THE WONDERS BEYOND…

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My mind has been bursting with thoughts for as long as I can remember. An infinity of them, bumping soundlessly into one another, giving me awful and unbearable headaches. Every single day of my life begins with this pounding in my forehead that doesn't leave me alone for one second.

Most of the thoughts start with 'what if?' What if there are other places in this world other than our humble cave? What if there is more to life than just hunting for food and getting a good night's sleep, preferably with a fully belly? As the years pass, more and more 'what ifs' clog up my brain…What if there's some supreme force that controls everything around us? What if there are other beings besides us and the animals we hunt?

The only reasonable way to cope with all this pressure seemed to go out and get answers for myself. Only I just don't work that way! As a matter of fact, I'm quite comfortable with my daily routine and express no desire to change it in the slightest. But all these thoughts crammed up in me make me uncomfortable.

I decide I must do something about it!

As soon as I'm old enough, I leave the family and go looking for someone or something that can help me. It took a lot of pleading and promises until my parents finally let me wander off alone. The more I search, the more disappointed I become. All I've ever known has been my cave, my family and food. And now here I am, all alone in this world, not knowing where I'm going or how to return home. I start thinking how stupid I was to start this journey in the first place…I just couldn't stand the thoughts anymore…

Then, I meet her, an old grizzled woman, a filthy cloth wrapped around her shoulders approaching me slowly as I make camp for the night at the roots of an ancient oak tree. Her eyes are sunk into their sockets, making me scatter away from her immediately. But something happens as she raises her hand. The thoughts in my head come to a sudden halt.

I gaze up at her, amazed. What sort of witchcraft is this? She approaches me slowly and sits besides me, putting a hand on my forehead. I'm held there as if by a spell, unable to move. For the first time in my life, the headaches stop. The thoughts are still there, still buzzing around, but it's not an annoyingly painful throb in my forehead anymore. I feel I can actually view them and consider doing something with them.

The woman is eyeing me strangely. If she stared any harder I feel she'd drill a hole through me. Then she starts speaking. Only her mouth doesn't move…I hear her voice directly in my head.

"I think you deserve some explanations. I'm so sorry I haven't got to you sooner, but there are so many…" she trails off, suddenly staring up at the sky. Impatience and curiosity start raking me on the inside. I can't believe just how close I am to finally getting answers…and maybe even viable solutions…

After what seems an eternity she continues her thread of thought.

"I made a huge mistake in my youth…You see, I was once a Goddess. It was so long ago, I can hardly remember anything. I suppose most of my memories have been destroyed by my family…" her voice fades once again as she presumably loses herself in remembrance.

If I can talk I'd probably tell her that she's mad…Yet she's done things so far that can only provide proof for what she's claiming. Still seems utterly unbelievable though.

“However, I can distinctively recall the disappointment on my parents’ faces when they figured out how utterly useless I was. I was born with no apparent power; no control over any phenomenon or element of nature. If I hadn’t had the usual divine magic, nobody would have ever believed that I had been born a goddess. It had never happened before in our world and it was an immeasurable disgrace. There was serious talk of banishing me when I suddenly discovered that I could do something special; something new that neither of them had thought of.
“New and interesting thoughts were forming in my mind. I called them ‘ideas’. I could create new things with them. It was amazing. The others were still skeptical, but even a new and dangerous power is better than no power. The called me the goddess of imagination.”
I wanted to ask what imagination was, but I suddenly understand it was a name for what has been happening inside my head. I start to think that maybe this woman isn’t as insane as I’d first thought.
“But I soon encountered the same problem as you have. Too many ideas, all bumping into each other, giving me horrible headaches. And if you think your pain is bad, imagine that I had it multiplied a few dozen times…”
I unconsciously shudder at the thought, feeling bad for her. I haven’t realized it, but I’ve been getting more and more curious, craving the continuation of her story. Thankfully, now that she’s got into rhythm, she has stopped trailing off.
“With all the imagination I possessed, it still took me incredibly long to conjure up a solution. The only way to get rid of the unbearable pain was to give up the ideas. I knew that I’d be banished for sure this time, but for the first time I wasn’t scared of leaving the gods. Instead, I was petrified of not being able to find a way to relinquish my hold on the power I possessed.
“I finally figured out a way to transfer the potential for ideas I held to other living beings. Only the volume was gigantic; I would have needed an entire planet as so the thoughts would have been distributed equally to everyone.
“I searched far and wide for a planet which would agree to help me in this issue, but none wanted to risk it. They said so many things could go wrong. The magic I wanted to use was innovative and could backfire easily. They warned me to give up, but I ignored them all.
“Eventually, I came across an inhabited planet…Earth. It had something distinguishable from the others: it was charged with a magical field. A much easier plan occurred to me! Using this field I could propel the imagination into Earth’s atmosphere. All my problems were solved…Or so I thought…
“For a moment, the spell seemed to have worked and I felt elated, my mind completely free and devoid of thought. But, just as I had been warned, it backfired horribly. I’m still not sure exactly how, but from the mass of imagination I had released thousands of different-sized shadows broke free and fell plummeting towards the ground”
I suddenly feel the urge to get up and leave. If up till now some of this made sense because it sort-of explained my problem, right now it’s getting more and more ridiculous. I find that I’ve awoken from the trance she’s put me in.
“You mean to tell me that we are the shadows of your ‘special power’ as a goddess?” I say raising an eyebrow.
She blinks and smiles, not getting the strong sarcasm in my voice. “I’m so happy you’ve got it so quickly!”
I struggle hard not to roll my eyes at her. I decide against leaving since I’m still curious to hear the rest of her story.

“Overall, that wouldn’t have been such a bad thing if only it had spilt relatively equal. Instead, some people, such as yourself and a few dozen others have unfortunately got a huge amount you are unable to cope with while the rest some so little it’s almost inexistent. I didn’t even wait for the gods to banish me; I left immediately to Earth to repair the damage I’d done, by recruiting people such as yourself. I am so sorry for messing it all up, but I promise I’ll fix it if you come with me…”

She extends a filthy hand, expecting me to take it. Interesting and logical as her story may seem, it’s still a lot to swallow. I eye her stretched hand suspiciously. I don’t even know her; I can’t go running off with a total stranger! Despite all that, there’s something inside me telling me that this might be my only chance to ease the headaches and that her story explains everything, far-fetched as it is.

“I see what the problem is!” she mumbles, grinning at me mischievously, “I still haven’t convinced you. Oh well, if I can’t bring you to the headquarters, I’ll bring the headquarters to you!”

I have a bad feeling about this. Almost immediately, the surroundings start fading away and are replaced by a completely different landscape. We are no longer in a vast field, littered with flowers, but inside a surprisingly bright cave. In the middle is a large stump, around which a few dozen people, some older and some younger than me sit. They turn and wave to me. I can’t help feeling that this is getting weirder and weirder. I find myself wishing I’d remained at home, sharpening the weapons we use for slaughtering wild boars.

“I think this may be the last one,” the woman announces, much less enthusiastic than five minutes ago.

As kindly as they had been regarding me, as nastily they stare at her and I can understand why…

“Thanks, Lucy!” one of them mutters under his breath.

I give her what I hope is a skeptical look. “Is Lucy a goddess name?”

I hear some amused snorts coming from the stump and an annoyed grump coming from Lucy herself. “Now I’d not be stupid enough to use my real name, would I?” she asks as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. I think of inquiring why not but I don’t think it’ll solve much, so I decide against it.

I approach the stump, hoping the others will illuminate me upon this whole imagination-goddess thing. A tall boy with messy dark hair starts talking.

“As our dear Lucy has probably told you the entire story of how she screwed everything up,” he pauses to shoot her a look full of venom, “I should explain what we’re doing here. You see, the safest and easiest way to get rid of the extra imagination is not, as Lucy thought, to pass it on to someone else, but to use it. I’m Lucy’s first recruit and I came up with an ingenious way through which we can use the thoughts in our head to thread complete ideas. They are then, with the help of Lucy, released into the magic atmosphere and will eventually implement themselves into people who will use them to create marvellous inventions for mankind. The more we create and release, the freer we become from our thoughts. Aren’t I just brilliant?” he grins, apparently extremely satisfied with himself.

“Modest as ever, Jack!” someone else mutters. “*I* came up with language and fire!”

I have to admit, rather grudgingly to be honest, that I have no other choice than to go along with this craziness. Maybe I’ll even have fun playing around with the thoughts that have annoyed me for so long.

Together, we make up so many vital inventions and I can actually feel the world evolving with us. Cavemen eventually start creating more stable homes and become pickier about what they eat

and how they prepare it. Towns and then cities appear, so do rulers, whether they name themselves emperors, kings or presidents; transportation develops more and more, from carriages, to trains, to airplanes. People start wearing something different every century. They also get peculiar ideas about exploring the unknown, colonization, fighting for territory. They also get the notion of equality, whether it's between races, sexes or opinions.

Curiously enough, not all ideas actually get put into practical inventions. Some of them become inspiration for literature or music. Lucy is the only one who gets out and brings samples of what humankind has created. Plans explaining how nuclear power plants work, zeppelin machetes, summaries of prize-winning novels and so on…

I never, not once feel the need to get credit for my work or to use the things we come up with. It's enough that I can help myself and the others and clear the mess in my head.

However, the more we imagine, the more I feel we're starting to run out of ideas. We finally have the nerve to ask Lucy about it.

After thinking for a bit she clears her throat and begins explaining,

"I believe that once that happens, new ideas will be formed naturally from the already-existent ones."

"What about us?" I ask, slightly nervous, "What will happen to us?" I share un uncomfortable look with my fellow co-creators.

She bites her lip uncomfortably, before whispering softly, "Frankly, my dear, I don't know…" It gets us even more annoyed with her.

Jack disappears first. Nobody can guess where he has gone, nor what has happened to him. Eventually, I'm the only one who remains, because I'm the last one recruited and I haven't exhausted all my thoughts yet. I still have a bit of imagination left. Just enough for one last idea. The idea for my story…

THE GIRL WHO CRIED GLASS

by Lavinia Loghin
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Cara walked to the bus station by herself. She didn't really enjoy the company of her classmates or anybody's in fact.

"You know, we've been desk mates for over a year and I still don't know where you live", Avery said while unwrapping her lunch. "In fact, I don't know anything about you at all, we're like those siblings that barely talk at family gatherings."

Cara laughed. "Why rock the boat by talking about nonsense? What's wrong with being awkward siblings?"

As soon as she got home, she took off her rain boots and stepped into her room. Cara's bedroom was covered with posters and if you peeked closely, you could almost see the blue paint. Her desk was full with clutter: drawing utensils, shredded paper strips, some colorful candles that she never used and a pile a books. She always felt like her room was missing something, like a clock or maybe some shelves that will keep her things more organized, but nevertheless she liked her posters way too much to cover them up.

She heard a soft knock on the door. “Honey, are you in there?” Her mom entered the room and glanced over the mess.

“How was school?”

“Fine”, she said without taking her look from the pile of papers.

“You know, we can always move you to a different high school, I heard that Watford…”

“Mom, it’s fine. Besides, I actually started making friends”.

“Ok. It’s getting late, you should go to bed. Don’t forget to take your medication.”

“I won’t. Good night!”

Cara closed her bedtime lamp and as soon as her head touched the pillow, she was out like a light.

She was surrounded by buildings. They rose high above the clouds, impossible to reach. The streets were deserted and covered in snow and she could hear the wind howling ghoulishly between the buildings. Carefully, she approached one the closest building. She could feel ice forming beneath her feet, leaving a trail of ice behind her. Once she infiltrated the building, Cara spotted a staircase nearby a statue and rushed to it. As she went up the stairs, she started hearing a faint weep coming from the roof and continued ascending. When she reached the top floor, she noticed a trapdoor that she presumed led to the roof. By the time she opened it, Cara saw a little girl sitting on the ledge of the building. Cara slowly poked her from the back and the girl turned. Tears were streaming down her face and before they could touch the ground, they turned into glass and shattered across the ground.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. Are you all right?” said Cara while she lay near her.

The girl didn’t answer. Instead she started to sing: “Ladybird, ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone, all except one, and her name is Ann, and she hid under the baking pan.” Her voice sounded really familiar.

Cara closed her eyes. She woke up.

She always had vivid dreams but this one was by far the realest. The little girl’s song persisted in her memory for the whole day.

“Are you even listening?” said Avery while browsing a magazine. “You are starting to worry me, you’ve been like this for entire day.”

“I just had a rough day, that’s all.”

The next night she saw the little girl again. Cara was in a forest, surrounded by tall oak trees covered in moss. A brilliant orange bird was blazing from high branches like a torch. The bird started jumping from branch to branch, drizzling leaves behind it. Cara followed it, carefully avoiding the roots of the trees that were unleashing from the ground. As soon as she reached a glade, the bird vanished into thin air. The little girl was sitting near a well, tears streaming down her round face, shattering as they hit the ground. Cara rushed to the well, lilies blooming with every step she took. After catching her breath, she sat down a rock and talked with a calm voice.

“I am aware this is a dream and I am also aware you are not real; so can you please stop crying?”

Without taking her eyes from the ground, the little girl started whispering beneath her tears: “Ladybird, ladybird fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are gone, all except one and her name was Aileen and she hid under a soup tureen.” Without noticing, Cara closed her eyes and woke up in her bed, shivering, just as the night before. Carefully closing the door behind her, Cara made her way through the living room and opened the door to another room.

She crawled into her mother’s bed trying not to wake her from her sleep. Slowly becoming conscious, her mother grasped her gently.

“What happened sweetie?” her mom said with a drowsy voice.
“Just had a bad dream.” Her mom chuckled and started brushing her hair with her fingers.
“When you were little, whenever you had bad dream, I used to hum you Ladybird, ladybird and you would fall asleep right away. You were so adorable when you were little.”
“Can you do that now?”

Last night was like a puzzle, only not put together. Cara was trying to figure out the meaning of the lullaby on her way home. She went to sleep late like any other night but this time it was different.
She was in a garden. It was dark outside, and the moon was the only source of light. Cara could hear the grass rustling and the subtle sound of water dripping. Through the crops, Cara spotted a funny looking scarecrow. Various vegetables were planted in the garden: from tomatoes to giant purple radishes. They were all surrounded by a low wooden fence. At the end of the garden, in the middle of the odd looking radishes, the scarecrow was sitting on a stomp near a dripping pump. In his lap, the little girl was crying, glass scattered beneath her feet. Cara made her way to the girl, a path of cobblestone forming behind her. She sat on a giant radish, sharing the same eye level with the girl. Without saying a word, Cara started singing gently: “Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home, your house is on fire, your children shall burn!” The little girl stopped crying and climbed out of the scarecrow’s lap.
“Come”, she whispered and Cara followed.
They jumped over the fence, going through bushes and fields, until they reached a field of sunflowers. There, the little girl pointed to an old barn and as they reached the entrance, Cara spotted two hooded figures sitting on the ground near a lamp.
“I thought you’d never come”. Their voice was so familiar, that Clara jumped in surprise.
“Sit down child”. They removed their hoods at the same time, leaving Cara in shock. The two girls looked exactly like her, except they looked older and had a scar on their forehead. Their eyes were soulless, and Cara couldn’t if they were talking to her or the little girl. As she turned her head, she noticed that the little girl ran into the field without turning back. Shocked, Cara settled on the ground, keeping a distance from the two girls.
“I am Ann…”, one of the girls said.
“…she hid under the baking pan…”, Cara whispered to herself.
“And I am Aileen”, the other girl said.
“…she hid under the soup tureen…”, Cara said, this time louder.
“We are merely a fracture of your imagination.”
“A projection of your deepest thoughts and hopes”, Aileen continued.
“You’ve been roaming this reality for far too long.”
“Solving every riddle that came your way.”
“On earth you are just a mere human.”
“Here you are everything.”
“And nothing.”
Aileen gently grabbed her hand, resting her palm on hers, while Ann did the same thing with her other hand. The two of them then started singing indescribable words. Cara could feel knowledge rushing through her veins and for once she wasn’t afraid. Tears were running down her cheeks, and as they hit the ground, they shattered into a million pieces.

THE KINGDOM OF MYSTERIES

by Nicolae Banciu-Constantinescu
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The mysterious Carpathian Mountains of Romania have always had a certain allure for all sorts of individuals, ranging from simple hikers to retreating armies, nature lovers, and even treasure hunters. But for the two brothers, Matei and Ioan, together with their best friend Andrei, the Carpathians were their second home. They were all famous hikers, conquering the most difficult peaks in Europe, and one day dreamt of conquering Mount Everest. The three took a leave from work, and went to the mountains, to try some new climbing trails.

The March weather was pretty warm and the snow melted in most places. The past winter had been pretty gentle as well. The three set up camp at the foothills of the mountain, and as soon as morning came, they put on their climbing gear, and went up. It was a rather cold morning, and bit windy. There was also a rather unusual mist in the air too, yet the three kept climbing.

“Next year, to the Himalayas!” said Matei laughing, as he was climbing.

Suddenly, a strong wind struck them, accompanied by a sinister sound, like an angry shout. A rock broke off, and Ioan lost balance, almost falling. He regained balance and even joked about it. Neither of them could explain it, but it was a strange feeling in the air, very heavy. As if the mountain itself wanted to throw this unwelcomed foreigners from its guts.

“Guys, maybe we should come back when the weather is better!”

“Come on, Andrei, since when do you fear a bit of wind?!”

A bit of wind was a bit of an understatement, though, as the sky was more and more cloudy, and threatening. In less than a minute,it became rather hard to advance, and the mist was growing thicker and thicker. Matei was leading the party, not impressed by the harsh conditions the Mountain threw at them.

“Why the heck is the mist blue??!!”

Ioan was the first to notice the peculiar color. Never in their travelling, did they encounter such event. From Russia`s Caucasus, to Switzerland’s Alps, this was surely a first for them. Andrei was more determined to climb back down, but Matei and Ioan both wanted to push on, even though they were starting to experience nausea. But right in that moment, the first brother noticed a peculiar light a few meters ahead of him. It was a hypnotic golden glow, more beautiful than anything he ever saw in his life.

“Are you seeing that?”

He did not wait for a reply, even though Ioan called him, asking him to come back down. He rushed upwards, and gazed upon the source of the glow. It was unlike anything he knew of. He felt as if he could describe it in thousands of words, yet if you asked Matei what it was, he would not be able to answer. It was stuck in the rock of the mountain, and looked like a rope, yet it was made from metal; more like a metal ring, or even chain. It was glowing, and had peculiar symbols on it. He could not recognize the letters, but they were actually a mixture of Sumerian, Minoan, and Rune alphabets.

The others shouted at him in vain. He was captivated by this object, and wasn’t even blinking, but kept gazing at it. He silently took of his gloves and warmed up his hands a bit.

Despite the others calling him, he grabbed the large metal chain with both hands, and right in that moment, a terrifying thunder struck the sky, and Matei`s body was enveloped in a bright flash of golden light. If felt as if the entire mountain shook, and a lot of rocks broke off and fell.
“BROTHER!”

Ioan was terrified! His brother disappeared before his very own eyes, in that flash of light! It was no sight of him anywhere, he did not fell, nor was he next to the glow anymore! He rushed towards the origin of the glow, and saw the chain in its place, eternally waiting for another Matei to come to it. He knew it was a bad idea, but he had to do it. He could not abandon his brother. So he took of his gloves, and firmly grabbed the cold metal, just as he saw his brother doing.And then, the same thunder and the same explosion of light came, as he disappeared into nowhere too. Andrei was more and more scared. His first impulse was to follow his friends, but then he thought that informing the police would have been more helpful, so he started descending. Just as the wind and the mist came, so they left, and the weather was warm and sunny again.

Ioan fell on his back, as if from a relatively great height. He felt grass under him, and dirt. He felt dizzy, and his limbs were numb, so he got on his two feet with difficulty. Before he could pull himself together, he was hugged strongly by his brother.
“Damn, I was never happier to see your ugly face, little brother!”
They both laughed, happy they found each other. But the joy was short lived, as it became obvious they were far from the place they found the strange chain. The first think that struck them was the heat, so they took off their jackets, and hats. Then they noticed they seemed to be close to the tree line of a forest, up on some sort of plateau.
“Oh my God, Ioan, look at this!”

A few miles away, they saw a magnificent city, with blue walls, and tall, white buildings. It had even some sort of watch towers, and in the center, it appeared to be a ziggurat, mostly blue. They are astonished by this peculiar round city, since not only they never knew of any such town to exist in Romania, but also that it seemed very archaic, like straight out of Ancient times.
Then, Matei took a horrifying shout, and took a few steps back, tripping and falling. Ioan turned around to see what scared his brother so much, and then his heart almost stopped, and his entire body froze. He knew any sort of resistance was futile. From the forest line close to them, came out 7 terrifying creatures, all having above 5 meters in height. They were only wearing some dirty skins around their waist, and some boots with fur. Their eyes were pure evil, small and grey, and they had a long, dirty hair, black, full of leaves, or broken tree branches. Their bodies were filled with dirt, and they smelled as if they never had a bath in their lives. Also, their chests, backs and hands were unusually hairy. Worse of all, they had huge axes, and hammers, which all had dried blood on them. The one that seemed their leader had a necklace made of bones around his neck.

This creature which seemed to be in charge, swung his axe in the air, and charged at the two, probably seeing them as prey, little different than how a hunter looks at his target through his scope. But just as the blade was ready to strike them, it seemed it hit an invisible shield. The monster`s axe sparked as it met the shield, and he lost his balance. You could see the rage on his face. Right after that, a party of five riders came between them, and the two brothers. Their horses were beautiful, and the riders also. With long hair, beards, and one of them had two feathers tied in his long brown hair. They were wearing black robes, red belts, and some cylindrical looking helmet, with eyes on them, and shiny armors, which imitated snake skin. On their chests they had a strange symbol, imbedded with sapphire. They all wore dark red capes,

only the one with the feathers wearing a darker blue one. He also had a beautiful falx sword drown out, with gold hilt, and gemstones.
“Withdraw to your forest, Serath! These grounds are outside your rule!”
“These creatures came here came here by the Ring, which is in my domains! I will do with them as I please, captain.”
Four of the riders gave long looks at the two brothers, which sat terrified on the ground, watching as their faith was being decided.
“Yet they appeared outside your reach! The trees are your boundary, Serath! Do not test your luck with us, giant, remember that what our Emperor gave, it is his to take back!”
The monster lowered his axe, and his companions returned to the forest. He was clearly angered, and the two hoped they won’t go from death by axe, to death by sword. Yet for now, they were grateful to these strangers for saving them. Before entering the forest, the one named Serath turned back and whispered to the feathered rider:
“What`s your Emperor`s to take back, it is also ours to defend with our axes…”

No one replied to what was clearly a threat. In silence, the riders picked up Matei and Ioan, and took them on the saddles. Despite numerous attempts, the two did not manage to make them talk. They rode with speed, towards their city, which up close was even far more impressive. The blue wall of defense was adorned with gold lion figures, wolves, and other sorts of symbols and animals. The walls were tall, and thick, and guarded a large gate, flanked by statues of lions, and two blue banners, with white concentric circles on them. The streets were wide, and the people merry. They were mostly wearing white or purple robes, and had a lot of gold jewelry on them, not to mention gemstones. Also, it was noticeable most people had weapons, both males and females. Bows seemed to be the preferred weapon, both the riders and the civilians carried them. It seemed that looks were very sophisticated too, as they had all sorts of gems or fine jewels tied to their hair, and strangely, a lot of men had black eyeliner. Most people had a pale, white skin, but there were also African, and Arabian looking people. Matei figured this metropolis must be a trade node since there were large markets, filled exotic looking goods, and sellers. The city was a strange mixture of ancient Dacian culture, with Persian influences.

The band stopped right next to the ziggurat and dismounted. There was a circular fountain in front of the 20 meters high building, and in the middle of the clear water was a pillar made of bronze. Guards wearing golden robes, and red belts held their spears firmly, making sure the palace was safe. The riders grabbed them firmly, and took them down the white marble hallways. They reached a large room, with floor of marble, and the roof sustained by golden pillars. The walls had lapis lazuli on them, and the hall was very alight. On the pillars, there were strange symbols, and in the other end of a room, on a dark wooden throne, sat a not so tall individual, with short black hair, and beard. He had many rings, and bracelets above his elbow, and he was wearing a long, black robe, with golden patterns on the hands and the lower part ofit. He had a beautiful dark red belt, with some gold chains attached to it, and a beautiful falx sword. On his head, he wore a tall black cap, with grey horns spiraling on the sides.
“Sir, these two were wondering outside the realm of the giants, and Serath claims the Ring brought them here. We do not know how much truth there is to that, but their clothing sure seems peculiar.”
“The Ring? Well, that did not happen in a thousand years, captain Sabay…”
He stood up from his throne and inspected the brothers. He was clearly intrigued by them, and ask them to tell their story. Nine times they repeated it, each time this ruler asking for more and

more information, and details about their world. All of a sudden, Matei mastered his courage and asked:
“Where are we?”
They all laughed. Even the slaves and dignitaries that stood by the wooden throne.
“You are in the great Empire of Pelas! (He opened his arms in a quite theatrical act) There is no corner of this earth that lies not within our blessed rule!”
A moment of silence.
“…And…when are we...”
This time no one laughed. Even the king took a serious face, and shrug his shoulders.
“Well, by our count, we are in the year 6760 from the foundation of the Empire. But… I have the feeling this date does not mean much for you, Travelers.”
“No, it doesn’t mean anything for us…”
The two brothers were more and more discouraged. They wanted to go back home, more than anything. Ioan felt Matei will make a scene, losing his nerves, so he was quick to add:
“Is you’re…. Majesty… ruler of this… Empire?”
Again laughter.
“No no, let`s hope such words do not reach our Emperor, he might think I conspire against him! (The nobles laugh even more now) I am Azard, governor of Hyperbion. These are the chiefs of the city guard, captain Sabay (the feathered one), Emerud (a serious, humorless warrior), Zirad (the wise one), and these two brave heroes are Aymar and Therion (probably the jokers of the band).”
Ioan and Matei pleaded for help, asking for directions and weapons, to try reach the Ring, and go back in their time. Azard did not rejected their plea, but was reluctant to give them Imperial aid. It seemed they had a treaty with the giants. The governor told them that giants and humans once lived in peace, until a chief called Taralekh attacked the cities of humans, and they pushed them back with great difficulty. Following the defeat, the giants left the Empire, going north. But after 200 years, they returned, in fewer numbers, seeking asylum in their former home. Emperor Galana gave them lands in forests, to dwell in them, with the condition to never bring the wrath of war beyond their boundaries.
“And this Ring? What is it?”
“We don`t know. It is ancient even for us. Our priests say it was used as object of transportation, by the ones who ruled before us. There used to be many rings, on this Earth, but this one is the last one we know of” Zirad said.
“And you left it in those monster`s lands?”
“Well, it’s not like they can use it. No one can. Whoever it is that made it, they surely had greater knowledge than us, I`m afraid.”
“Wait, are there even older empires?!”
“We only know of one, ruled by our forefathers… When their homeland was taken aback by the Oceans, we sailed here. Searching for a new place to call home. And from amongst our sailors, Pelas rose to power, and forged a new Empire, on the ashes of the old one.

Later that day, Sabay was sent to negotiate with the giants, to allow Matei and Ioan to reach the Ring, and try to return home. Of course, they refused, and Azard had to allow a party of Imperial soldiers to accompany the two to the artefact. They were to enter the forest by night fall, on foot. They were afraid. Who would have thought one trip would lead them to so much trouble. All the two wanted was to make it back to their homes, and families. From them, Matei seemed very affected by the possibility they will remain stuck in the past, or even killed here.As the

Moon took its place on the night sky, they rode to the edge of the forest and left their horses where the two emerged from the time travel. Trespassing on giant territory could have serious repercussions, and could even lead to another conflict between the Empire and the tribes of the giants. Despite all the risks, the band pushed on into the forest, which was grimmer than anything the brothers have ever seen. There were animals dead and skinned impaled on trees, and skulls and gore decorated the dark forest. The stars were not visible from there, and there was a heavy feeling in the air.

"Hold."

Sabay pulled out his sword and looked carefully in the trees. They all felt as if they are being watched. Did they fall right into an ambush?

As they stood there waiting, three giants engaged them, waving their axes, and smashing the trees with their bare hands. They were screaming like animals, and Sabay and Emerud parried an attack, as Aymar shot an arrow which seemed to be made of pure light. Matei and Ioan took refuge behind a fallen tree, trying to stay out of sight. Four more giants jumped on the warriors, and just when they seemed overwhelmed, Sabay waved his falx in the air, and a burst of flames came out from the blade, engulfing the giants and some tree branches.

"Come on, we do not have much time!"

The two stood up and ran as fast as they could and eventually reached a clearing. There they saw the damn iron chain, or Ring, that got them into this mess in the first place.

"PELASGIANS!"

The shout was similar to the roar of an animal. A cornered animal, that had nothing to lose, so he was about to put up the best fight in his life. Giants encircled the clearing, and from among them, Serath came running, waving his hammer like a maniac. Aymar and Therion waved their hands, and set up a form of shield of glowing light, but the giant smashed it with ease. Emerud and Sabay dodged him, and quickly fired two arrows, one made from green light, the other from red light. But the arrows shattered when they hit him. Then, he waved his hammer again, and Zirad jumped on it, and charged his sword at the giant`s face, pulling out his left eye. He screamed of pain, and Aymar and Therion seized the moment, and fired more arrows.

But quickly, seeing their chief wounded, the large crowd of giants engaged, and Sabay hit his fist in the ground, resulting in a strong shockwave that made the enemies lose balance, giving the two brothers a small window.

"Quickly, we will not hold them for much longer! Now or never!"

Despite their fears, the two came out in the open and ran as fast as they could to the Ring. As they were only a few meters away, a huge blade struck Matei, severing his right hand. He screamed of pain and fell to the ground, Ioan quickly tried to shield him from the next strike. But Sabay threw his falx, which rotated in the air, hitting the giant that was ready to strike for a second time, right in the head. He dropped his axe, and fell on his knees. The captain jumped on his back, and pulled his sword from the monster`s head, turning around and throwing another wave of flames from the falx, hitting Serath. The giant screamed, and attacked with even more ferociousness, his hammer hitting Therion right in the chest, throwing him on a tree which broke in half.

"I`ll kill you all!" shouted Serath.

"Take him and go, we don`t have much time!"

Ioan took his injured brother, and rushed to the ring. They were ready, and did not hesitate, both grabbing the cold metal firmly, and with a strong thunder and an explosion of light, they disappeared from this lost, mysterious place. The last image they saw was the guards taking

down Serath. That made them happy, and both hoped the five will manage to escape the forest alive. Ioan hoped to see the spectacular duel coming to an end, but right now, his brother lost an arm, and they needed help as soon as possible.

They fell on the solid ground, at the foothills of the mountain. It was night, but the weather warm. It seemed to be spring. Matei was bleeding, and was losing conscience, his brother struggling to keep him awake. And then it hit him. That was it! It worked! They were back to the same place they camped with Andrei, the night before they started ascending.

"Brother, brother, we did it! We`re back home!"

Matei laughed, and tears of joy appeared on his face. This was probably the happiest moment in their life. Both were grateful to the strangers from the past, which risked their lives for them. But it was no time for celebration, as the wound needed immediate medical care. Ioan supported his brother, and they started walking.

"We need to get to a road. Fast."

They walked for about twenty minutes, searching for the closest road. Once they reached there, it was only a matter of time until a car passed, and from that point onwards, in less than an hour they will be in a hospital.

"Brother, never let me lead the ascension again, ever!"

They both laughed, but he noticed that his brother voice was fading. He was losing a lot of blood. Then, he thought, how they will explain it. Fighting giants together with an unknown civilization would probably make them look mad, in the eyes of the police.

"Look, a camp! Andrei must have alerted the authorities, they were looking for us!"

They hasted to the camp they saw a few hundred meters ahead. As they went closer and closer, at about 50 meters distance, they stopped as if hit by bullets. Their breath and hearts stopped. Matei pulled away from his brother, and started screaming, and hitting and scratching his face.

"Why, why, why?! Why did I touched that thing??!!"

Ioan was speechless. He felt as if the entire sky fell on him. They were in the right place! So close! After a few minutes, some strange men came out the camp, attending to the strangers. Matei attacked them, probably trying to provoke his death, but instead of using lethal force, they hit him on the back of his head, only leaving him unconscient. Then, they took him with care, on a wood stretcher. Two men accompanied Ioan, making sure he won't lose his nerves as well. But he had no desire, nor strength for that. The group entered the camp, and the wood gate closed behind them. A tear came on his face, as he realized he will never go home again, never see his family, or enjoy modern life again. As the gates closed behind them, Ioan looked at the red banners of the Roman Empire, that flew above the fort`s walls, as proud conquerors.

THE UNTOLD STORY OF JOHN PINKMAN

by Andrei Andone
Colegiul Naţional "Grigore Moisil"

John Pinkman was a college student who enjoyed writing fictional stories about what he considered the "perfect world for humans to live in". You may be wondering why I describe him as a dead person. The answer is quite simple. He is indeed dead, but I believe that his story deserves to be heard…

John was 19 when he started attending the Scotch College in the USA. His first days as a freshman were tough and he didn't make any friends. The month that followed was even tougher. Eventually he started getting bullied for writing in his book during breaks and was nicknamed "red loser". As college life became harder and harder for him, he fell in love with a girl named Elisabeth. His only reason for coming to college everyday was to see her. In the end, after a few weeks had passed, he found the courage to confess to her about his feelings. Elisabeth was somehow happy about the way he felt and the two started dating. Everything seemed to be going so well for John; it was a turning point in his life.

One day, while driving home from college, he took a shortcut on a less traveled road. It was pouring rain so his visibility was pretty much inexistent. As he kept driving, he suddenly saw a bright light and passed through it. After that, he noticed the rain had suddenly stopped and the sun that was making an entrance behind the clouds. He got out of the car to take a better look. As soon as he got out, his phone started ringing. He answered and was shocked by the person calling him. The caller simply stated that his name was Blue Lagoon, a name given to a character of John's book. Blue Lagoon then said:

"Creator, it's so good to be able to finally talk to you. We need to meet so just stay where you are and I'll come pick you up."

John then said: "What do you even mean? I think you dialed the wrong number."

In the next moment, out of a small pond close to the road, a man appeared.

"Creator, follow me" he said. John followed him back near the pond and they both disappeared without a trace. John found himself in a cave. He got up and started talking to Blue Lagoon:

"What is this place?" said John while glancing at his surroundings.

"This? This is part of the world you created, "the perfect world". Ringing any bells?" asked Lagoon while staring at a hole filled with water.

"This can't be…this place is not real…I created it!!! yelled John at Blue Lagoon.

"That is the reason why I was addressing you as "Creator". I am still amazed that you were able to come here. I believe that you figured out by now who I am." said Blue Lagoon.

"Yes, you are one of the first perfect humans that I created, Blue Lagoon, able to travel long distances with ease with the help of water. The only question I have now is how I got here in first place." replied John.

"Hmm? I thought you were going to tell me that. This place only exists in your brain so you somehow managed to access it." said Blue Lagoon.

“I don’t really know. I remember driving home from college and then the next thing I remember is that I was in this world. Now that I think about it, there should be more perfect humans like you in this world. Where are they?” asked John.
“This world, no matter how you look at it, it’s nowhere near perfect. The perfect humans are fighting to decide which one of them rules the others, in other words, there is a power struggle going on.” said Blue Lagoon.
“Then how comes you are not fighting for power as well?” asked John.
“I have lost interest in that for a long time now. I only seek a way out of this world.” replied Blue Lagoon.
“And what does that have to do with me?” asked John.
“You are the one that created me, so you are the only one that can erase me as well.” said Blue Lagoon.
The conversation was suddenly interrupted as Blue Lagoon noticed that John was bleeding…
“What is going on? I don’t feel pain, so then why am I bleeding?” asked John.
“Don’t you remember? You created a world where you can’t feel any kind of pain. No wonder you don’t feel pain.” said Bue Lagoon
“In any case we have to stop the bleeding.” replied John.
“I’ll take you to Elsa. She may be able to stop the bleeding.”
After he said that, the two disappeared again and appeared in a place that resembled a lab.
“How did you get here? Who are you?” asked Elsa.
“It’s me, Blue Lagoon. And this is….”
“The Creator. I noticed he isn’t from our world.” said Elsa while staring at John.
“How can you tell?” asked John.
“You are bleeding and look scared. You clearly aren’t from around here. So if my guess is right, and it should be, you will die unless you find a way out of this world.” said Elsa.
“Fine by me, but where is the exit?” asked John.
“There is no exit. In fact you shouldn’t be here in the first place. This world is the creation of your imagination, a reality that you distorted making the perfect humans. This world is a reflection of the world you see every day but with elements you replaced. I don’t know how you got here but you better hope you can get out the same way.” said Elsa.
“Then I have to go back to the road where I first landed. Blue Lagoon, can you take me back there?” asked John.
“Sure, just hang on tight.” said Blue Lagoon.
The two then appeared back on the main road. The car was still in the same spot where it was left with the door open.
“So I guess this is where we say goodbye.” said John.
“I suppose so. Don’t forget to erase me when you go back into your world.” replied Blue Lagoon.
John Pinkman then made his way back into the car’s driver seat. As soon as he was seated, the bright light engulfed his vision once again and he woke up in a hospital’s bed.

As of now our story is coming to an end. John told us everything about his dream while he was in the coma. The only thing I haven’t explained so far is what caused the car accident. The car’s breaks were cut by a group of college students who wanted to play a prank on John. One of those students was Elisabeth who played with John’s feelings. Because of this accident, John was able to access a part of his brain that humans can’t directly use. He was able to visualize his world with his own two eyes and understood that his imagination tried to improve our world but

managed to do nothing but create other problems for humanity. John died a few weeks after due to heart failure, but his story lives on.

IMAGINATION DOES HAVE WINGS

by Alexandra Chirilă Apostol
Colegiul Naţional "Mihai Viteazul"

I cannot remember how this legend got passed on to me, but I strangely recalled it today while I was looking at the horizon line which couldn't decide on the colour the sky should take: would it be a periwinkle violet or a bloody red, or even both? From that point, all my surroundings got entangled in the alluring atmosphere it irradiated, the trees danced on the border between reality and illusion changing shades of blue, pink, purple within matter of seconds in a harmonic rhythm , and so I stumbled over my thoughts until this story managed to escape my subconscious.
This legend was carried around for decades along with the fluid movements of the mysterious clouds covering the east slope of the Fuji Mountains, or so I have been told.
When we are born, on the edge of passing into the material world, our soul is divided in two uneven parts: one is plowed into the body, the other one, known as 'soujouryoku' is attached to the heart of a bird, a bird which takes the shape and colours of the soul, and these two are strongly connected throughout life, some might say they unite again after it ends, following the overflowing energy of the universe.
Some centuries ago, there was this black-haired girl whose dark locks could be considered the continuation of death itself or even believed to unravel the furtiveness in which the stars are suspended on the night sky; her lashes long and flexile, a river flowing furiously with her deepest thoughts. As her tiny wrist was tracing colourful patterns in languid movements on an empty canvas, her teary eyes were wondering the landscape behind the window as to seek inspiration, to search for something. In that moment, a bird landed on the wooden sill. 'Her muse' was staring back at this artist, at her pale skin, trying to fill her with colour. It was a beautiful view, the girl arched her back in order to reach the creature and caress her feathers which were sprayed randomly in the most numerous pasty shades she has ever seen: faded blue or shy pink were combined gracefully under one of its wings. Its eyes ignited her spirit with something she felt before, but as her fingertips could grasp those feathers, the bird changed its position as if it sensed the intensity of the girl's eyes. This was a message that Ureika , because that was this girl's name if I remember correctly, should try to convey her feelings into a painting and cover the canvas.
As soon as I started to think about the description of that drawing, I was interrupted all of a sudden by the changes in my field of vision. Now the park in front of me darkened, no longer bothered by that war of colours from before; it was covered in layers and layers of mystery and thoughts, little trees were obstructing my vision in some places which made me feel upset and a little anxious as I realized I, myself were a shadow on this Earth, someone who could easily disappear, an ephemeral existence, this saddened me a little. As my eyes were inspecting the zone further, I could reach the lake far away, drowning my brainwork into it. Those colours remembered me that I was telling a story to myself so I continued the legend.

Returning to Ureika's artwork which my brain left in the same state as before my thoughts were interrupted by my visual sense, this in-becoming masterpiece of hers was almost finished by midnight when the numbness in her fingers was almost too much to endure, almost. As the bird was standing in the same position as we left it, the girl could not focus on anything else than the outline of its body. In that moment, the silvery romance between the colours which existed before and the tenebrosity of the night were mingling on the flying animal. The girl raised her eyes once more to admire the bird before it flew away in the distance, taking with it all the trees and all the flowers on that side of the mountain, sucking away the life. From that point on, for weeks or months the little artist could not find her inspiration.

Some people even say about this legend that the purpose of the separation in two parts of our soul is to maintain at least one of them pure and intact, flying across the world. As our body and our living soul may be touched by different emotions and lose its initial form, its initial stability, the other part can experience freedom and nourish our spirit constantly. It is believed that this is why we are able to travel mentally in different locations, this is why we see and dream places where we have never been before, this bird is our imagination and our constant reminder of our connection with the universe and its peace.

One day, the beautiful creature returned to Ureika even livelier than before, carrying more and more colours on its fragile body, signs that it travelled far away. More excited than ever, the little girl knew now that the connection between her and this still very strange bird was on a level she could not understand well but feel within the knots in her stomach. She grabbed the paintbrushes, the rest of her utensils along with another untouched canvas and she started creating again, maybe the very first time she could really feel all the nature vibrating around her, she could sense the universe changing and this indeed was the true meaning of using your imagination and creating art, she stepped in another land and made the most beautiful artwork in the presence of this bird she now called 'Imagination'.

I felt my heart racing as one of the dogs barking in the middle of the alley scared my thoughts away. Again the legend was left behind and forgot for a couple of minutes. Now that I escaped the spell of my own strings of emotions and memories and legends, I glanced over, past the door which was left ajar, to the clock, realizing it was past 2 a.m. in the morning, and the idea of spending the whole night on the balcony seemed more and more appealing to me. I was covered by the obscurity of the night which now wanted to devour me, so black that even the lake disappeared. I tried to empty my brain for a while by gazing at the sky, at the stars in particular, but as the wind freshened, it brought a sweet fragrance resembling cherry blossom flowers, a random information which brought me back to the Fuji Mountains and so, to the legend.

As Ureika added other details to the painting, her mother entered the room, but as she saw the bird, her happy visage was replaced by an expression contorted with sorrow, and so she took the bird by her wings and shoved it in a golden cage. The little girl was pleased as she thought that the flying animal could stay with her forever, providing inspiration and talking to her when she is alone. However, as time passed, the little creature lost its special and colourful feathering. Ureika's desire to paint disappeared, thus one day, the artist released the bird, comprehending that it cannot be tamed or live in captivity. As soon as it flew away, some of the colours came into view again.

Moreover, as the legend followed its course, I found out that there is the possibility of this bird called 'Imagination' to die or to vanish into the sky as a human reaches adulthood. That is why some of us lose ourselves as we remain solely with the degraded version of our soul, we cannot escape our human form; some may even want to steal others birds, encage them and present them

as their own. The colours won't match, the form is discrepant and the connection is limited, but in fact this may be considered the humiliating condition of the human nature.
Going back to the little girl, Ureika didn't know how to coordinate the movements of her hands with the images she had hidden in her heart, it was very difficult to draw without her 'Imagination', it was close to impossible. She thought to herself that this word: 'close' represented the line created by the ordinary along with the inexistence of something unique or memorable, it wasn't art, just painting. The bird visited her again, but the colours were completely changed, the old one were replaced by shades of vivid yellow, red and blue, like a tornado of life. She wondered for a little while what could have changed the pigmentation of its feathers, maybe it was the fact that 3 years have passed and the girl's heart changed, but in the end she could not figure out the reason.
I opened my eyes to witness the sunrise. It was already 6 a.m. in the morning and I was still on the chair with my hands clenched on the railing trying to form a better angle to see how the sun was awakening, staining the sky with bright yellow and sparkly orange which resembled a little bit the feathering of the bird from the legend. This time I let my surroundings overwhelm me as the sun embraced the park, the trees which were now on fire, the lake, very happy to have returned to my sight and the stray dogs which came to admire the greatness of the nature, the artwork of the imagination of a deity. Everything in our sight and everything above it, is created through imagination, flock of birds which now 'brought me' the sunrise.
After the spectacle ended and the sun stood proud on the blue eternity, I returned to my story. A new day. Even if I knew that I wouldn't be able to resist throughout the day, I felt like having a debt to finish narrating the legend.
Sometimes, we are very curious how come we are able to create something which cannot exist, which does not belong in the sphere of reality, how come we escape this world and dive in the spiritual universe of all possibilities? Well, the legend says that the flying animals discover the world for us and when they are ready to give us the knowledge they collected, they come to us, painted with more colours every time, when they fly above our heads, we are able to free ourselves and produce art. These bodies are keeping us on Earth, but those birds are the ones connecting us to everything we cannot see, the only thing which cannot be fully explained scientifically, 'Imagination' flies and therefore we remain its shadows reflected on the stained piece of material we call 'reality'. We are not as colourful as those birds are, we are simple and rather usual, that is why we need them to differentiate us.
Ureika was visited more often by 'Imagination'. She examined its changing patterns each time. From green to violet, her colours were perpetually transforming, mixing, taking the shape of its environment. Its wings grew bigger so she could cover a larger distance in a shorter amount of time and return to Ureika quicker. It is said that the girl started to neglect the little creature; she stopped painting and when the animal landed on the frame of her window, she ignored it, continuing to practice other usual activities. Unfortunately, 'Imagination' died and hereafter, Ureika became unable to sense again the waves crashing on the shore far away, the universe moving around her, the matter merging and disjoining, she could no longer surpass her transitory condition. She missed 'Imagination' for the rest of her life.
I was woken up by the wind gusting over my flushed cheeks and cold skin, which made me shiver. I couldn't figure out if it was because of the change of temperature or because of how sadly the legend ended.
I was slowly closing my eyes, when one thought crossed my mind: how would my 'Imagination' look like? Maybe it would have a pale turquoise for the summer days spent on the beach, or a

dramatic red taken from my passion for painting, these probably blended with a sharp yellow , brilliant dark and last but not least a royal blue like the night sky, covered in stars and mystery. I couldn't have known. It was 11 a.m. Another glance over to the park, now very ordinary, no contrast, no antithesis, just trees, dogs and a lake which altogether made me rethink what my mind has produced in these hours ; made me focus on the depth of the legend. It was strange how the shades of the feathers of that bird resembled the ones present in my surroundings. I entered my room still processing.

Maybe it wasn't even a legend, but what I am very sure about is that I have seen this story in the eyes of a very colourful bird one time.

THE BEASTMASTER

by Theodor Ciuciuc
Colegiul Naţional "Spiru Haret"

I was riding my horse along my party under the merciless heat of the sun when I saw a small stream of pristine water. I dismounted my steed and drank from the cold water, quenching my thirst. Suddenly one of my eagles gave a piercing cry and descended from the sky landing on my arm. I peered into his eyes seeing the events of the past.

I was soaring through the clear skies watching the scorched ground below me. I saw the marble city of Elrud in the middle of the barren wasteland, a white pillar of civilization and hope. The city guards were running frantically behind the outer wall of the fortress preparing for the battle that was to come. Smoke arose from a distance and a loud clarion boomed in the distance followed by the rattle of steel.

I closed my eyes and opened them again to find myself back in my own body. I raised my hand and the eagle took off. The members of my party were all staring at me waiting for what I was about to say.

"Drarak's army is much closer than we thought. They will reach Elrud by sunset."

"Last time you used your mumbo-jumbo magic to see your bird's memories you told us we will reach the city at least one day before Drarak. Now we might even be too late to do anything." said Teldrum. "I knew we should have killed this freak when we found him."

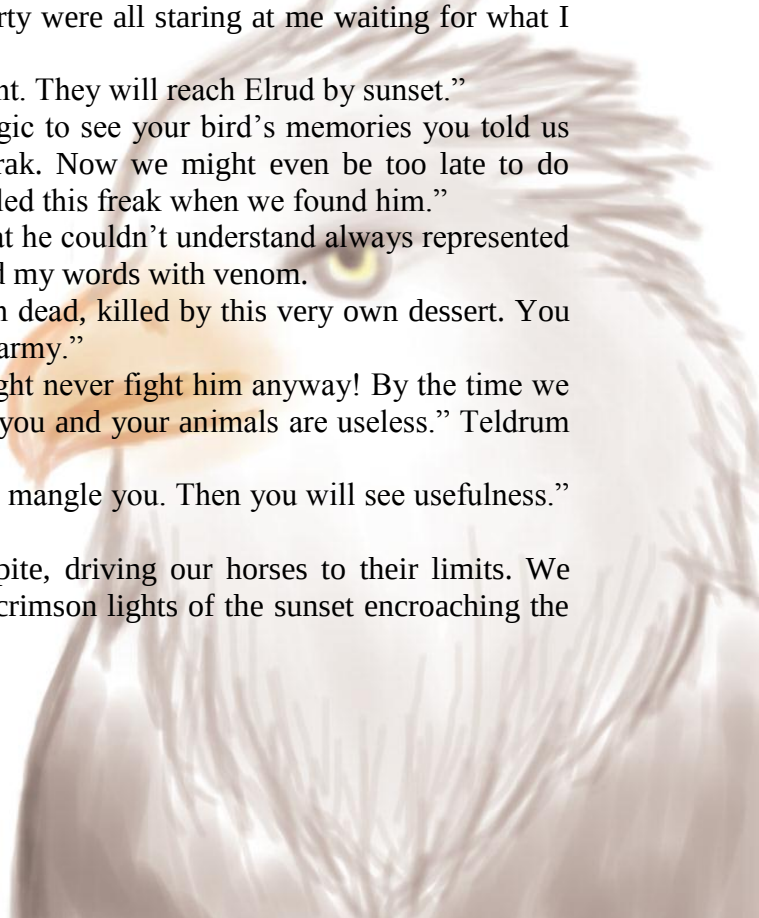
Teldrum was a dwarf and like any dwarf, what he couldn't understand always represented a threat to him. I looked right into his eyes and coated my words with venom.

"If it weren't for me you would have all been dead, killed by this very own dessert. You wouldn't even have had the chance to fight Drarak's army."

"Thanks to your great approximations we might never fight him anyway! By the time we get to the city the battle will be over. Face it, druid, you and your animals are useless." Teldrum spat at me as he turned around his horse.

"One of these days I'll have one of my eagles mangle you. Then you will see usefulness." I muttered under my breath as I mounted my steed.

We rode through the wasteland without respite, driving our horses to their limits. We reached Elrud just in time. We saw the army in the crimson lights of the sunset encroaching the city, a swarm of dark silhouettes.



As soon as we entered the gates we were greeted by a wounded soldier. He could not have been older than 30 seasons. A bandage was covering his right side of the face and he walked aided by a crutch held in his left hand, *his only remaining hand*.

"I am Charil, Captain of the City Guards. I would shake your hands but…" he stared at his stump for a second a tear in his eyes. "The toll of war was too great for me and I crumbled beneath it. I can barely walk let alone fight and lead my men. The first wave of enemies left me a purposeless cripple. Drarak himself, the dark sorcerer severed my limb with one of his spells. We knew you were coming to help us, the raven got here in time but now I will have to ask much more of you than just fight…" he swallowed hard and hesitated. It was clear as day that he was a proud man with a sense of duty far greater than most men had. I barely knew him but he already had my utmost respect. "I ask you to lead my men in battle."

Just as Teldrum was about to accept Charil's request a tremendous explosion shook the foundation of the building around us. As a druid I had a powerful connection with all that was living. I felt the agonizing cry of the nature as the ground beneath us was sundered. I could feel the earthquake in my very soul. We looked towards the source of explosion. An amorphous glob of swirling shadows broke through the city's inner wall, leaving a giant hole for the army to enter the city slaughtering the defenders. The glob began to take a more humane shape right before our eyes. I saw hands with terrible claws emerging from what seemed to be a torso and a deformed head appeared too.

Everyone heard an icy rasp inside our heads. "You…will drown…in your own…blood." It came from that demonic creature.

"Is that one of Drarak's minions?" I inquired.

"No, that thing is Drarak himself." Charil responded drearily.

Teldrum quickly jumped in. "I saw Drarak before, he was a human just like you and…well not me, I'm a dwarf but you get the point."

"Whatever he is now, he's not human anymore."

"Alright listen up!" Teldrum yelled at our party. "This is it boys, the moment we all have been waiting for. Time to end that monstrosity once and for all! On my mark we charge him!"

"Teldrum this is madness!" I tried reasoning with the dwarf. "You will be torn apart by his magic, let me and my animals…"

"I had about enough of you and your voodoo magic!" Teldrum coughed and spat me on my chest. "You have been a coward since the day we dug you out of that cavern of yours. Do as you like but after we are done with Drarak you will be the next one to taste my blade's axe." And with that he turned his horse around along with his men and charged valiantly at the sorcerer.

Spikes of pure demonic energy erupted from the ground impaling the group but Teldrum. Even though he was the only one left he didn't slow down. As soons as he was close enough Drarak swiped at him with one of his deformed claws beheading the dward's horse and sending him flying into the wall of a nearby building.

I had only one option left. I unhinged the clarion I have been carrying on my belt throughout this whole ordeal. The Horn of The Beastmaster laid now in my hands. I took a deep breath and blew in it with all my might. Suddenly rattlesnakes emerged from the ground biting and poisoning the sorcerer's army, buzzards came from the sky mangling them. Drarak sensed the magic emanating from my horn and rushed towards me. Charil tried to step in between me and him in a last heroic act but was split in half by one of the sorcerer's spells.

One of his claws metamorphosed into a sharp blade and he impaled me. I felt searing pain coming from my chest as he wedged the blade deeper. He cackled madly at me as he prepared his

final blow. Right then my eagle came soaring from the skies gauging his eyes. He let out and inhumane shriek as he flayed his other hand around trying to kill my eagle. With my last bits of strength e reached my belt again and drew my hatchet. I struck the blade into his skull with all my might. He didn't even get to scream one last time.

The swirling shadows disappeared as Drarak gave his last breath and I fell on the ground. I was bleeding profusely but the blood of the wolves coursed through my veins. A grave wound but a wound I could heal in time nonetheless. Unfortunately that day, faith showed me how merciless she could be and how little regard she gave towards us, mere mortals.

A shadow appeared above me and I looked up to see Teldrum holding his bloody belly with his hand and with the other his axe. He raised his weapon above his head like he was taunting the sky itself.

"I told you that you were going to follow soon Drarak's demise at my own hand."

MOON PRIESTESS

by Andrada Dumitru

Colegiul Naţional "Spiru Haret"

I had seen many castles during my journeys, but none impressed me as much as the one which stood in front of me right now. It was a high lord's proud residence in the far south of the kingdom. Despite its old age, which was long forgotten, the fortress towered as noble as the lord's blood.

Four crenellated towers reached high into the clouds and on top of each of them stood a guard with a crossbow tightly squeezed between his hands. The walls were made from the best stone, carried all the way from the northern mountains of Frostshackle, here, into the warm, sunny country of Thunderclasp.

I urged my horse, an old mare, forward and as I got closer to the fort's moat I realized it was completely dry. "Must be the draught" I told myself. The drawbridge was already lowered and the heavy, silvery portcullis risen. There was a grand ceremony inside, and all kinds of folk had been invited to celebrate the birth of the lord's new son. From outside I could hear the cheering of the men, the laughter of young maidens, the raucous of the drunk and the sweet sound of merry violins playing. I myself had come as a bard, but my instrument was an old harp with lithe golden branches intertwined with the frame.

As I entered the majestic gate I noticed the lord's banner: a blue jay flying over a turquoise and green ocean, an orange sun above it. Every wall, inside and out, held a banner and was heavily decorated with the representative blue jay.

The stable boy quickly took my mare, right after I had unsaddled her and another boy took my harp. I swiftly checked my garments: they were no lady's gown, but they served well a lonesome bard. I swallowed a deep breath and with it my anxiety and entered the great hall which held the ceremony.

The first thing I noticed was the intense stench of alcohol: ale, mead and wine were pouring from every corner, thus the smell of the food being completely covered. I looked at the two rows of columns which lead to the noble people's table. At their plinths were a myriad of blue flowers, the colour of the blue jay's plumage.

Swiftly, I took my place with the other musicians and started playing and singing the merry tunes, but I hadn't come all the way south just to accompany the rest of the bards, but to sing to the newborn prince my famous ballad: "Moon priestess". It had become a superstition among the peasantry that if a lord's baby heard this song during its first years of life, he or she will be blessed by the moon goddess with great fortune, health and wisdom. Lately, even the lords started believing this. Of course, none of it was true, but I enjoyed my fame and respect as an artist. Soon enough it was time for my ballad to be sung and time for the goddess to bless the child.

The lord's young wife approached the platform where I was singing with the small baby that was sucking on his thumb. Her eyes were fixed on my deft fingers as I was playing the harp and she listened to every note and word I sang. In no time, all the guests started humming the ballad and the baby gave a big chuckle. His mom kissed his forehead gently with her bright red lips and continued listening.

In all my years of singing at weddings, name days, or other sort of festive gatherings in castles or inns, I had never received so much praise. By the end of "Moon priestess" the fair lady was already in tears. She thanked me sweetly and made sure I was fairly paid. That night I earned more than I ever imagined. Around 150 golden coins were clicking in my sachet. The lady was known for such generosity as she was extremely pious and did many benevolent deeds.

Now, it was time for me to leave. I bid everyone good night and good fortune, yoked my mare from the stable and galloped into the cold air of the night. Once again, I became a lonesome spirit which roamed the kingdom far and wide so that everyone could receive the blessing of the silvery moon which lighted my way as I was carried by the wind into the unknown...

THE SHADOW BEHIND ART

by Irina Iancu

Colegiul Naţional "Sfântul Sava"

The last time she had checked the clock, it had been 2:37 a.m. A fleeting thought of sleep ran through her mind in that moment, quickly replaced by another, more brilliant idea.
So her pencil danced across the paper in the rhythm only it and its owner knew.
The next time she cared about time, it was 12:53 a.m. and her sketch was now a painting she was *almost* satisfied with.
Her stomach grumbled in disapproval, so she got up, meaning to eat. However, she stumbled onto her bed and moments later and fell asleep. One last thought, that exact shade of colour that was missing, crossed her mind just before dreams claimed her.
Her own name was the next thing she heard.
“Adira!” The voice called, loud enough to give her a headache. Adira grumbled and sat up. She regretted the decision moments later, as she got dangerously dizzy.

“In here!” She called to the voice, her mind begging her to sit back down.
Her sister appeared from the other room, the ever-present frown on her face. “You look dreadful.”
Adira wanted to comment but found her throat begging for water. As always, her sister had already guessed her state. Carin had already brought both food and some sort of natural juice only she could deem drinkable.
“You are going to kill yourself if you keep going like this.” Carin said. But she would always say that, each time she decided to visit Adira in order to make sure she was still alive.
Carin the perfect daughter, perfect wife, perfect mother. She was even flawless at her job – having received some sort of prize for her work as a surgeon.
One had to wonder how this untouchable human being could balance everything in her life with such incontestable grace.
Adira, as this particular situation proved, couldn't even remember to eat and sleep at the right time, let alone live her sister's ideal life.
“I'm doing fine.” She lied, willing her sister to just leave already. There was no reason for her to be there, and Adira still had a painting to finish.
Carin said nothing about that, choosing to give her sister her mail instead. “You got a letter from some museum.”
At the sound of that, Adira dashed to take the piece of paper, some strictly irrational impulse she always had. She effortlessly grabbed the envelope, and tore it open to read its containts.
To Mrs Adira Enfield,
Adira skipped forward.
We are sorry to announce you that...
She threw the letter away as soon as she read that first sentence. No use reading the rest of a filthy rejection.

Her mind was slightly blurred, the influence of alcohol clouding her vision noticeably. She couldn't paint with or without it.
What a delightfully cruel irony.
Still, her hands kept moving, sketching what was now taking the shape of a hooded figured. Her fingers were holding the brush too tightly and her movements were rigid.
She sighed in frustration and threw the brush to the other side of the room. A perfect shade of black smeared on her white walls.
Not good enough, she thought and the syntax followed her into her next four drinks. By the fifth one, she had forgotten why she was drinking in the first place.
She stumbled across the room towards the bed, only barely missing hitting her head on one of the shelves. Her mind made some half-conscious decision to remove the obstacle when she woke up, before Adira fell face-first onto the mountain of pillows, not to wake up again until late midday.
The sound of her buzzing phone was what grabbed her away from her dreams, an annoying hiss that she despised with every fibre of her being. That is, until she realized why her phone was so desperately calling for its owner.
Eyes wide open now, Adira swiftly got up, ignoring the splitting headache that was setting in. Instead, she made herself a cup of coffee, while also trying to find something adequate to wear.
How had she forgotten about this? She thought, balancing the cup of coffee with one hand, and an iron with the other.
This could not be happening. She could not forget her meeting.

But she had done exactly that. As she looked in the mirror, finding a zombie rather than a person, it hit Adira that somehow, she had managed to mess up the one thing that truly mattered to her. Tears found their way to her eyes, glossing the deep brown of her irises, creating a shade so perfectly like the mud a pig would roll in.
Of course, had she been Carin, this would have never happened.
Wiping the tears away with an angry movement, she proceeded to try and make herself look presentable.

By the time Adira reached the museum, she had been three minutes late and had possibly sweated through her shirt *and* sweater.
She dreaded to know how she looked like.
Regardless, she still walked in, her high heels creating thud after thud on the marble floor. She should have just picked flats.
Rather than focusing on the fact that she was carrying her best work and that she was about to meet one of the most well-known gallery owners of London, she found herself thinking about her appearance. Did she still smell of alcohol?
Was her hair unkempt? Had her clothes wrinkled?
Adira knew better than most just how precious a first impression could be.
As she reached Mr. Davis' office, she somehow convinced herself that this had been a terrible idea, that the only choice now was to run.
Still, she knocked.
Her ears caught some mumbling from the other side, and praying that it was a warm invitation, she opened the door.
The first thing Adira thought as she faced the man was that he looked nothing like the photos in the newspapers.
Instead, he was relatively short and corpulent, if not absolutely massive.
Still, he was intimidating.
His eyes analysed her for a few moments, before he got back to whatever he had previously been looking at.
“Thank you for seeing me.” Adira started, hoping to prompt a conversation. Mr. Davis only grunted in response. “I brought some of my paintings, as you requested.” There was silence, followed by another grunt, “Perhaps you'd like to see them now?”
That was the moment Mr. Davis lifted his stare once again, a look of dismissal present in his eyes. He hadn't even seen her paintings and he was already unimpressed. A sinking feeling surged through Adira at that moment, like a tube of aquarelle that had been squeezed too tightly and now was empty inside.
“Show me.” He said, his voice the exact sound of disinterest.
Adira showed him anyway.
She started with the portraits, the ones of herself, her sister, of random children who radiated with joy, before moving to the few landscapes she had.
Through this display, the gallery owner was silent as a mouse.
By the time she finally reached her last painting, the quiet of the room had climbed inside her head and it was driving her insane.
She wasn't sure how much of it she could take.
“Miss Enfield,” the man started, sitting back down at his desk. She didn't like the sound of that.
“I will say this as simply as I can: you are not famous.”

Adira furrowed her brows, a nervous tic she was trying to give up but never could. Wasn't her not being famous the reason she was begging people to display her work?
The man continued, “Your name hardly ever appears in the newspaper, you rarely go to art shows and people are simply not familiar with your work.”
But this was supposed to be about talent, not about how popular she was and most definitely not about the people she knew.
“What about my art?” She asked then, her voice a fine line between calmness and hysteria.
Mr. Davis sighed, his eyes no longer on her. “Your work is neoclassic. And if that doesn't make it hard to sell, the fact that you play with unusual contrasts surely does. You have talent, if that is what you want to hear, but I'm afraid that without first having a name for yourself, no reasonable individual will risk hanging your work in galleries.”
Carin had once told her, long ago, that she always painted in polarity aspects, playing with human feelings. She had told her that her paintings were a game of happiness and sadness, an equilibrium of loneliness and love.
Until this moment, Adira had always thought of it at her biggest strength.
Now, she wished she could take all these years back, change her own style.
“Thank you.” She managed to say, and started picking up her paintings.
Mr. Davis grunted.

She had never been one to get drunk in a bar.
Knowing herself well enough to understand how risky it was to get home half-consciously, Adira had always preferred the safety of her apartment.
Now however, she was too tired and too unwilling to get back there only to face her dirty walls and messy life.
So, despite herself, she did go to a bar, and she did get drunk.
She even made a game out of it.
For every painting that had been complimented on its realistic depict of the world, one shot. For every unfinished drawing, another shot.
For all the bright colours that she used in order to mask her own greyness.
For all the people she had painted, beautiful strangers in the subway, ecstatic children playing on the street, lovely old couples on their evening walk.
For all of these mistakes that had stolen twenty years of her life, she drank herself senselessly.
Adira couldn't remember leaving the bar, but her memory had kept the feel of the glass door as she pushed it open.
This wasn't how it was supposed to be, she thought sorrowfully. The anger had long disappeared, replaced by profound desolation. She had dreamed of being the shadow behind masterpieces, that painter whose name everyone knew, but whose face was unrecognisable.
She had dreamed of her paintings hanging in galleries all over the world.
Adira knew fellow artists who wanted their face on every issue of every magazine, the people who carved being known by a whole world. She had never strived to that, nor had she ever imagined she *should*.
And yet, here she was, needing to become famous in order to make her dream come true.
It seemed an unfair trade.
Lost in her own thoughts and with alcohol dancing around her mind in confusing circles, Adira never noticed the blinding headlights as they approached her at top speed.
And even if she had, it wouldn't have made a difference.

Carin Enfield was working the night shift when she was paged.
She didn't think twice about it, as she hurried down the long corridors and towards the E.R. There was nothing strange about an emergency call, especially not in the middle of the night.
She had no way of knowing who the patient was.
“Carin.” Her colleague called after her, but she barely slowed down.
When you were paged, you didn't just walk.
“What's up?” She asked Melanie, as she pushed a set of doors open. One more corridor and she would reach the poor patient.
“It's your sister.”
Carin almost lost her balance then, before managing to save herself from a disgracing fall.
“What about her?” She asked as she regained both her composure and her speed.
Her friend, however, never got a chance to answer.
Instead, Carin pushed the last set of doors open and walked boldly into the E.R., only to freeze right on the spot.
There, in front of her very eyes, stood her sister.
Carin's blood drained from her face and she tried and failed to maintain her calm.
“She's the patient?” She asked her friend, although she already knew the answer.
Melanie still nodded.
Carin watched Adira's unconscious body as the doctors ran tests, as they scanned her, as they determined just how many bones she had broken, how many vital parts of her were damaged.
For the first time, Carin thought that not letting a surgeon operate on family was an utterly stupid rule. She was the most qualified of the whole hospital.
And that, laying open on the operation table, was her baby sister.
She should have been with her, a surgeon in action rather than a relative waiting for news.

“You should check this out.”
Days turned into weeks, and then weeks turned into months but Carin refused to give her sister even one moment alone.
Adira wished she could blame her for it, but she was secretly glad for the company.
“I don't think I want to,” she answered Carin, as the older sister came in with the mail.
Adira had no intention of hearing any more bad news.
Her shrink – Carin's idea, not her own – was already frustrated with the painter's refusal to open up any new mail.
“I think this might be good news.” Her sister pushed.
Adira sighed, an over-exaggerated gesture. “You have already read it, haven't you?” she asked.
Carin nodded and handed her little sister the envelope.
The artist took it with shaking hands.

Miss Enfield,

We have been quite impressed with your more recent work.
A promising start. Adira skipped through the lines of useless rambling, wanting to get to the conclusion faster. When she did, she almost stopped breathing, a wave of unfamiliar feelings crashing onto her.

We would love for three of your works – of your own choice – to be exposed for the "Contemporary Artists Gallery" in November. The three pieces will be exposed for two nights.
"Congratulations, Adi," her sister instructed her.
Adira barely heard her. Managing to calm her breathing to a reasonable level, as allowed the words to sink in into her mind, into her heart.
This was it, she thought with a surge of ferocious joy, *this was finally it.*

OPIUM

by Mihai Ionașcu
Colegiul Naţional "Spiru Haret"

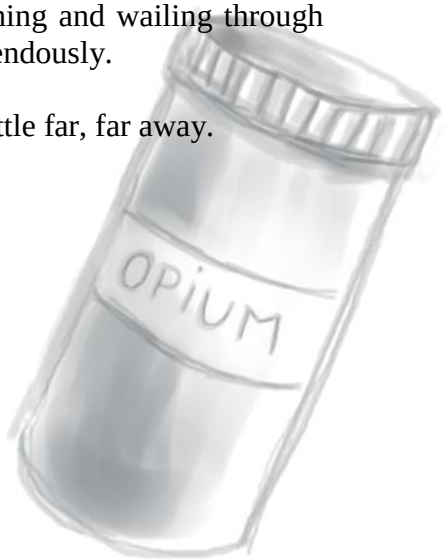
The 19th of September 1680
Mr. Dewitt Booker
Hamlet
Patol Mansion 63409

Mr. Booker,
I request that you read this letter at most urgency. My name is Carter Booker, I was born in Hamlet long ago after the war ended, with your father Ivan. We were a rather poor and deprived family, little conditions we had lived with. That didn't mean we hadn't been educated, years passed and your father and I finished high school. We still were extensively poor and our parents were having health problems. Mother had been diagnosed with severed tuberculosis and father had been hit by the plague. Most of the money we made from working in the town were spent on medicine and witch doctors, which didn't even have effect. It was little time till our parents had both died and we were left all alone on the cruel world. It was a struggle between paying for the house and choosing to eat everyday.
Conditions were getting worse and worse and we'd eventually be drown in debts and recuperation threaths. Those things had little importance anyway as long as your father and I had the humour to drown them. It was one day that I was walking home when I heard people shouting and corpses set of fire thrown in the air, arrows and screams and agony, it was another invasion that our town had little response to. I came surging home to find Ivan and run, little did I know he was already gone when I got there. I didn't have much time to think anyway the last thing I know is getting hearing a loud smack onto the house's door.
The next thing I knew I was enrolled into the town's militia and fighting and a bare teenager. Every minute was a bloodshed. I had little knowledge of what I was doing and I eventually saw the opportunity to desert my ''comrades''. I was running for my life with a pitchfork raised, completely focused on the space between 2 streets in the square when I hear a mercifull laugh and a giant shield appears in front of me. I was knocked down and unaware of what was happening.
Luckily for me I woke up in a medicine hut in a nearby town in the insanity ward. Somebody signed me up as demented. As I try to get out of the bed I see a familiar face, it's Ivan. After long explanations I found out a family member of ours knew about the raid and sent someone to our house to pick us up but I was missing. My brother had intense research to come across me and

eventually found out where I was. He had told me about the job he had taken once he ran away and the money he stashed for us. ‘’Follow me” he said ‘’We’re going back to Hamlet’’.
Back in Hamlet everything was destroyed, the authorities didn’t even bother to restore the town in any measure. Once we got to our house I looked at it deprived and full of grief, everything was burned and and demolished, all the money we put into it. We lifted the scorched remains and dug the way to open the cellar, forced the barred entrance and made it inside. Bellow an old barrel was a small wooden casket, we crushed it and the inside was full of golden coins and silver jewelry left by mother, we had also found an address and a huge crest with a hawk inscriptioned with ‘’opulent and imperial’’.

Thing might start to make sense now, the address we had found was the one which I’m writing you from right now. Ivan and I made made way to the mansion and found out it had been owned by an old man with the same family name… Booker. We knocked on the door and the man answered with a hysterical figure. We were welcomed inside and soon started to share our tearing story with the weird man. After we told him about how we managed to trace the address he smiled and agreed to let us buy the house from him for a decent price. We striked the deal having little knowledge of what was going to happen.
Your brother and I had a good ammount of savings left and we could trade the silver collections for more. Ivan had eventually confessed that he had loved a woman back when I was unconscious and had children, this is the way I traced you.
We lived all of our years in that ancient, rumor shadowed manor, filled with decadence and luxury, yet we began to tire of extravagance. Nights of sinning with unknown women and alcohol abuse.
It was a bloody heavy rain night when we were down the cellar draining the last spatter of wine we had stashed when we noticed the covered tunnel. We started shoveling away the gravel and found a ripped and torn piece of paper, ‘’If you’re reading this you had found the source of energy that destroyed our family’s name, I wrote this to assure myself that someone will read it before I lose my sanity. It’s not too late for you yet… SEAL THE TUNNEL AND RUN FOR YOUR LIVES.’’
…
I always wished your brother and I weren’t so purerile and left the mansion. We had spent the last centim of money left on excavations and diggings to uncover the source of the ‘’energy’’.
Ruin had come to our family. You remember our venerable house, so ‘’opulent and imperial’’ gazing proudly from its stoic perch above the moor. With every relic and ritual we bent our way to the buried secret. At last in the clay soaked crags beneath the lowest foundations of the mansion we had unearthed the damnable portal of evil. Our every step unsettled the ancient earth but were in a real of death and madness. In the end I alone fled laughing and wailing through those blackened tunnels of antiquity until my own sanity failed me tremendously.
…
Return home, claim your birthright and help us enclose the portal and settle far, far away.
Deepest respects,
Your uncle Carter

The torn piece of paper falls down in a puddle of blood



I look around myself and see my brother lying down next to the fallen letter surrounded by naked women gasping and looking at us.

-W-what have I done?

To my right is a crude wooden table with a slashed packet of opium opened. Stupefied I look at my hands and see a short pocket knife drenched in soaking blood.

-I should've stayed away from that bloody drug when Ivan told me…

As I get off the chair to press on my brother's wound a huge outburst comes from my throat. I put my hands on the cold decking and puke a mix of blood and white powder. Last thing I can remember is my head falling down and seeing the dying look in Ivan's eyes.

…

In time… you will know the tragic extent of my failings…

THE SHADOW OF MY IMAGINATION

by Emilia Andreea Manda
Colegiul Naţional „Cantemir Vodă"

I'm still trembling. I'm sitting next to my body, watching three men in white intubating me. They are doctors and I'm in a hospital. What can I say ? There is nothing to worry about. I'm trying to remember what it happened to me but every single memory I should've had, now it's gone.

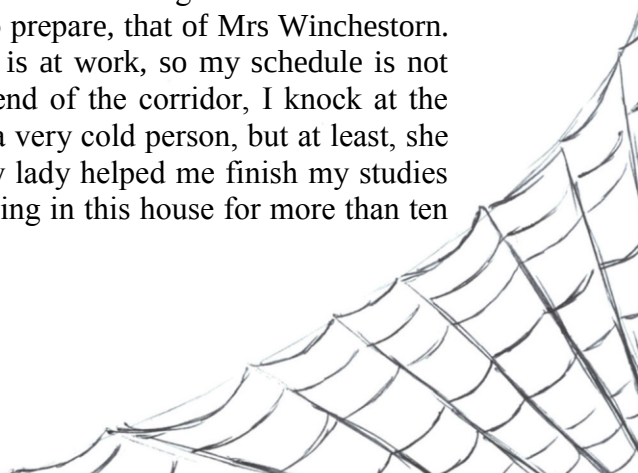
Unable to make a sound, I'm running and sobbing at the same time in order to find someone to help me. Unfortunately, I'm alone, as nobody seems to feel my presence. Yet, it is normal for me. I've always been alone and there is nothing new, besides the fact that I'm the ghost of the human being that is dying on a surgical table. Two minutes later, my whole life is flashing before my eyes and I realise I want no recalls of it.

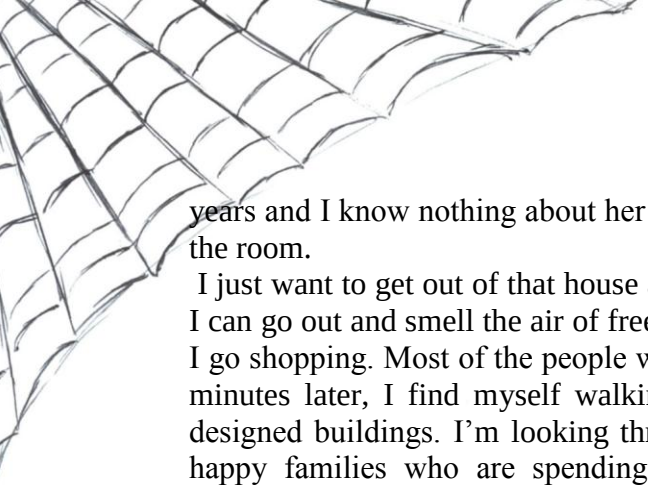
3 hours earlier...

It's almost the crack of dawn. I can't even see the sun on the deadly red sky and the only ones awake are me and my chief's dog. This is how my routine starts: serving others.

My name is Katherine and I work as a chef for a wealthy family in Northern England. All my life I've had great expectations and I've imagined a brilliant future for myself. Well, this is not how life works, though. When I was fourteen, my parents left me in the middle of the night at the Winchestorn family's door, my future masters. I don't know and I will never know why they did something so cruel like abandoning a child, but now I truly believe those who said that we only live a small part of what we imagine and that our dreams and plans don't always come to life. Anyway, let's get back to my story.

I'm waiting for my alarm clock to ring in order to know when it's the right moment to serve breakfast. I'm relieved today because there's only one plate to prepare, that of Mrs Winchestorn. Her children are somewhere in Switzerland and her husband is at work, so my schedule is not very busy. I'm climbing the stairs of the manor and, at the end of the corridor, I knock at the wooden door. *''You may enter*,''she says. She's always been a very cold person, but at least, she didn't treat me scornfully as the other ones. What's more, my lady helped me finish my studies and I'll always be grateful to her. It's funny how I've been living in this house for more than ten





years and I know nothing about her past. „*Yes, madam*," I replied politely. After that, I'm leaving the room.

I just want to get out of that house as quickly as possible because it is one of the few times when I can go out and smell the air of freedom. My masters let me leave the manor once a month when I go shopping. Most of the people would call me a slave, but I know it could've been worse. Ten minutes later, I find myself walking on the Newgate Street, admiring the old, but very well designed buildings. I'm looking through the windows of a restaurant, jealously watching some happy families who are spending some quality time together. Well, I've never lived such moments, but I've imagined similar ones every time before going to sleep. Getting lost in my own thoughts, I'm not paying attention to the traffic lights, so I'm getting hit by a car. The next thing is just a blankspace.

...

I am a shadow, a spirit who cannot be heard, touched or helped. However, the atmosphere here is quite peaceful and I don't feel any kind of pain. I have no idea if I am dead or not but I don't want to find out either, so I keep walking away until someone stops me at the entrance of the hospital. It's a middle aged man, who is all dressed in white. He looks like a doctor. Maybe he is one."*Welcome to the other world! You seem a little bit scared but you don't have to worry anymore. You can't die again*", he tells me amused.

*''How can I make it stop and why are you able to see me ?''*I ask him.

''Because of the fact that you're new in business, I'll explain this to you only once and no more questions after that. Firstly, you're a ghost, I'm a ghost and everybody who can see us is a ghost. Secondly, it's not that bad and you should take advantage of it. You can travel everywhere in this world as you lack a physical shape and you can find a person just by thinking of it. Technically, the living ones could do these things only in their imagination.'' This is all that he says to me before disappearing. So, I'm alone again. What a beautiful way to spend your free time!

I keep chewing on what I've just heard and I realise that he is right. I am not a servant anymore, I am a free spirit and I can't be tamed. I can travel beyond my imagination and I can bring everything that I've ever dreamed of to life. It's just me and my creative mind and for the first time in my life (my after life), this is enough.

I close my eyes and the next thing I see when I open them again is a room with no doors or windows, but mirrors. I think there are hundreds of them on the walls despite the small size of the area. In every corner of the room, I am surrounded by my reflections and it is a little bit of a shock, as a spirit can't contemplate its face every day by looking at it. I'm trying to touch one of the mirrors. As a result, two seconds later I'm being absorbed through a portal which leads to a very familiar, but yet a far away place for me: Saint Petersburg, the city where I was born. I immigrated with my parents from Russia to UK when I was a little girl and I was raised there until they left me. Everything is so impressive and it feels like I'm living a dream. It's true, I've imagined this moment once or twice, but I've never honestly believed that I'd be able to visit my native country again. I almost remember everything: the Mariinski Theatre, Saint Issac's Cathedral and even the Russian Musem. My father used to say that the history of a country is written on its buildings and if I left my heart open, it could be filled with unforgetable moments.

Unfortunately, I can't stand this view any longer, so I choose another mirror. When I get in, I notice the Winchestorn's manor, but it's slightly different. The corner is covered in flowers and the Master of the castle is, in fact, me. I am dressed like a real lady and I am waiting for the breakfast to be served.'' *Now I know why Mrs Winchestorn told me that I have too much imagination*", I say it out loud. A smile of revenge suddenly appears on my face. I am sitting in

my office and watching some pictures with me from all around the world: one is from Jamaica, another one from Austria and so on. I would have loved living that life...
Before entering one more portal, I wish I could see what really happened between my family and the Winchestorns. I know it is the only way to find out even if it may be heart breaking and painful. The next moment, I see a flashback of my mother and my lady discussing about me. They look ten years younger and I am just a spectator during their conversation.
''You're my sister! You have to help me! I know you disregard my decisions, but you cannot hate Katerina, too. Me and her father are soldiers of a war in which she is not involved". I was completely shocked, but my mother's soft voice was the medicine I've needed for a long time. On the same day, I had a car accident, everything that I'd ever imagined came alive and aIso, I've found out that my parents were soldiers and Mrs Winchestorn, my aunt.
Finally, I found the peace. I learnt that it's never too late to turn dreams into reality and even if I lived a small part of the scenes that I created in my mind, my imagination had no limits. It raised me up and made me find the right way.
5 years later...
I'm sitting with Mrs Winchestorn on the couch (I call her Aunt Anna now) and we're having a tea together. After the accident, she told me the truth and everything changed. I feel appreciated now and I am a successful architect, a fulfilled person who is not the shadow of her own imagination. The new me has no boundaries.

IMAGINE WITHOUT FEAR

by Teodora Trandafir
Şcoala Centrală

I breathed in the clear, misty air surrounding me. I was lying down on the ground, looking at the sky which was partly covered with trees. The sun dappled the clearing with golden patterns. "I'm finally calm" I said to myself. To put it in a nutshell, I had a fight today with my dad. Basically, I've been living alone with him for 10 years now. My mom left us when I was seven, because she's the un-committed type of person when it comes to families. Anyway, today I just snapped and I told him that I'm done living this dull life with him. I wanted to see fascinating places, to observe the world, to feed my mind. But now, since I just found my calm in the forest nearby my house, I just understood that, he's simply not made for it. Like the rest of the people I've met lately. They show this absence of imagination. Of spirit. I strongly believe that our imagination flies and we are just its shadow on earth, we just have to stop cutting it's wings. Eh, maybe I just live way too much in my mind, just as my father says.

I looked again at the clear sky, admiring the branches full of green leaves. I closed my eyes for a second, feeling a little bit drained from the argument I had today with my dad. I thought that maybe a little nap won't hurt anyone. As I felt asleep, last thing I heard was the birds who twittered occasionally. I woke up in a bed made of straw. It was kind of comfy, yet odd, I didn't remember having a bed like this. Wait, I didn't even fall asleep in a bed. I opened my eyes, "this ain't my house" I said. I was in a shock. I looked around and all I could see was a tiny bookshelf, a handmade one, full of books obviously, a desk full of dried flowers, things that looked like potions, and a fireplace which had a huge pot above the fire. Everything was so simple, yet

somehow magic. “It looks like a witch hut” I whispered to my self. “Because you are in a ‘witch hut’ said a sultry voice, with a sarcastic tone. Like a terrified deer, I got out of the bed and I turned my head. At the shack’s door was a petite woman, with pale skin and strangely yellow eyes. Her hair was jet-black, long enough to reach her waist. Even if she had a mysterious figure, she had a kind of beauty I’ve never seen before. Her linen dress and her Celtic-like jewels was making her more interesting. She glanced down at me, measuring my strawberry curls and my burgundy dress down to my dirty boots (this is what happens when you decide to take a walk two hours after a heavy rain). “Who are you?” I said, almost whispering with fear. “I’m Morrigan. I should ask you the same, since you were the one found lying on the ground.” Her spiritless voice didn’t help me to calm down. “I’m Patricia, why didn’t you wake me up? My house was 3 minutes away. But thank you, anyways...”, “I tried to” she said “I did, I thought you were dead, I didn’t know how long have you been there. Wait, what house?” For a second I believed that she’s mocking me, and then I saw that she really seemed confused. “Uh, mine? I am pretty sure that the distance between the place I fell asleep and my place is 2-3 minutes maximum.” She smiled. “I think you are very, very lost. My shack is the only ‘house’ in this wild. The closest village to us is at two hours distance.” I frowned. “What village? Where am I?” She came closer, gazing into my eyes while walking in front of me. “You are not from here, I can see that. My mother was just like you, but she chose to stay. You’re confused. Let me explain.” Morrigan cleared her voice “Well, long story short: you are a special kind of human from where you come from. Apart from the rest, you are not dull, you can see what others cannot, you are curious, you have a flaming mind, not made at all for your…world” She said “world” with a lot of disgust. “So, you are born with two options: come here, the place where you basically belong, or you can live your dull, simple live on Terra.” I was shocked, for a second I thought that this may be that kind of a sick pranks they play, I’ve seen this kind of stuff at TV. But I thought that I should leave my paranoia and start asking her the real questions “Again, how long can I stay here? What’s so different apart from where I come from? Have you met others like me?” She raised her hands, meaning that I should calm a bit. I took a deep breath and waited for her answers.

She started telling me about how different is my mind and how lucky I am to get a single chance in life to leave my dull world and live in another one- a medieval type, she described with kings, magic, enchanted forests, divines and sacred laws. I was astonished as I saw the books she had about this world-LIenor. The capital of Llenor was Starkhaven. “Just four hours from the village, if we go there we can catch a carriage to get us to the capital- you need to see the king”, she said with a straight face. “For what? Why today? I think I should firstly ask my dad if...” “He won’t believe you. no matter what are you gonna say, he won’t. That’s the difference from you and the others- you have the sight, the unique way of thinking. Time passes differently anyways, if I remember well from what my mother said when she got back to Terra, before she officially moved here, a week here is not even a second in your world. Let me tell you something- do you know how rare you are? You are the first one who came to Llenor from Terra since my mother, and that was 30 years ago.” I was surprised to be honest, I thought that the sudden appearance of someone from Terra wasn’t that special for them, as I saw in Morrigan’s reaction when I firstly talked with her. She continued “so yes, you, my mother and the king are the only ones who ever came here from your world. That’s why he needs to see you. Besides, you should see Llenor, or Starkhaven’s castle, my mother said that there ain’t nothing on Terra that even resemble with our wonders. And maybe, if you like it, you can choose to remain here. That’s why you need to see the king, he will agree with your permanent staying. So, let us go.”

As she said, after we arrived in the village nearby and we took a carriage to Starkhaven. I contemplated a bit while I admired the richest nature I have ever seen. There were mountains, huge ones, that's reached the sky like they were holding it. Along them, the ancient trees were standing with thick roots, with an endless highness, with leaves as red as the sun and with huge trunk, not even 10 people could not embrace the whole tree. It was something I never saw before. The air was so pure, yet I could feel the scent of the rug of flowers, with a pastel pink color, they almost looked like the roses from Earth, yet even their simple flowers had something special in them.

We finally arrived in the great capital of Llenor. As I walked on the paved streets, I was surrounded with people that seemed they had a purpose, maybe not a great one, but I could see in their eyes that they ere living for it. That made me happy, so I decided to walk with Morrigan to the great castle with the huge smile I had. I felt so euphoric, I felt like this is a dream, the world seemed so surreal, the nature, the city; even the castle was even greater that I thought it will be. Not even Olympus-Gods' home- wasn't as spectacular as the architecture that was lying in front of me. I entered with the serious witch in the Great Hall of the castle and walked directly towards the king that was sitting on his pure, white marble throne, while he was chatting with his adviser. He turned his glance towards me and Morrigan, and we both bowed. He knew Morrigan, I could see this. "Wait here", she said, as she went straight to the king and talked. I couldn't here what they said to each other, but they were both watching me, Hm, I should have known that the witch knew the king, it was odd how easy they let us wander into the castle. I felt Morrigan touch on my shoulder, and I looked like her a bit confused. She smiled and escorted me to the King. He was handsome, yet a bit old, I think he was in his fifties. He seemed so powerful, yet he had kind eyes."Morrigan told me about you." he begun " just as me, just as her mother, you are from the other world. I can see the way my castle basically can feed your mind, your imagination. I am surprised, after Morrigan's mother I thought that no one will ever come again. You see, this world need you just as much as you need this world. You may heard from Morrigan about our divines. They were the creators, the makers of Llenor. Before they created this world, they were damned to live the dull, pale life of Terra. They realized they were gifted- their minds were like gold mines of creation. Everything you see here was made of someone's mind. Every bit of nature, every city, every architecture. They exploted every bit of it to create this. And that happened hundreds of years ago." That explained why everything looked almost medieval- the divines lived in this Era on Earth. Yet they still made art from it. "Patricia" he said with a solemn tone "what do you say? Do you want to live in this world? To keep it alive? Yes, this is your purpose, the purpose of your imagination- keeping it real, alive and paradisiac as you seen it. You belong here. Maybe you feel better on your homeland, but still, you belong here. Your gift is native. "he stopped and took a long glance at me "Your choice.". Even if I had been here for a day, I feel exactly as the King said, I feel like home, I feel even better than when I wandered alone in my forest. It was everything I could have wished for, besides, when I saw the nature of Llenor I could feel how my mind was fed with all this power this world has. If I remember well, this is the world I ever wanted to live in since I was born. Everyday of my live I day-dreamed about this, and now I got the chance to live here forever." Yes." I said as I smiled "Here is where I belong, here is where my imagination is accepted, and that's why I want to remain here forever." Morrigan was surprised, and the king smiled proudly "Just as I thought." He said.

I accepted citizenship of Starkhaven, and, as part of Llenor. To be honest, I realized how powerful it is the thought that, no matter what I've encountered in my life, I never quitted about dreaming and using my mind in order to escape the reality. I realized that this was the reason why I am here- I, basically, have always been here. Not physically, but with the power of my mind.

THE SWEETEST ANGEL

by Mara Ioana Chiţimuş

Colegiul Naţional „Mihai Viteazul

They just couldn't understand. How couldn't they see how shameful it would be for her to go to school with that stupid phone. She had told them to buy it pink. She said pink. Not golden. Now all the girls were to laugh at her. She would be the only one without a pink phone. And when she complained to the maid about that, she simply called her a spoiled brat. Why were her servants so cruel?

Staring angrily at her ridiculously luxurious room, she wiped a tear with her shirtsleeve and decided what to do next. If her parents were blind enough to make her go through that abashment, then she wasn't going to go to school anymore. She would run away. And with that decision in mind, Rose quickly packed some things in a small backpack and sneaked out.

For those who were watching her, she was just a fourteen-year-old girl, tall and slim, wondering the crowded streets of Manhattan aimlessly. As the wind blew, it made her curly blonde hair fly, covering her face. She gently removed it from her eyes, blue as the summer sky, seeming to notice for the first time what was surrounding her. She stared almost in disbelief as some homeless people were bagging for money in a hidden corner, while a little dirty boy was selling some small apples, giving a wide smile to anyone who happened to leave him an extra coin. She shook her head, trying to escape that image and hurried up, not noticing that a thin shadow was following her. When Rose finally understood that somebody was after her, she tried to get lost into de crowd, but ended up in a narrow street. And now what? Lost and scared she quickly made up her mind and entered the small hospital on the other side of the road. At least there the stranger would no longer be able to follow her.

The room she found herself in wasn't very big, nor crowded. Only a couple of people were waiting on the chairs to be called in by the doctor. Somehow, none of them seemed to care about Rose's apparition, so she simply crossed the room, aiming for the stairs.

" If I can get on the roof top, maybe I could have a full view of the area, and recognize where on Earth I am." she thought, climbing the stairs.

Rose had just reached the third floor, when she stopped to take her breath. She was clearly not in a good shape. Maybe if she had waited to have lunch and then run away she would feel better. Leaning her back against the wall, she pulled out her wallet and checked if her credit card was in there.

"Good" she muttered, moving her fingers slowly on the cold surface of the plastic card. That was her salvation; now she knew for sure that she wouldn't starve. Letting it slip back in, Rose looked up, preparing for the next set of stairs, when a shrill crack broke the silence.

A door had been opened and behind it appeared a small girl, short and slim, with a fragile aspect. She seemed as light as a feather and looked no older than eight or nine. Her big dark eyes were studying Rose with curiosity, while her hair, like thousands and thousands of flames was waving messily around her heart-shaped face. Her pale complexion was brought alive only by the red in her hair, as intense as the sunset, the freckles that were dancing on her nose giving her a playful air.

Noticing that Rose was staring at her too, the little girl blushed and turned back to her room. For a brief moment, Rose looked back at the stairs, thinking about going on, when the girl's voice broke the silence. The little girl was again near the door, holding something that looked like a cloak.

"Won't you come play with me?" she asked, in a small voice.

So sweet her voice was, and so full of entreaties, that Rose couldn't say no.

"Sure" she said, entering the room, after the little girl. "My name is Rose. Rose Hathaway. What's yours?" she asked, once inside.

"Today it's Princess Leia" the girl answered, taking a paper-made crown and placing it on her head. "And you are going to be the bad witch that keeps me locked up in this terrible tower."

"No" she said shaking her head. "What's your real name, I meant."

"I told you; today it's Princess Leia."

"But that's not your real name; it's just something you've made up on the spot!" Rose exclaimed in frustration.

The little girl took a serious face and sat on the bed.

"Your lack of imagination is pure torture! You're telling me what's real and what's not, while the world is full of the products of imagination. See that bag you're holding? Once it only existed in someone's imagination. Now it's real. Between reality and imagination is nothing more than a thin wall made by those like you that refuse to let their thoughts fly."

Rose felt angry for a second, not knowing how to explain her that there was more than a thin wall between those two, but then she felt something like a wave of warmth, and she suddenly couldn't help smiling. This little girl was absolutely fascinating, and her theory about reality and imagination was…well, it was interesting and childish.

"Fine, Princess Leia" said Rose, taking the cloak from the little girl, and while dressing with it she added "What are you doing, young girl? Why haven't you cleaned this room? Just because it's a tower and not a palace, doesn't mean that you have to leave it like that! "

'Princess Leia' giggled, happy that she finally got somebody to play with and, for the rest of the day, the two girls were the most real bad witch and princess this world has ever seen.

"Now you have to go" whispered the princess to Rose.

Rose looked at her a little puzzled, and the little girl roll her eyes.

“If you don’t go, my prince won’t be able to come and save me. So I will pretend to be going to sleep, waiting for my prince, and you will leave to do your witchy stuff.” she explained, while lying on the bed.

Rose smiled and covered her with the blanket, then reaching for the backpack she pulled out her golden phone, full of missed calls from both of her parents.

“It’s a nice phone” said the girl from beneath the blanket.

Rose shook her head.

“No, it’s not. It was supposed to be pink. But thank you, anyway.”

“Then imagine it’s pink!” laughed the little girl.

Rose laughed too. Suddenly, the thing that made her run away that morning didn’t seem such a problem anymore.

“Yeah, you know what? That’s probably what I’m going to do.”

She took her jacket, decided to return home and apologize for running away for such a stupid thing, when the girl talked again.

“Rose?” she asked in a sleepy voice. “Will you come tomorrow?”

Rose melted with pleasure. In those few hours she had been playing, she felt extremely happy and she somehow grew fond of her new friend. Turning around and watching the red-haired girl fighting with the sleep so that she could hear the answer, Rose nodded.

“Of course.” she whispered. “In fact, I will stay with you until you fall asleep.”

‘Princess Leia’ smiled.

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The next day, when Rose returned to the hospital, she brought a basket with muffins. This time only, a man stopped her at the entrance. He must have been the janitor.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her, seeming bored and tired of his job.

“I’m visiting someone, sir.”

“You must give me the name of the patient, otherwise I can’t let you in.”

Rose rolled her eyes with anger. What was she supposed to say? ‘I’m visiting Princess Leia’ didn’t sound convincing.

“I don’t remember having to give a name yesterday.”

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“It wasn’t my shift yesterday.”

‘Yeah, what a luck for me’ taught Rose, but in the end, she went for the truth.

“I’m visiting a little red-haired girl. I met her yesterday and I promised her I would come again.”

“Ah, you’re here to see Melody!” he exclaimed, cheering up. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Rose smiled.

“Well, I didn’t know her name. Yesterday she was Princess Leia. Who knows who will she be today?”

The janitor nodded.

“Yes, that’s the Melody we all know.” Then, with sadness he added. “Too bad for her illness. She’s such a good child!”

“She’s ill?”

Then Rose remembered she was in a hospital. Of course that little Melody was ill. Trying to fix her stupid question, she added “But she will recover soon, won’t she?”

“I’m afraid not. She was diagnosed with cancer. God knows how much she has left.”

These news hit Rose hard. Little Melody, little fragile Melody could not possibly be dying. Trying to think it was not real, she climbed the stairs and knocked at Melody’s door. Entering her room, she took a seat on the chair, with sadness all over her face.

“Hello, Rose.”

She was still in bed, as pale as she had been a day before, but with the same eyes, full of life. Looking carefully at her now, Rose could see the signs of her illness.

“What’s wrong, Rose?”

“Nothing.” lied the girl, realising a tear had slipped on her cheek. “I’ll just imagine it’s not real” she added, thinking about what Melody had taught her a day before. “So, what are we going to be today?”

Melody smiled.

“Time travellers. We may live in eternity, through the people that knew us, but we die in time, so today I want to see all the times from the very beginning.”

Later that day, Rose thought deeply about what Melody had said.

“We may live in eternity, but we die in time.” This was something that deserved to be written, as it had a profound meaning, and convinced Rose that her new friend was more intelligent that she could have guessed.

And so the days passed, Melody becoming sicker and sicker, the cancer calling for its tribute, meanwhile the two girls lived a thousand different lives. They have been fairies and mermaids, or pirates or emperors. One day, little Melody decided she would be Cleopatra and another day she went for Anne Boleyn, while Rose was keeping her game, absorbed by the fascinating process of

imagination. Watching her friend grew sicker, she began to fear the day she would have to say good-bye, and when that day arrived, Rose felt it just like any other day.

When she entered Melody's room, she was lying on the bed, deadly pale and thin, so thin that you could see through her. Trying to hold her tears, Rose asked as always:

"So what are we going to be today?"

Melody smiled softly.

"Today I will be your guardian angel" she said in a frail voice.

And right there, watching her like that, Rose understood that Melody knew what was to come. But she was at peace somehow, no sign of fear appearing on the little girl's face. Rose admired that braveness silently, while approaching her and grabbing her tiny hand.

"Don't cry, Rose." whispered Melody, and that was when Rose realised she had been crying for a while.

"What will I do without your imagination to cheer me up? Without your wise words? You, Melody, have changed me. With your childish games and beliefs, you turned me from a spoiled selfish girl into a reasonable one…one that actually believes that imagination isn't far from reality."

"Oh, Rose, I didn't do anything. That girl you claim to be now…she has always been in you. She just needed a little push. And about my imagination… you won't miss it. Our imagination flies - we are its shadow on earth. You will find you own source of inspiration, and once you've found it your imagination will be like a waterfall: unstoppable."

Rose closed her eyes, trying to pull back her tears.

"Is there… Is there anything I could do for you? Any wish I could fulfill?"

Melody closed her eyes too, seeming very tired.

"No, Rose. I'm afraid you can't. All you can do is to promise me you won't forget me; in this way I will live through eternity."

Rose stood up, placing a kiss on Melody's forehead.

"Melody Jones, I promise you I will make you live through eternity." she swore and then, feeling she could not hold her tears any longer, she left the room, allowing Melody's mother to take her place near her daughter's bed.

***

Twelve years later

She finished reading the letter for the second time and yet she couldn't believe it. The editor had truly accepted to publish her trilogy. In that letter he had been praising her imagination and narrative art, and he really believed those books could be a success.

Opening the laptop for some final adjustments, her thought flew to Melody.

‘I did not forget you, dear friend. I promised you you’d live through eternity; and so shall you.’ whispered Rose, beginning to write the thanking part.

Then, for the third time in that day she opened the printed version of her book that the editor had sent her along with the letter.

There, written beautifully, with golden letters was the title:

‘The Sweetest Angel’

And right beneath it:

‘dedicated to Melody : when a writer loves you, you can never die’

Desenele au fost realizate de eleva Ana Dora Calea, clasa XA, Colegiul Naţional "Spiru Haret"