidden off behind a staircase – underneath a staircase, the cellar. Each step groans and croaks, an unfamiliar foot-tread, a weary welcome. Darkness hovers above his head, and below it, as he moves out of the light of day, burying himself under the dirt with every tread. The air is not stale, or tart, but tastes of rain. That wet, sappy taste. He takes another few steps down into the cellar, breathing deeper.

The cellar flickers on a light, as if by command. The place illuminates. Rows upon rows of shelving climbs from floor to ceiling, disappearing deeper into a warehouse of bottles, containers, and glass jars. Some contain food supplies – preserves, fruits, vegetables, the odd jar of saplings and sprouts. But the

weight of the storage down in the cellar is what he had searched out, for forever – the glassed-up jars of clouds, trapped in their prison. Each one seems different, a changed collection of puffy and fluffy white masses, some squished up against the walls of the jar, others floating past one another, for those days with smaller cloud cover, or for those days the sisters planned for it to rain. He wanders past row after row, smiling in at each cloud, as if it has the eyes to stare and smile back, begging to be freed. He plucks a glass jar from the shelf, squeezing at the lid. Nothing. He tucks his shirt over it, squeezing, heaving, his breath collapsing in on him as he struggles, and to no avail. The glass jars refuse to open. He lunges a jar across the row, and it corrects itself upon impact, staring back at him, in perfect form. Not a single crack stretches the jar, no air, no clouds escape from it.

He sets the glass jar back upon the shelf, snickering at it one more time. He moves through each row, searching for something out of the ordinary, beyond jars of clouds collected in the morning time. Another row of preserves, older and groggier, that make him clutch at his stomach. The liquid a putrid green colour. He rounds the corner, pleased to see the soft white of fluffed clouds. And then, following that one, another row of the clouds, and another, and another. Surely, he thinks, there is an end to the cellar. His feet grow weary.

He stumbles upon the back wall of the cellar, but it is the only wall in the underground without shelf upon shelf of bottled anything. The cellar narrows in, each row shorter than the last, until he finds that final row, and that back wall, connecting to its adjacent walls through a series of pipes. In the centre of the wall, connected to the myriad of pipes, is a machine, of sorts. A machine the size of two figures, to be precise, shorter than the visitor himself, but barely. Could it be some technology he has never seen? He steps forward, studying the buttons, the lever, the words written above the two slots, the figure-sized slots. Two words, carved into the metal.

Leva, on the right.

Tisbe, on the left.

The machine powers back up; the pipes rustle and shake, selecting their ingredients from the cellar – two glass jars, each, from the shelving, and one jar each of the dark green substance, a substance that glugs as it slides down the pipes, headed for the machine. Nillke is dead in his tracks. Figures begin to form in the space, beginning at the toes, and the legs, skin as smooth as silk. He backs up, stunned. Leva taps her foot against the metal. Tisbe begins to wriggle her fingers. Their torsos form, from clouds and guck. A soft whisper creeps from the machine to the visitor's ears, a whisper he cannot understand.

Leva chuckles, brashly, an eruption of an echo. Nothing shakes but their visitor, Nillke.

Sisters, hand in hand, step out of the gaps in the machine, floating on air.