

The Shop of Wonders

a collection of writings by the students of the
Centauri Arts Academy

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Introduction

Imagine a door, leading through to a very unusual shop. Perhaps the door wasn't there yesterday, perhaps the shop will be gone tomorrow. Walk inside and you will discover bizarre objects, each with a story to tell. There are portals in the shop, leading to alternate worlds and times. Unusual, sinister and magical characters frequent this mystical place... and of these characters, perhaps the owner of the shop is the most mysterious of all.

With the paragraph above, and a slide show of weird and wonderful objects, the writers, filmmakers, artists and actors of the Centauri Arts Academy were introduced to our 2024 collaborative arts project: ***The Shop of Wonders***. The intention was that all students in every arts program would take this idea as their theme, preparing films, digital art, paintings, murals, performances, fiction and poetry - and all of us would come together to share our work in a final celebration at the end of the year.

This anthology has been created as the end project of the thirty writers who currently attend our programs. Some writers take classes in person at our studio and others attend virtually, from all over Canada. The oldest writer represented in these pages is eighteen, and the youngest just nine years old. They are poets, short story writers, novelists and playwrights. They write fantasy, science fiction, crime, horror, mystery, historical fiction, romance and contemporary fiction. In this anthology, you will find writers who are taking their first ever creative writing program, as well as experienced authors who have spent several years writing with us.

During ***The Shop of Wonders*** project, we meandered through a wide variety of prompts, working on our own and collaboratively. We wrote descriptions of the shop on the inside and out, exploring sensory writing and poetry. We tried our hand

at fantasy, as we imagined portals and stepped through them. We built characters, learning about motivation and subtext as we created their backstories, and we even attempted a segment from a screenplay. We told tales of objects languishing in the shop, many of them with magical powers, and each writer ended by completing a short story, experimenting with structure and point of view. All writers chose their favourite pieces for inclusion in this anthology.

I would like to thank Aaron Alviano and his Digital Art and Fine Art groups; our writers gained endless inspiration from your creations! I would also like to thank all our arts instructors for entering into this project with such enthusiasm. Finally, enormous thanks to our talented and enthusiastic writers, including those who ultimately decided not to submit their work to this anthology. You are the reason we all love what we do at Centauri Arts - and the reason we look upon the future with hope.

Julie Hartley

Writing Instructor; Co-director of Centauri Arts

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Part One

In a City on the Edge of the World

... in which writers are asked to imagine the exterior of the shop, and the sights, sounds, smells, textures, threats and wonders that lurk behind its door.

Approaching *The Shop of Wonders*

A collaborative piece by the Saturday and Wednesday Creative Writing Salons

It is a cold, dark, windy night, and the little seaside town sleeps. The gale from the ocean strikes it, hard and fierce. The storefronts of the cobbled lanes stand ancient and deserted.

It is an odd building, small but wide, like a cake that hasn't fully risen. The white roof is smooth and flat while the vibrant red bricks poke out at the corners, as if they have not been laid properly. I step back to read the sign above the peeling wooden door. In golden ink the sign reads, ***The Shop of Wonders.***

The hero walks through a forest to the Demon Lord's castle. Dew drips down from the leaves of the trees. As he approaches the castle, he finds a lone, majestic door with a simple frame in the middle of the trail.

The streetlight's glow upon my back casts a shadow against the brick wall. A gargoyle knocker stares me in the eye, watching, daring me to open the door, its mouth agape: an invitation to try something dangerous.

Looking around, Ares sees a giant door. It's about thirty feet tall and made of ebony wood, dark as the inky black sky above her. There are delicate patterns and swirls of gold on this mysterious door. Ares tries to open it, but the handle will not budge.

Amelia is walking solemnly through the city when she sees a distant glow. There, standing alone and isolated, is a heavy, wooden door with an intriguing, gold doorknob and a sign in curly gold writing that proclaims, ***The Shop of Wonders.***

He opens his eyes and looks around. Above him, below him, and on all sides is a thick wall of lush green leaves. Right in front of him stands a circular door, rusty gold in color and resembling a bank vault, with a huge wooden wheel in the middle, like the ones in the pirate ships of his favorite story books.

I have never seen this shop before. It isn't new: it has ugly, yellowish-brown stained glass windows, and a huge sign that reads: ***The Shop of Wonders***. The shop hints at creativity, and shiny gears spin around inside it, but suddenly I remember, I have to go. I turn and hurry away, glancing back over my shoulder.

The next day, the shop is gone and all he can see is a bare, gray brick wall.

The next day, the shop is gone and all he can see is the Demon Lord's castle in the distance.

The next day the shop is gone and all I can see is an empty alleyway.

The next day, the shop is gone, though she uses her phone to track her position exactly. In its place is a plain brick wall.

The next day, the shop is gone and all I can see is a hardware store. *Wasn't there a different shop here yesterday?* I ask the sales assistant, but he replies, *This place hasn't been occupied for 20 years!*

The next day, the shop is gone and all I can see are the memories of last night, blinking back at me as if they are nothing more than a dream.

The Shop of Wonders

George Freedland-Haynes

It shone
With a striking familiarity
Yet halted me
With frightening peculiarity
A relief
From the white stores of luxury
A contrast
To the warm mom and pops
Yet invisible to the crowds

Inside
was nothing.
Everything?
Maybe just something.
Millions of words
But I couldn't make out a single one

Eye of the Storm

Isadora Riquelme

Drying tears
On her cheeks
Shimmering trails
Dusted and tarnished
Echoing footsteps on old worn cobblestones
Stepped on a million times
One more time won't matter
Her wide eyes search
For an escape
The clouds grumble
Either disagreement or approval
Tumbling rain traces her tears
Salt in the wound
Fire to fever
Bruise to broken bones
Broken as second chances
Fragile as stolen kisses
Hidden as whispers in a crowded room
Lost to the gossip
Lost to the screams
Lost to the wind
Ready to restart
But only once these new tears dry
So she sprints
Turns the cobblestoned corner
And her wide eyes find
An eye of the storm
Nestled against granite walls
Smooth and green as sea glass
Framed by storm
A door
Shaking hands reach
The polished knob
Cool against flushed skin
The door has been patient
It's time
Today, here, now

Entering *The Shop of Wonders*....

A collaborative piece by the Saturday and Wednesday Creative Writing Salons

I open the door, and I see...

An old wooden bookshelf intricately carved
filled with gleaming glass bottles
full of strange powders and
mysterious shimmering liquids

A whole room filled to the brim with
chairs and couches and rocking chairs
old oak closets, the doors slightly ajar
toys and bookshelves
maps and art and quills galore
ancient relics, glowing
paintings on the walls,
stacked on the floor,
floating in midair.

A thousand books piled on top of each other
and a giant cup of hot chocolate spilling over

Tinkling wind chimes,
swirling and floating,
untethered to the ceiling.

A skeleton lying, as if resting,
on a rocking chair.
A cat, asleep in the ribcage.

A video store
no, a book shop...
no, a lobby...

A large staircase winding up,
higher than I can see,
warm light streaming down
to encase the room in a soft glow

I reach out my hands and I touch

A cold metal handle, rusting with age
a leathery book, covered in scales, hide and feathers
an old broomstick with eagles and foxes engraved in its wood
dusty books, piled higher than I've ever seen
and a map, leading to the lost city of Atlantis

I walk deeper into the shop, and I hear

The tinny, hollow tune of an open music box,
its ballerina spinning slowly on her pedestal
the muttering of famous voices, low, in a dank corner
soft piano music drifting from a golden gramophone
a sound of heavy breathing.

The ticking of clocks, wind chimes jangling
my shoes, squeaking on hardwood floors,
my feet wandering in random directions,
my voice, mumbling: "What is this?"

The sound of the ocean waves,
splashing on a pristine sandy shore
soft singing, like a sirens call,
drawing me farther into the shop
and an unfamiliar voice
whispering my name

I turn the corner, and I smell

The fresh, salty scent of the ocean's deep blue water
the spice of chai tea and burning incense
layers of lavender perfume, tingling in my nose.
The pungent scrolls of ancient worlds
and moldy books, filled with stories aplenty
firewood, old newspaper, brown sugar cookies
the dust of a stuffed room not cleaned for 40 years.
A bubbling pot of rich chicken stew
and memories galore: rain falling on frolicking girls
the spiced rum of people singing in a tavern.
A plethora of things:
pine, fur, wax, paint, bone, fire, flowers
cherries, paper, wine, lipstick, cigarettes

Standing in The Shop of Wonders, I feel

A deep, burning rage at the enemy I face
a rush of excitement
a desperate desire to explore
a strange need to go deeper into the halls, and never leave
a tingling of magic in my fingers and my toes, my wrists and my nose
a sense that here, I belong
that this place holds exactly what I need.
My heart becomes lighter, lifting alongside the air's dust.
I'm bewildered, as if worlds have collided:
more at home
and yet more terrified
than I have ever been before.

Entering *The Shop of Wonders*,

A collaborative poem by Kristine, Basil and Blythe.

I open the door and I see...

big portraits in big frames
little dresses fit for little people
a cage full of funny looking zebras
toes wiggling around on the ground
and a hybrid of an elf and a kangaroo

elaborate paintings of people
who wave at me, smiling serenely
treasure maps displayed grandly
pinpointing buried treasure
ancient monuments and sunken ships

porcelain and rag dolls
walking around the oak floor
ancient jewelry in glass tanks
made of shiny copper gems
rare minerals looking like they come
straight from a movie scene

the shop is moody, mysterious
something from a detective novel

I walk deeper into the shop and I see...

a doll tied up to a post
her eyes hanging from loose threads
and her legs burnt off by a never-ending lighter
a chair, stained by non-existent drinks
(perhaps potions made by an evil witch?)
an empty bottle with lipstick marks on top
evidence of the chair's last occupant
little humans trapped in a jar
maybe dead or asleep -
and the outline in chalk of a body

A crime was committed here.

The Entry

Cecelia E. L.

The wooden door
Grand and elegant
It glows with life
The door is the reason to live
It is both your life
And mine
It holds all of our answers
It is the past
The present
The future
It is more than life yet less than death
It is the eye of the world
This door has witnessed everything
It has seen everything
More importantly
it is

The Entry

Bianca Pupato

A smooth, old wooden door
Golden handle, blinding to look at
Behind the door, muffled voice softly singing:
“Come in here and shut the door.
You’ll never want to open it again.”
Entrancing voices singing only for him
Promising everything he wants
Bringing him under the spell
Reaching out to him
He reaches back...

In a City on the Edge of the World

J. L.

Down by the wharf, in the little side street next to the market, along a winding alley splashed with graffiti is a shop. The door is hidden under layers and layers of paint, each one screaming out into the world: **SOMEONE WAS HERE I WAS HERE I LIVED I LIVED I LIVED.** People often skip right by the shop, thinking, *this must be a dilapidated apartment/sketchy bar/doorway to a basement fight club.* That is, assuming they even wander this far in the first place, in the city on the edge of the world.

Perhaps people think a city on the edge of the world could be a magical thing, brimming with life, the streets colourful and bright, but no. It is just a city. Sure, there are gods here, lurking in the feathers of pigeons, in the glint of sewer drains, in the tags of graffiti artists and in the moths buzzing around street lights, but they are few and far between. How many of these people have even met a god? Not many. The city tends to eat them up, if the cold from hanging on the knife's edge of the world doesn't get them first.

The point is: this city is hardly magical. *Mystical* is another story altogether. The people are tired. They eat and sleep and travel the same way you do, and they get along quite nicely. Their eyes skip over the gods in their midst, the ones they persistently tread under their feet as they wait in line for the bus.

The children are luckier. They aren't as tired, still clinging onto hope with two hands, and they can see the magic, weak but still lingering in the wingbeats of honey bees, the breeze that smells of sea spray. Not all the magic is gone. It has simply adapted to the shifting world, settled under the city's soundscape and become its heartbeat.

The city is a maze. Maybe the magic made it that way, or maybe it has always been a concrete jungle, who's to say? Maybe in the dead of night, beneath the murmur of passing cars, you can hear the streets rearrange themselves. Maybe there is a shop, down by the wharf, in the little side street next to the market, down a winding alley splashed with graffiti. Maybe the door with the little window is hidden under layers of graffiti, and perhaps there is a sign above it, long hidden by paint and rot.

It's a shop. It sells things. Maybe it sells the things you don't want: the necessary things, the hard decisions you'll need to make about your life, and maybe it sells things you desperately want: another

moment with a dead loved one, a chance to say goodbye, an apology that is made in just the right moment.

This shop is a thrift store. It sells second-hand things, just a little bit off, just a little bit magical. Second-hand things: from second-hand gods, to second-hand people, in a city on the edge of the world.

Except: it's a city first and foremost.

Except: there are gods here, not quite dead, just clever. They survive like any other god does - on belief. The people don't believe in gods, they don't have the time to spare, but they believe in other things: that the bus won't be late, that they'll make a living, that they'll have a job that they care about, that they'll meet people who they'll love here.

Gods eat those dreams instead.

There's a shop in a city on the edge of the world. Maybe it promises everything you wish for. Maybe it promises you necessary, hard decisions. Maybe it promises vengeance, or hatred, or fear. Maybe it promises nothing at all.

It is a second-hand shop from second-hand city gods.

There is nothing else to it.

Part Two

Cast of Characters

*... in which writers are asked to imagine the characters
who inhabit the shop, wherever and in whatever dimension
it may appear: the proprietor, the customers and those who
hide out among the relics*

The Owner

Sadie L.

The Owner. That was his name. Maybe it had always been his name. Maybe he didn't have a name of his own. No one really knew what he did. He was a speck of dust in the universe, forgotten by those around him.

Did he create *The Shop of Wonders*? No. But he was the one who found it.

The Owner used to have a family. He had a wife, and two kids. He was once loved. But all good things must come to an end. One day, he simply disappeared, reappearing as The Owner of the shop. No one really knows why. All we know is that one year, the door appeared, the shop was there behind it, and he was The Owner. No one ever saw him there, but they knew.

There were theories of course. *The Shop of Wonders* hypnotized him! He killed his family and so owning the shop was his punishment! He's magic, and he created the shop with his bare hands!

The real reason was that he found the shop... and the shop found him. Was it fate? Possibly. Anything was possible.

We are talking of *The Shop of Wonders*, after all.

The Owner

Cecelia E. L.

The owner of the shop was a man who seemed older than the earth. He had a slim figure and wrinkly skin, each wrinkle like a ridge in sand. Wispy white hair barely covered his head, and his eyes, his most prominent feature, were as cold as ice, an ocean of wonder. I could tell he had not felt love for a very long time. He held himself in a hunched position, his eyes darting around the shop. He seemed haunted, though he was bound to the shop, as if he was forced to be present, physically, but mentally, he was somewhere else.

The Owner

Ariana M.

His irises felt like they had been gouged out, and replaced with ghosts. His skin, shriveled like rotted apple, had been stretched over thin bones. His expression said that he had seen everything, and nothing; and that knowledge had turned him inside out.

The Thief's Salvation

Deaneeka Anna

I turned the corner and saw... my salvation. An old brick building I'd walked by many times before. One that I'd passed just this morning, and hadn't given a second glance. But now, even with my heart pounding in my chest and the palace guards hot on my tail, I couldn't help but give it my full attention.

What had once been a broken-in window was now repaired, shining as if freshly scrubbed. A bright turquoise door that I was sure hadn't been there this morning glowed irresistibly.

A sign jutted out on a gleaming metal spoke between the door and window. It was ornately carved and painted with a looping golden script:

The Shop of Wonders

Location #1934

Enchantment

Lost things

Discovery

Adventure

Lunacy

Escape

Enchantment? I somehow had the time to wonder. *It must be a magic store like The Golden Spindle.* Then I noticed another word. *Escape.*

I was convinced. I bolted for the door, almost tripping on the cobbles, grabbed the dainty golden door handle and with all my might swung the door open, leapt inside and slammed it behind me. With one ear pressed to the door I waited, my focus narrowed by terror, until the tromping footsteps faded into the distance. When I was sure they'd gone I sank against the door, huffing from my exertion.

Closing my eyes, I rested my head on my knees. The smell of earth and rain from my skirts wafted into my nostrils, calming my mind. I rested my hands on the cold floor, starkly different from the suffocating humidity outside. I was surprised to feel rough stone tile instead of the soft wooden boards I expected. I took in a shaky breath, allowing my thoughts to clear. With my focus now relaxed, a strange sound wormed its way into my mind. An erratic tapping.

I lifted my head, standing. Everything was white; ceiling, walls and floor. Even the door behind me had turned to eerie blankness. The strangely-repaired window beside me, which I had noticed from

outside, was covered in a veil of sheer fabric, thin enough to let the light in, yet too cloudy for anyone to peek in.

An incredibly short woman with a graying updo and harsh spectacles sat behind a large desk, also bleak white. She was perched on a style of chair I'd never seen before, with a tall back, which seemed even stranger in contrast to the woman's short stature. Instead of four legs, the chair was supported by one central post that split at the bottom into five legs, each boasting a small wheel.

The woman must have noticed me - there was no way she could have missed me - but she paid me no heed. Her attention was completely absorbed by the many ledgers and thick books, each of them also a clean white, which were stacked in neat piles across her desk.

I remembered again the sign I'd read outside, with its grandiose claims of mystery and adventure. I chuckled softly, remembering the building's name: ***The Shop of Wonders***. It was just a small white room, and strange as it was, there was nothing *wonderful* about it. But at least it served its purpose for me.

Confident that I'd escaped my pursuers, and not wanting to disturb this stern looking woman, I turned to leave. The door handle jiggled in my grasp. I twisted it again but it wouldn't budge. The door handle bumped and jostled with my increasing efforts, but would not open. Suddenly, a raspy old voice came from behind me.

"Oh no, dearie, that door won't open again unless—" the woman cut off and let out a little shriek of alarm. "Is that mud? Mud! You're getting mud on my floors - this simply will not do!" She waved her hands wildly in the air while continuing to mumble unintelligibly.

I looked down at my skirts and jumped in astonishment. The dark mud that once covered its fabrics was gone, though traces of its comforting aroma still hung in the air. "Ah, that's better." said the magical woman. "Now, what have you come for?"

"What— What have I come for?" I repeated dumbly.

"You saw the sign outside didn't you?" the woman sounded exasperated. "Which of the services has attracted you to my humble shop?"

"Well, I, um, I... Enchantment!" I lied. "That's what I've come for. I thought this might be a new magic store, I haven't seen it around before. But now I see it isn't, so I'll just be on my way—" I amended hastily, and gave another useless tug on the door handle.

“Oh, we *are* a shop of enchantment and of wonders.” The magical woman croaked mysteriously. “But my specialty is enchantment of the mind and the soul, not the physical world. For that, you should have visited The Golden Spindle, a charming little shop, just a few blocks over. But you should learn not to lie to your elders, dearie. What do you really want?”

The Shopkeeper's Illusion

Blythe W. M. Carson

The ancient little puppets chatted away, minding the rare ding of the doorbell when a nearby pedestrian decided to walk by. They sat, looking so stiff, for they could no longer move half of their muscles. They had been hard working, trusted people. But when the shopkeeper opened the door, they remained silent as a rock. *He* couldn't be trusted. Their clothes, which dated back to medieval times, were fit for grandparents. They had two children, and only their love as their best companion in times of need.

. . .

Everyone tried to be a good neighbour, back then. But with the old couple living next door, that wish and truth vanished into thin air.

The couple mentioned before were trusting, hard working, and sat on their decks watching cyclers and townspeople walking by. They were the kindest of the kind people living in their village. So all was good, all was well. But then, another couple moved in next door. They were so rude, and they had a child named Brian, who stumbled when running, and was good at no sports. Brian used a crutch, which supported his right knee. Nobody knew why, though. But to the good old couple, all was understood.

The boy's parents made him work. He stayed out all day long, in the sun. He had probably harmed his ankle while gardening.

One day, the good old couple called their daughter, Maria, over from the shops to go and meet the poor boy who was now drawing on his porch. She ran in the sunny afternoon, trying not to trip over her puffed-sleeve dress, and not to ruin her styled hair. She arrived at the porch, and walked up the steps to his astonishment. They shook hands politely. On a normal day, young adults their age would just sit and start talking. But the lady at the window, Brian's mother, watched like an eagle circling overhead. And since the two young adults seemed polite enough, she went back to her normal duties.

"So, what are you drawing?" Maria said, interested in the boy's sketching skills.

"Oh, just a shop," Brian replied.

"Oh, really? What shop?"

"The shop of... I'm not sure what it's called yet."

"That sounds delightful! May I sit beside you?"

"Yes. My name is Brian."

“Maria.”

Day after day they sat on the deck together, and she would stay with her parents all day and night to catch a glimpse of the boy.

Ten years later, the shop Brian had imagined was finally open. They sold antiques, like jewelry, and rings that looked similar to the wedding ring Brian had eventually given to Maria. They sold things from dolls, to blankets and chairs. And they lived happily.

One day, a man appeared in the shop, yet he didn't use the door. They didn't mind that, since most of their customers were unordinary.

Moments later, he cast a spell on them, which turned them into dolls. Maybe he had intended to kill them by transforming them, but they were still alive, all right. So, each time he opened the door, they had no choice but to keep silent.

Then, one day, a middle-aged-man who was not the shopkeeper opened the door and went into the back. He entered the shop and he never left. There had to be a way out for the two dolls, yet only the shopkeeper and that mysterious man knew what it was.

. . .

Five years later, Brian and Maria decided to run towards the back door. One very short step at a time, they trotted to get help. But before they could do so, the doors...opened? They ran to the left, and hid beside a blanket that was drooping from a chair. They sat, and plastered their fake smiles on their thin porcelain lips. The man's heavy boots thumped to the door, and he departed.

Five years ago, he had entered the room - why would he choose to leave now?

When the two dolls looked inside, they saw a coat room, and beyond that, a tunnel of mirrors. Then, more rooms that made no sense at all. They ran to the end of the tunnel, crashing into mirrors and shiny objects, and while they were slamming into mirrors, they had no idea the shopkeeper was in the next room.

He wore a tie and was sipping tea loudly, like on a late night show. He had on a dress shirt, dark jeans, and yellow dress shoes. And when they met his eyes, they saw an illusion. Spirals shaded their eyes, and groovy shapes filled their minds with questions. Like how they really got there, and what was going to happen to them.

Even they didn't know.

The 99 Year Timeline of Augustus Robustus

Baileylauren S.

Augustus. He is an elderly, burly, old-fashioned man. Some people find him strange, but others think he's downright amazing. He is tall, over six feet, and he has barely any hair. He has no surviving family, except for a twenty-three-year old daughter, April-May, who lives in New York City working as an executive chef for renowned Michelin Star restaurateur, Giada De Leurantiis.

Augustus is proud of his daughter, but he hasn't seen her in person since she was nineteen, and sees her in only a handful of Zoom calls each year. His wife, Virginia Brulee, was an accomplished author, playwright, and poet and they were married just two weeks after they met. They remained married for fifty-seven years until Virginia fell ill from breathing in a pesticide while visiting Mexico.

August prayed and spoke to her as much as he could, but within three weeks, she was dead. He locked himself in his tiny bedroom immediately after hearing the news and anyone who went near the door could hear him crying, sobbing, and whispering to himself that at least she had had a long life and would be safe in heaven.

Secretly, he is still mourning Virginia in his heart, wearing all black most days and thinking, *Virginia, Virginia!* over and over, even during his wedding to Trixie Woodplank, which took place that same year.

Now, I still haven't mentioned what Augustus does for a living. He owns the small, mysterious, amazing, magical... ***Shop Of Wonders.***

It's an old, granite store founded in 1925, the year Augustus was born. Its one floor is jam-packed with magical treasures, objects that had been lost for thousands of years, and fabrics that have never been revealed to anyone.

Augustus Robustus loves the shop even more than his own daughter, and he has owned it ever since he was eleven years old (when his dad tragically died). He opens it at 3am every morning and closes it at 10pm every night. He doesn't get many customers, but he had learned from his father (who originally owned the shop) that there are slow days and busy days with a business and you just have to go with the flow no matter what. He reads books, writes in his journal and does

his taxes while people are shopping. Sometimes, he even asks people what they are looking for and if they need help. He keeps a daily journal in a brown, shriveled, leather notebook, which he adds to and re-reads every morning while the customers are looking around. He writes with an old-fashioned blue-ink fountain pen with a little pigeon engraved on the nib, his father's favourite bird.

His father also had a journal, which he kept when he was running the store 99 years ago, but he wrote with a pencil and the journal was locked in a box and there was no key. Augustus suspects that his father treasured it and didn't want anyone to see it, so he locked it away and threw away the key.

Augustus has been writing in his own journal for 75 years now. It was a wedding gift from his father's best customer, Mr. Woodplank (Trixie's great-uncle), a beautiful 700-page book that he can use for a long, long time without running out of pages. His first journal entry was on Thursday, March 17, 1949 and he has been writing every day with the same pen, in the same book ever since. Anyway, I'm off topic. The shop owner wakes up every single morning at 1:30 AM, hitting an 88-year-old alarm clock (also from Mr. Woodplank) with barely-working hands on a cracked clockface. He makes his bed carefully and takes a shower with hot water and blueberry soap. He continues the rest of his morning by getting dressed in a plain shirt, jeans and sneakers, eating his breakfast of mango oatmeal with Trixie, going downstairs to the shop, getting everything organized and opening the front door at 3am, closing it at 10pm exactly after a successful day for Augustus Robustus.

Part Three

Objects Lost or For Sale

... in which writers are asked to imagine items to be found in the shop, some magical, others tragically lost, some from our world and others from worlds we can barely comprehend... and all with intriguing stories to tell.

A Writing Fragment

Ariana M.

Its metal looked old, but not rusted, like an ancient river that engulfs you in its beauty. It had a small, maroon gem set into it, and it was simple yet complex, like how you can look at an ocean and see only blue, but brimming inside is a magnificent plethora of stories and souls, creatures and characters, hidden under the veil of water.

Once Upon a Time in *The Shop of Wonders...*

Isla M.

Once upon a time, in *The Shop of Wonders*, a very old man sat on a rickety wooden stool, gently caressing a broken doll between his frail, bony fingertips. Though the dress was faded, the hair was falling out, and one arm was missing, the facial features were striking: rosy pink cheeks, bright blue eyes, and red lips. The old man stared down at the doll, for which he had been searching for many years and he smiled, for now he felt complete. With his final dying breath he breathed his life, his heart, his soul into the little doll, before crumpling to the floor and disappearing into a wisp of smoke.

The Deceivers and the Deceived

Bianca Pupato

Stone cold object, forgotten on the dusty shelves
Longing for a soul to give it use
Abandoned perhaps...?
Cobwebs attached to the item
Not even the spiders wish to go near it
Hidden where none would notice
Was that on purpose?
Waiting for a fool to take it
Only the shine gives it away
Little bauble, standing out against the dull stone
Cheap trinket to those who want it
Treasure to those who fear it
Red glow, sinister or magical?
Alluring, nonetheless
Catching the eye of its former fool
Hypnotic
The fool, becomes prey once more
The prey slides it onto its finger
The ring still fits
Useless trinket no longer
Back to former ownership
Who is in control now?

Lost Things Like Promise Rings

Leah Chan

The first rays of sunlight filtered through *The Shop of Wonders*, brushing against the tips of each object with its honeyed, welcoming light. A soft melody began to play as a ballerina sprang to life, twirling upon her music box.

A cluster of rings sat gleaming in the sun, sparkling with untold stories. Amongst them sat a small old ring made of something akin to dark bone. A shining stone was set in the band, the colour of maple syrup and discarded pennies.

Although the bowl was filled with valuable rings in the brightest shades of scarlet, turquoise, and more jewel tones than imaginable, the dull ring stood out, perhaps because of its bleak appearance in comparison to its counterparts.

The ring had been passed down through generations, from mother to daughter, before being lost forever when the Titanic sank.

Originally, it was a promise ring.

Theodore, a young and clever boy, deft with his hands and eager to please, fell in love with Aurelia, a rosy-cheeked, sweet girl who seemed destined for adventure. They grew close, and Theodore made the ring for her to represent his endless love. He battled a great sea monster to acquire its fangs, which he carved meticulously into the shape of a band. He dove to the bottom of the ocean to find the stone, his lungs burning with exertion but his heart thrumming with excitement at having something special to give to his true love. He polished the stone to a shine before placing it on the ring, securing it and brushing a loving thumb over it.

He gave the ring to Aurelia, along with a promise to make her happy forever and a story about his great adventures. She loved the way he would tell her about how he battled the great sea beast and went swimming deep underwater to find such a beautiful jewel, the brightest opalescent amethyst purple she had ever seen. He told her the story every night until she fell asleep, almost as if she were a child again.

The couple got married, then left their little village in search of adventure, eventually having a child whom Aurelia passed the ring on to, recounting stories about Theodore's great sacrifices. The couple passed away a few years later, and the ring continued its journey through generations until it lost value, the beautiful, sparkling purple dulling to a colour not unlike cinnamon. The story was written down by

a young girl, who loved to write stories in her diary, but when she passed, the diary disappeared to the bottom of a chest, covered in dust and tucked away.

Although the ring held sentimental value, the stories that came with it eventually sounded so obscure that they were discarded, considered of no greater value than a made-up fantasy. When a teenage model along Theodore and Aurelia's bloodline boarded the Titanic with the ring in her possession, she did not know of the adventures Theodore had gone on to create such a masterpiece. The only thing she knew was that it had been her mother's, who got it from her mother, from her mother, and so on. She loved it dearly, as it reminded her of all the women in her life that she had lost, but still, she found it dull in comparison to the flashy marigold dresses and cerulean heels that she wore.

When the ring was lost along with her, it wasn't missed.

Years later, a descendant of Theodore and Aurelia eagerly searched for the ring after reading about it in a diary he had found in his attic. Then one day, miraculously, it was cast up onto the beach by the advancing tide, and came to rest between his sandy toes. Some believed this to be a coincidence, but he considered it was destiny. He donated the ring to ***The Shop of Wonders***, alongside a printed manuscript telling of Theodore's adventures, leaving behind a legacy that was previously buried beneath the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

This should have been the end of the story, but word spread, and suddenly people were on the hunt for the ring and the manuscript, searching all corners of the world to take ahold of the valuable piece of jewelry.

Thinking of all this, the shop owner meandered to the front door, unlocked it and flipped the sign to *Open*. Then he stepped away, vanishing into the unknown depths of the shop. Five minutes later, the door opened, and a woman wearing a large sun hat stepped inside, holding a collection of photographs. Upon seeing the wonders of the shop, she stood, mouth agape, in awe, her eyes skimming every surface as she tried to take in her surroundings. She slowly made her way around the room, perusing each aisle, her gaze lingering on each item. When she reached the bowl of rings, she gently pushed them around until she found the one she was looking for. She compared it with what she saw in her photographs, confirming that it was indeed what she had been seeking.

She cradled the ring in her hands, disbelief in her eyes as she gingerly turned it over in her fingers.

The shop owner watched her with a small smile. "Would you like the manuscript that goes with that, madam?"

"Yes please," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He grabbed a wrapped package off of a shelf before beckoning her to the cash register. "There are a lot of people in this world who want to get their hands on this ring and this book," he warned her.

"Why don't you tell someone and sell it for a high price, then?"

The shop owner raised an eyebrow. "I'm not looking for money, madam. I'm looking for all of these objects to have the right home. If these objects leave with the wrong people, they are as good as lost."

The lady nodded, not sure what to say, as she placed the ring on the table next to the package and dug around for money.

"No need," he said, holding up his hands to stop her. "I'm satisfied knowing it leaves here with the right person." The ring flashed violet as he put it in a small jewelry box before tucking it in a bag alongside the manuscript. "You'll take care of it, right?" His eyes bore into hers and before she could respond, he nodded sharply, satisfied. "Have a good one." He saluted, silently receding into the back rooms again, leaving the lady standing at the counter, dumbfounded.

She left the shop, heading back to her hotel, where she would soon fly back home and enjoy her quiet, comfortable life with her family, treasuring the relic and the stories it brought.

The second she was down the street, a group of reporters rushed to ***The Shop of Wonders***, about to open the door when they noticed that the *Open* sign had been flipped to *Closed*. They were perplexed, as they had all just witnessed a lady striding out of the shop not a minute earlier. They peered inside, only to find the shop completely empty, nothing but a flickering light remaining.

The Sound of Passing Time

Leah Chan

The clocks tick
as the people talk
and the children laugh
and the squeals turn into
half-suppressed laughs into
long sighs.

The clocks tick
Hours pass
Days pass
Years pass
Lives pass
Tick
Tock
Tick
Tock

The clocks tick
as the sun rises and sets
as the waves pull in and draw out
as the leaves sprout then shrivel and fall
as the door opens, and closes

The clocks tick
as the cars race past the shop window
as the movie starts, then ends
a love starts, then ends

The clocks tick
off
time
and every last object
is thrown
into the waste,
unneeded
unnecessary
unvalued
(like the passage of time)

From A Letter Fragment, Discovered in *The Shop of Wonders*

Ariana M

A Solemn Goodbye

My love. My everything. My whole world.
Ethel, my mind repeats your name each night.
Ethel, the one to whom I must say goodbye.
The moment I met you, I let myself fall.
Magnificent explosions, firing in my heart.
Every time your voice reached my ears, I fell further.
Always and forever, I will fall
And I will be yours.
Through thick and thin, sun and rain.
Through prosperity and desolation, life and death.
Hold my hand, for I will stay with you, ever present.
Every waking moment I will think of you,
Though I can no longer be with you.
While I guard our nation, your image
Will remain forever in my mind.
Alas, I leave for war; but know that I do so for you.
Remember me, while I fight in your name.
Down in the trenches, I will pine for you.
Ethel, my love,
Never forget me.

The Pendant's Prophecy

Kristine Quan

Behind my mom was a mysterious man. He looked very old, about 89 years old. His gray hair was as stiff as sandpaper and he wore a blue sweater and jeans. Although he looked like he hadn't taken a bath for 100 years, he still had a kind smile and eyes that twinkled like diamonds. He spotted me and his smile grew bigger. "So, you finally came," he said in a raspy voice.

"What's going on?" I asked. "I put on a weird necklace and I found myself here. There are scary shadows, this place is creepy and I entered this door..." The man put his hand up to stop my clamoring. I gave them a very long stare, as my mom and the mysterious man stared back at me, menacingly. I was amazed - but now everything made sense! Long robe, wand, crystal necklace. But this was still an unexpected plot. I mean, who would even suspect your own mother to have this amazing fantasy place AND be a sorcerer!

My mom nodded solemnly at the old man and he nodded back. She put on a necklace and disappeared into thin air. "Where did my mom go?!" I demanded, looking at the man.

After a moment, he thrust a pendant onto the mysterious necklace around my neck. It was a purple gem and it had a swirly, golden frame around it. Suddenly, a beam of light began to lift me up. "Hey, stop this!" I cried. But he didn't do anything. Before I could say more, the beam of light carried me higher and higher until the light was so intense I couldn't see anything.

There were a few minutes of blinding light, and I found myself in a strange room. It held different coloured portals and in front of me were six empty slots. They each had elaborate carvings on them and glowed with magic. My mom stood in front of me, looking very serious. "Leia, we need your help," she said.

Quickly, my amazement and shock turned to fury. "Mom.... Why didn't you tell me you were a sorcerer?" I cried. "You always went away randomly and all my life you've lied to me, saying you just had to go to work. You don't even HAVE a job!!" I shook my fist at her.

My mom sighed, bending down on one knee so she was my height. "I'm sorry Leia, that I didn't tell you sooner. It's just that...I wanted to keep *The Shop of Wonders* a secret." I stared at her in shock. "I was worried that if the news spread, robbers would want to

take all the precious artifacts we have. So to keep it safe, my dad taught me elaborate protection spells. Eventually, we were able to create a spell that teleported the shop to an alternate dimension of shadow and darkness. The only way to get into this dimension is to put on this necklace.”

My mom pointed to the necklace around her neck. It had a light pendant and a dark pendant, like mine. I looked at it carefully. “Mom, two questions. One, what do these pendants mean?” I pointed at my necklace, which had the same pendants as hers.

She nodded solemnly. “‘The Pendant of Dark and Light’ is a way to enter this dark universe and return to the Overworld,” she said. “But just like the yin and yang charm, when combined, they give the user extraordinary magic.”

I nodded, to show her I understood. “And question number two,” I continued, “why do you need my help now?”

She gazed back at me. “We need to find my mom,” she said.

Okay, so now my brain felt like it was falling through a void of questions. Why hadn’t I ever seen my mom wearing those pendants before? When had she become a sorcerer? And why did she never tell me I had a grandma?

As if she could read my mind, my mom answered all my questions. “I know, I know,” she said. “You have a right to be angry at me. But... it’s just that until now, I wanted to keep your powers a secret from the world.”

After I got over my shock at hearing this, I replied, “But, why, mom?”

“She was worried that you would be in great danger if the world found out,” cried a voice. I turned around and gasped.

It was the old man. Without waiting a second, my mom pushed me towards him. He had a grin so big it looked like one of those creepy jack-o-lanterns. My mom cleared her throat. “Leia,” she said, “this is your grandpa.”

Wait...wait.. wait. First I have the magical powers of an unknown sorcerer and NOW, I have a grandpa who I don’t even know?! Hoo boy, this is going to be a long diary.

The Dolls in the Chair

Basil

The dolls in the chair are actually real people, but they have lived in the shop for hundreds of years. Each year, another part of their bodies shrinks and turns to plastic. They have become dusty from staying in the same place for so long. Cobwebs hang over them. Their noses look as deformed as ancient fungi. Their pants are rugged and dirty. Every day they sit motionless, watching people walking in and then out of the shop.

These people didn't want to live in the shop - it is their punishment! Five hundred and sixty two years ago in 1567 the people of Ember had two rules: you couldn't kill someone and you could only make twenty six mistakes in your entire life or you would be punished by death. Guess what? They made two hundred and forty nine mistakes! They were about to die when suddenly *The Shop of Wonders* appeared. They ran inside and locked the doors.

The rulers of Ember were about to barge in and capture them when suddenly the shop flew up into the sky and entered a black hole. They laughed at the town and cried in relief. "Hallelujah!" they said. But then they became scared after flying through the air day after day.

Later, the shop returned to the ground and a sphinx appeared to present them with a riddle. If they solved it, they could come out from the shop and turn back into people, but if they were wrong they would have to remain in the shop for all eternity.

"So," said the sphinx. "What has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?"

"People!" said the dolls.

"Correct!" said the sphinx. He turned them back into people and opened the door to *The Shop of Wonders*. They ran out into the world, and for the rest of their lives they lived on a hill near an ocean where it was always warm.

The Night Flower

Sadie L.

Do you see it? There! Behind an old wooden door
A beautiful blue flower, blooming only when the day is lost
Never seen by those who wander.
Gently, the petals fall on the ground no one walks on.
Every time its brilliant colour could be seen, it isn't.
Right there, yet so far away it waits,
Over the books and
Under the bookshelf.
Still waiting, waiting, waiting.

Clock Parts & Magic Dust

Myah Rathl Litteljohn

The girl walked away, her tears mingling with the drizzle until the line between water droplets and tears blurred to nothing. Ignoring the child's wild cries, she focused on the rain-kissed pavement, each step bringing her farther from the pitiful heap of limbs and rags in the alleyway. A strange feeling swelled inside her - not guilt, though she felt its ache as well - regret for what might have been, what should have transpired. But it was too late, the decision had already been made. The girl clutched the tiny key around her neck, buried deep in her sweater like the secret buried deep in her heart. She turned back to look at the child and was met with endless brown eyes that implored her to return. Eyes that were too alive, cries that were too human. The girl averted her gaze and broke into a rapid walk that took her away from the dark alley and the hurt it harbored. Still, she couldn't help wondering what would become of the monster she had created.

Part 1: Karena

Karena Raven was ten when she first came to the place she called home, and she'd remained that way for the past three years. Annually another candle was added to her birthday cake, but she stayed the same age, in mind and appearance. She was able to learn Grade Seven concepts but within a few days they flew away and she had to be taught all over again. Her shoe size never changed, and neither did her height and weight. A tiny, bloodless wound on her palm did not close just as the freckles across her nose did not fade in the sun. Nobody knew where she had come from before being adopted, and nobody knew if she had always been ten or just stopped growing at that age. People were beginning to worry, and worry was turning to suspicion.

Pressed uncomfortably against a roughly sanded wooden door, Karena was able to hear two very worried people conversing in loud whispers.

"We've visited every doctor possible and they've all said that Karena's healthy, there's no condition they can find," said a lean, gangly man who had the disconcerting habit of rapidly twitching his long nose like a fox.

"Maybe she just misses the family she had before," replied his wife, rubbing paint-covered hands on her artist's smock, already marred by a messy rainbow of acrylics.

"Of course Lantana, she's been missing her family for three years! And her growth stunt is one thing but she also has the mental capacity of a Fifth Grader; yesterday I had to reteach her long division for the seventh time," retorted Karena's adopted dad sarcastically. Karena blinked rapidly behind the door, trying to hold back her tears. She accidentally hit herself against the door but found no reason to scream because she felt no pain.

"Some grief never goes away no matter how many years pass by," sighed Lantana.

"But she hasn't improved in any way. I would be happy if she were going from D's to C's because at least she would be on an incline. And the neighbours are starting to talk," Amar said, twiddling his greasy beard.

"Who cares what the neighbours think; she's *our* child!" cried Lantana, wagging her wet paintbrush desperately and not entirely sure whether her husband was in the wrong.

"It's not just our neighbors who are talking, it's our family and our friends, they're starting to distance themselves!" argued Amar, shaking the kitchen island. A sole tear rolled down Karena's forever-young features and a loud whirring noise filled her ears. The noise came on whenever she was anxious, but it could not drown out the increasing feelings of misery.

"What do you want to do then?" asked Karena's adopted mom, helplessly.

"We could talk to the foster system about her?" suggested Amar.

Rolling her eyes, Lantana realized this was what his point had been the whole time.

"Just talk," relented Lantana, placing her head in her hands.

"For now," added Amar slyly, ignoring his wife's silent frustration.

Lantana retreated with her paintbrushes to her art studio and Amar put on his mailbag. Just like that it was all over as if it had never happened. But it had changed everything for Karena, whose world was crumbling now. She ran up the slippery stairs, not caring if her parents heard her; they didn't care if she had heard them anyway.

Karena was used to neighbors staring at her warily from their porches whenever she walked by. She was used to friends edging away because they had been warned by their parents to stay away from the strange girl who never grew up. She was used to being gawked at by passersby that she barely recognized. But now her adopted parents didn't think of her as their real daughter. To them, she was nothing but a burden, slowly pulling them down. She slammed her creaky bedroom door and collapsed like a pile of laundry on her bed. Hot tears soaked her pillow and mingled with strands of her short chestnut hair. She felt something hard under her pillow, and pulled a small golden key from amid the deep folds. She weighed it in her hands and pressed the cool heart-shaped top to her quivering lips. And then Karena turned around...

Wooden door in the wall
Engraved golden knob
Secrets it will recall
Stories in which to sob
Put the key in
Knob opens to reveal
A ballerina's spin
Singing of a place to heal
A place of wonder
To embrace yourself
A place of blunder
*Welcome to **The Shop of Wonders***

Part 2: Florence

Florence sat at her desk amid papers encrusted with jewels of dust, sifting through yellowed documents that spun a fragmented web of her past. She found an old newspaper clipping among the mess and read it mindlessly.

May, 12, 1980

Markham Economist & Sun

Obituary for Florian Ather, written by Florian Ather

I was a clockmaker and avid inventor. I had my own shop called Time Flies on 300 SteelCase Road. After I married Agatha, the preeminent sorceress and potion-brewer of her time, I lost many customers and friends on account of her dubious occupation. When Agatha died of pneumonia in the year of 1979 (something she was unable to magic away), I lived a sort of half existence,

moving blindly from day to day. My daughter Florence Ather was isolated and knew no other world than the bare walls of my shop. I taught her my craft, hoping Florence would take over when I was gone, but although she was brilliant at clock making she always wanted more from life. When I died of heartbreak (I have died if you are reading this), my daughter ran away. She will be all alone seeing as how my wife was a sorceress. Please look out for her if you see her and make sure she's in safe hands. She has fiery red hair, startling green eyes, and is only fifteen years old. Please, in the memory of Florian Ather, a caring husband and father, protect my daughter.

Florence sighed, desperately trying to recall the wrinkled map of her father's face. Once she had known every tear current and smile valley by heart, but now she was uncertain about the color of his eyes and the exact way he talked. Florence smiled at how trusting her father had been; an obituary like his would attract more ill-intentioned people than those seeking to help. But somehow Florence had managed to stay out of harm's way and away from prying eyes. By staying in the shadows and out of the light, she had been able to make her way and found her shop. Florence hadn't been completely defenseless, after all. She fingered a weathered certificate:

May, 11, 1977
Florence Ather, 13 years old
is officially an Able Sorceress
Signed by Mrs. Minchin
Head of the Sorceress United Organization
"May she use her magic for good as her mother Agatha Ather did"

Not at all defenseless Florence thought, inwardly smiling as she placed a book of spells on a shelf. Just as she had been brilliant at inventing, she also had a knack for her mother's craft, though she kept it well hidden.

Deciding to focus, Florence opened her notebook of toy designs. She landed on a page whose title attracted her attention, "The Living Doll, 1982." A faded photo of a little girl forever immortalized on paper was x'd out with the word: FAILURE. Compulsively, Florence clutched a tiny silver key that hung around her neck. The living doll was one of Florence's first creations and her very first failed one. Though it had been years since she had created it, the invention's

sullen expression still brought back memories of dark alleys and unwanted feelings. She quickly turned the page, not being able to bear the invention's troubled eyes for another moment. A weathered letter fell out and she reached down to grab it.

To: ***The Shop of Wonders***; a comfort to all children who have suffered

September, 13, 1983

Dear Florence,

Thank you berry much for the cool toy. I treasure it foreveber cause it reminds me of granma. I'm going to be a sorcerer like you when I gow up. Mommy said it's a long way till i grow up but im already 8 so i'm almost there.

Xo, Raina Lane

14, summerlong rd, ottawa

Florence laughed lightly, remembering the little girl that had visited her shop long ago and how beautiful it had been to watch a grin cross Raina's face like the sunrise when she picked her toy. It was those precious moments of happiness that drained a bit of the deep loneliness in Florence's heart. As she tenderly placed the letter back in her notebook, the door swung open.

Part 3: Realising

Florence looked up from her study expectantly, waiting for her next visitor to come in through the open door. A small girl entered, her eyes red from tears and her hands quivering with shock.

"Hello, welcome to ***The Shop of Wonders***," greeted Florence with a warm smile, which the girl met with confusion and fright. Florence shrugged, thinking, *Some of them are nervous when they first come.*

"The music box already said that. Who are you?" asked the girl in a surprisingly polite tone that didn't match the bluntness of her words.

"I'm Florence and this is a toy shop that is only for children, you can choose any toy you'd like," she replied.

"I'm Karena," said the girl, tiredly rubbing at her red eyes.

“Hi Karena, you look rather familiar, have you visited here before?” asked Florence, squinting over a large notebook where she added Karena to her visitors’ list.

“No I haven’t; people say I have that type of face. Where are the toys?” Karena asked, looking suspiciously around the drab room that smelled of old coffee and dust bunnies.

“I’ll take you to see them all in a moment. Do you still have the heart key?” said Florence kindly.

“Yes, do you want it back?” Karena muttered, reluctantly taking the golden heart key out of her pocket.

“No that’s fine, you can keep it if you come again later,” Florence replied gently. Karena had a certain sadness to her, heavier than the other children who came because they lost a friend or grandparent. This Karena girl seemed to be covered in layer after layer of grief that swathed her whole in a suffocating cocoon; only at certain moments could Florence catch a glimpse of a different child that lived within the coverings. Florence was sure that Karena would someday again have a sadness that would allow her to visit the shop and so she decided Karena could keep the key. Somehow, she felt akin to her latest customer and could not put aside the strong familiarity of her features. Florence stood up from her desk and pulled aside a stately mahogany bookshelf to reveal a different world from the study entirely.

Framed by the jagged hole in the wall was a busy scene of rows and rows of colorful toys. Florence lent Karena her hand, which the little girl took, and together they stepped through the makeshift entrance. An old fashioned radio played *The Muffin Man* and *Hot Cross Buns* at full blast, and an old TV played wordless *Tom & Jerry* episodes on loop. There was a brightly painted rocking horse that neighed and bucked. A shiny train with a miniature conductor chugged on tracks that winded all around the crowded room. There were picture books whose watercolour characters acted out the stories when you opened the cover, and shiny scooters that shouted out directions in squeaky voices. Karena brushed her hand against a shelf of paint boxes with colours that came to life in fairy spirits.

“Why do you do this?” Karena asked more in awe than in suspicion.

“Well, I feel like it’s important that when children feel sad they have a wonderful place to go,” replied Florence inviting Karena to blow silver bubbles that danced.

“So when I feel sad I come here?” asked Karena, her eyes shining with wonder. “I did feel really sad today.”

“Why were you sad?” asked Florence, surprised that she had asked; normally she did not pry for the reasons of her customers' sadness, but she was driven by a strong curiosity.

“My adopted parents don't love me anymore; they think I'm a monster,” cried Karena, her voice rising to a crescendo as she turned to face Florence with the hurt eyes of a cornered deer.

“I'm sure they don't think that,” Florence reassured, though, peculiarly, she felt Karena might be right.

“They do, it's because I'm not growing. I'm supposed to be thirteen but I'm still ten!” said Karena in between her silent sobs.

Florence didn't know what to say, but slowly a nagging suspicion was growing in the pit of her stomach: *there was something strange about this little girl.*

“Why don't we look around some more, maybe that will make you feel better,” comforted Florence, handing Karena a tissue that was gratefully accepted. “Come, I'll show you my latest invention. I think you might like it.” She stood up, brushing the creases from her skirt.

“Okay,” replied Karena, a hint of a shy smile blooming at her lips.

In the corner of the cluttered room was a small dollhouse. A childhood nostalgia surrounded it, as did a compelling, magical aura. Karena sat down and curiously inspected every meticulous room.

“This is an old childhood relic that I fixed up...” hinted Florence mysteriously, taking a tiny bottle of silver powder from a room in the dollhouse. She sprinkled a bit of the powder on herself and Karena, and instructed that they should close their eyes. When Florence and Karena opened their eyes they were in the rose-wallpapered guest room of the dollhouse. Karena ran to the window and was amazed to see ***The Shop of Wonders*** spread out before her. After exploring the rest of the dollhouse and meeting the kind owners - a couple of ragdolls charmed with the ability to walk and talk - Florence sprinkled the magic powder once more and they were transported back to reality. Dazed, they sat in peaceful silence amid the colorful mess of toys.

“Is that the toy you'd like to keep? If so, why don't we go back to the study to wrap it up?” Florence asked as she placed the magic powder carefully back in the dollhouse. Karena nodded profusely, and it was then, staring into the little girl's unending pupils, that Florence realized...

Adopted
Never growing
Forever ten years old
Chestnut hair
Dark eyes
The living doll. How had she not known?

Part 4: What She Was

Karena trailed behind Florence, carrying the enchanted dollhouse as they made their way through the bookshelf hole to the study. When Florence asked her if she wanted a snack, Karena said yes, partially to elongate her stay and partially because she was starving. As she devoured mini frosted cupcakes and a glass of blue Kool-aid, she could not help feeling uncomfortable under Florence's uneasy gaze.

"So when did your parents adopt you?" asked Florence, flipping through an old notebook.

"1982, right after I was found by the foster services," replied Karena, between bites of cupcake.

"Where did the foster agents find you?" questioned Florence, with a crazed look in her eyes.

"The alley behind the foster agency," said Karena, sensing there was something wrong.

Florence gave Karena what was meant to be a reassuring smile. "Do you remember where you were before?" she asked her..

"No. All I remember is a dark alley and a figure in a long shawl."

No one said anything as they sat in uncomfortable silence for what seemed to be hours, but according to the stately grandfather clock in the corner, was only seconds.

"There's something I need to tell you," mumbled Florence, failing to meet Karena's anxious gaze, "You're not... you're not..."

"I'm not what?" asked Karena, her dark eyes fixed on Florence, daring her to speak.

"You're not human. You're a creation, *my* creation, for my shop," stuttered Florence, looking down at her notebook.

"What do you mean?" screamed Karena, her mind knotting itself together into a jumbled mess of uncertainty.

"You were my first failed invention: The Living Doll. I breathed an enchantment into you, so you would walk, talk and eat. I

made you with clock parts and old gears. I abandoned you beside the foster agency when you were deemed a failed invention; you were too human to be a children's toy and too easily mistaken for flesh and blood," sighed Florence, her head in her hands.

"I'm not, I'm not!" roared Karena, throwing the remainder of her Kool-aid and cupcakes onto the floor.

"Give me your hand," said Florence, retrieving a tiny silver key from around her neck.

"No!" spluttered Karena

"Give me your hand - now!" insisted Florence, standing up to tower over the little girl.

Reluctantly Karena extended her hand and Florence placed the key in the tiny open wound on her palm. Florence twisted hard but Karena felt no pain. Slowly her palm opened like the petals of a flower in bloom, revealing whirring gears and shiny metal parts. Karena couldn't believe Florence, but here was the proof in front of her and she couldn't look away, could not run. Because *she* was the problem, *she* had always been the problem - not her adopted parents, not the neighbors. She could not hide from herself; wherever she went, trouble would follow.

Her parents were right: she was a monster. She wasn't even living; she was nothing.

"Why? Why didn't you destroy me when I was deemed a failure? Why did you leave me near the foster agency where you knew I would be adopted?" asked Karena, her silent tears streaming rapidly now.

"Because I wanted you to have the childhood I never experienced, and I thought maybe I could live through your happiness in a way," said Florence.

"You knew I would not grow up, you knew that someday my world would fall apart, and I would realize what I am and *never* be happy. Yet you didn't destroy me because of your own selfish reasons!" Karena spat, her words echoing in the dusty room.

"I'm sorry," Florence cried looking down at her hands helplessly.

"Sorry isn't good enough!" Karena screamed as she began to pummel the dollhouse to pieces. Her violent rage transformed into loud sobbing, which in turn became quiet tears. An eerie silence remained as Karena sat in a chair, a blank expression masking her emotions. The

two of them stared at each other, as if playing some sort of game, each daring the other to speak first.

“Florence?” whispered Karena, breaking the calm.

“Yes?” answered Florence nervously.

“What do I do now? I can't go back.”

“Stay.”

And so, the inventor and the invention embraced.

Don't Fear the Dead

Owen C.

A boy runs into *The Shop of Wonders*, exasperated, "I need this knife! Please!" he pleads with the shop owner.

The shop owner raises an eyebrow. "You never *need* anything in this shop. The only thing you *need* is a *want*," he says in a monotone.

"This knife! My life depends on it! How could you say I don't need it?!" the boy shouts.

The shop owner walks over to him and asks, "Why do you need it?"

The boy says, "They had a knife, just like that. I was using it but when I finished my quest, it broke! I need it to pay my debt or I'll die!"

The shopkeeper sighs, "You don't need to pay off a debt where there is none. The knife broke after its purpose was fulfilled."

The boy looks more angry by the second. "But the collectors will come for me! I need to have it! I need it to stay here!" The boy punches the shopkeeper who staggers across the room and lands with a crash.

The shopkeeper looks at the boy who is growing more monstrous and transparent by the second. He says, "I have no heart for the dead ghosts of the past." He picks up the blade and slices the boy in half. After that, he places a sign next to the sword that says, *Don't fear the dead*. He sighs and stretches.

"I'll take my break now," the shopkeeper mumbles. "Goliath and Warden - please take over the shop for now."

Goliath appears through a mirror and responds with a mischievous grin, "Of course."

"We will handle it. For now," says Warden, rising slowly from a shadow.

"And make sure no slain ghosts of that blasted knife come near this shop again," the shopkeeper says as he walks into the back room.

The Ruby of Ruin

Zofia Juliet

In the shadowed realm of Eldoria, where the Whispering Woods spoke not of breezes but of spirits long past, there lay the village of Thimbleton, shrouded in an eternal twilight. The villagers spoke in hushed tones of a legend, a tale of a hand-forged ruby ring, birthed by the first High Enchanter, Aric Spellweaver, under the blood-red gaze of the Crimson Comet.

The ring, pulsating with the life force of the comet that crossed the heavens once a millennium, was forged in secrecy, its ruby set in a band of metal so dark, it seemed to swallow the light. Aric had poured his sorcery into the gem, along with the comet's eldritch fire, creating a talisman of untold power.

It was said that in Eldoria's most dire moment, a champion pure of heart would arise to claim the ring and cast back the creeping shadows that sought to devour the land.

The ring lay forgotten, its power slumbering beneath Thimbleton, until fate's hand guided Elara, a blacksmith's apprentice, to its resting place. In a chamber veiled by enchantments, the ring awaited on an altar of gnarled oak, its crimson stone throbbing like a living heart.

Elara, whose soul was untainted by darkness, felt the ring's call. As it encircled her finger, a warmth like no other flooded her being, and the gem's glow intensified, as if recognizing its destined bearer.

With the ring's power coursing through her, Elara embarked on a quest to confront the encroaching darkness. The ring granted her dominion over the elements, communion with the forest's denizens, and the gift of mending flesh with a mere caress. The ring's truth might lay not in its enchantments, but in the ring itself.

Her path led to the heart of the abyss, to face the Shadow King, a being of malice incarnate. Their clash was a storm of wills, the ring's brilliance against the suffocating void. In the end, the Shadow King was undone, his essence scattered to the wind.

This is not the end.

Elara set out on yet another quest. A quest to find out more of the ring's secrets.

The night was a tapestry of shadows and whispers as Elara,

with the ruby ring's warmth against her skin, found herself drawn to the outskirts of Thimbleton. There, shrouded in an otherworldly mist, stood ***The Shop of Wonders***, a place spoken of in hushed tones by the villagers.

The shop, a curious structure of twisted wood and glass that refracted the moonlight into dancing colors, seemed to beckon her closer. The door creaked open at her touch, revealing an interior that defied the laws of space and time. Shelves stretched into infinity, filled with artifacts that pulsed with arcane energy.

A figure emerged from the shadows, the Keeper of Wonders, his eyes reflecting the cosmos. "Welcome, Elara," he intoned, his voice echoing like a distant echo in a cavern. "The ring has guided you to this crossroads of fate."

Elara's gaze was drawn to a pedestal where a single candle burned with a flame as black as the void. "What is this place?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"This is where lost things find themselves," the Keeper replied. "And where seekers may find what they did not know they sought."

As Elara ventured deeper into the shop, the air grew thick with the scent of ancient paper and dried herbs. The ring on her finger pulsed in response to the hidden magics that lingered in the air, each object in the shop a story waiting to be told.

It was then that she noticed a mirror, its surface swirling with a mist that seemed to beckon her. Drawn to it as if by a spell, Elara peered into the depths and saw not her reflection, but a vision of Eldoria, besieged by a darkness that crept over the land like a suffocating blanket.

The Keeper's voice broke the silence. "The ring has shown you what may come to pass. The path ahead is fraught with peril, but you are not alone. ***The Shop of Wonders*** will grant you an ally, should you choose to accept the burden."

From the shadows, a figure stepped forth, cloaked in a garment that shimmered like the night sky. "I am Lyrian," the figure said, pulling back the hood to reveal eyes that held the wisdom of the ages. "I will walk with you through the darkness, for the ring has chosen us both."

As Elara and Lyrian stood in the heart of ***The Shop of Wonders***, the Keeper approached them, his steps silent as a shadow. "The time has come," he said, his voice a mere murmur. "The ring has

awakened, and with it, the final chapter of your journey begins.”

With a solemn nod, Elara clasped Lyrian’s hand, and together they stepped through the portal that had opened within a mirror. They emerged into a world blanketed by an eerie silence, the darkness palpable, pressing against them with the weight of centuries.

The ruby ring on Elara’s finger shone like a beacon, its crimson light cutting through the gloom. They moved with purpose, guided by the ring’s unwavering luminescence, towards the heart of the darkness where the Shadow King lay in wait.

The final battle was fierce, a maelstrom of magic and wills. Elara and Lyrian fought side by side, their spirits unyielding. The ruby ring’s power surged, its brilliance overwhelming the Shadow King’s malice, until at last, he was no more.

As the darkness dissipated, the first light of dawn crept over the horizon, bathing Eldoria in a golden glow. The land was free once more, its people emerging from their homes to witness the new day.

Elara and Lyrian returned to ***The Shop of Wonders***, their mission complete. The Keeper greeted them with a knowing smile. “The ring has fulfilled its purpose,” he said, taking the ruby ring from Elara’s finger and placing it back upon its oak pedestal. “And so have you.”

The Shop of Wonders faded away, leaving Elara and Lyrian in the centre of Thimbleton, where the villagers gathered, their eyes wide with awe. They hailed Elara and Lyrian as heroes, their names forever etched in the annals of Eldoria.

As for the ruby ring, it remained in the realm between realms, its magic sealed until the day it would be needed once again. But that is a tale for another time.

Elara and Lyrian’s legacy lived on, a testament to the courage and hope that had saved their world. And in the heart of Thimbleton, life continued, ever mindful of the magic that lingered just beyond sight.

A Letter discovered in *The Shop of Wonders*

Sadie L.

Dear Theodora,

I'm writing to you because I don't know if we will be able to see each other again. My brother has fallen ill, and it's my duty to take care of him now. I'm very sorry to inform you of this, and while I too do not want us to part, I am afraid it is in everyone's best interests, right now.

When you do get this letter, I want us to meet at the old train station at midnight. Do it the day you receive this, or I won't be able to make it. That meeting will be the last you see of me.

Do not attempt to write back. My parents are opening any and all mail we get, in case one offers a cure for my brother. None of them have, so I'm going to the shop in case there's one there.

I have not told my family our secret yet. I can't trust anyone with the truth about the shop except you. That is the only reason I'm sending this. If I make it back, you can't tell or show anyone this letter. I fear that if the world knew about *The Shop of Wonders* it would not end well. In addition to that, enclosed in the envelope there should be a locket. It has my picture in it, in case you miss me.

If you are ever in trouble, tap the locket twice. It's from the shop as well, so hide it under your shirt.

Sincerely,

Your best friend since forever

The Shop of Wonders

Chelsea Eason

Part One: First Appearance

Once upon a time in *The Shop of Wonders*, there were no wonders at all. Yet it was still named that; wonders are things you've never seen, things that are odd and unordinary, but the things and people in the shop were nothing to wonder at, and they themselves were incapable of wonder... until one day, they were.

I walked down streets I had walked a thousand times, streets that were no longer confusing to me after so many years. Then I turned down the alleyway I take home everyday, but rather than being met with grey walls as usual, I saw in front of me a glass window.

The odd building was small but wide. It reminded me of a cake that hadn't fully risen. The white roof was smooth and flat while the vibrant red bricks poked out at the corners and around the door, as if they hadn't been laid out properly in construction.

I peered through the foggy glass. The inside of the building was filled with junk. Random pieces of furniture, clothes and knick knacks were scattered all around.

I stepped back to read the sign above the ancient wooden door. In peeling golden ink the sign read, *The Shop of Wonders*.

The next day, on my way home, I walked a little faster. Not so fast as to alert the people around me, but just enough so they knew to stay out of my way. I turned the corner, expecting to be met with the shop again, and I was shocked to find that it was gone. All I could see before me was the gray alleyway, just as it had been every other day of my life.

The alley was as empty as I am, now that the shop is gone.

Part Two: The Treasures Inside

After what felt like weeks of rushing back to the alleyway, hoping to find the shop again, hoping that I wasn't crazy, the shop finally returned, and this time I was going to go inside.

I turned the lightly-rusted door handle and pushed open the door.

An old bell chimed as I entered. As I stepped in, I inhaled the smell of old books, cookies, and something I couldn't quite name. The familiar smells mixed with the unknown drew me farther into the shop.

I walked around, brushing my hand against old couches with floral patterns that reminded me of my grandmother. Old oak dressers and closets were scattered around. Vanities held up mirrors and when I looked too far into one of them, I saw someone else entirely staring back at me.

Trinkets were strewn across tables and counters. Electronics were stored in a far-off section, away from the rest of the objects. Doors were lined against the walls and when looking down the pathways between furniture I couldn't see an end, if there even was one.

Further into the shop I came across a library that pushed through the ceiling and curved every way I could and couldn't perceive. Books lined the shelves, bound in colours I had not known existed.

I reached out my hands and touched dusty books, in piles higher than I'd ever seen before.

Past the library, *The Shop of Wonders* opened up, bizarrely, into a field. In the middle of the field was a small hut with its windows open, the smell of cookies wafting from it and through to the rest of the shop.

There was another smell, too, one I couldn't quite name, and I walked on further, in search of this new, addictive smell.

Standing deep inside *The Shop of Wonders* I felt a strange desire to go further into the halls, and never leave.

Part Three: The Shopkeeper

It was said that a man, a being, within and beyond our time, ran *The Shop of Wonders*. A man hunched, bending like time itself. His eyes, once a bright blue, had turned to grey as he aged. His remaining hair was grey as the fog that often swirled around his shop.

People who met this man described him as the archetypal elderly gent, sitting on a park bench, as old as time itself. He was a keeper of souls both willing and unwilling, a trickster, someone who had made every mistake there was to make, yet also done every good deed there was to do.

This man was connected to every fairytale that ever existed. He was the man who gave Jack the magic beans and the first to find Cinderella's slipper. He was the one who saw the ends and beginnings of all wars, the one who waited and watched, the one who wrote every history, and he could erase a person with the flick of his wrist. He introduced balance to the universe, and imbalance, too. He was all-

powerful, all-knowing, and yet nothing more than a story in the books he wrote himself.

And no one would ever forget the rumours of how he managed to get his wrinkled hands on *The Shop of Wonders*.. It is said that he built it brick by brick all on his own and gave it magic, so those inside could travel through everything and nothing. That he dealt with beings outside of everything and nothing to get that magic and was able to make connections that lasted lifetimes, yet somehow out lasted them all.

Part Four: A Ring, A Smell, A Shopkeeper

On the top of a dusty desk lay a red-gemmed ring. Most people described it as having an odd smell, like a rotting body. Those who entered the shop often reported this smell but almost all customers were lucky enough never to find the source, never to find the ring.

The old man walked through his shop, slower than in past years, older with each passing day. The old red ring on his finger beat along with his heart, pulsing with each step he took. He reached the heart of his shop, the shop he worked so hard to preserve, and stood before the front of a desk, a desk he would return to whenever he could. He sighed and took off the ring, the glow dimming until it disappeared completely. He sighed as his body began to crumble, dust swirling around him as he placed the ring on the desk. Then, his body turned to a fine ash and a gust of wind blew him across the desk.

I ran through the shop, weaving around the old and new furniture, the unfamiliar smell leading me deeper and deeper. My nose began to sting as the stench got stronger, the sickly sweetness of it reminding me of the smell of roadkill. I stopped, catching my breath. On the desk in front of me was an old ring with an odd red gem set into it.

I picked up the ring and placed it on my finger. The gem started to twitch, to glow softly and to beat, almost like a heart.

A loud scream shattered the silence and in horror I realized that it came from me.

I felt the smell creep into my nose like tentacles, winding their way up into my mind. My vision blurred and through the fog I saw my hair turn gray. The ceiling seemed suddenly further away as I hunched over.

I looked at the ring on my finger and noticed the wrinkles on my hand growing deeper and deeper. I turned to a mirror by the desk and saw that my brown eyes had turned a cool blue and my face had aged countless years.

The paintings I had seen around the shop were not of a mysterious shopkeeper now. The paintings were of me.

The Rapturous Ring

Evan Mannik

This ring has been through a lot. It has an earthy smell, with just a hint of salt. It is battered and old, and has a dirty red gemstone. The band of the ring looks like it was roughly carved out of some sort of wood, with scrapes and uneven bits. But it is a bit sinister, and is more than it appears at first glance. The stone is murky, dull, and covered with sand. The wood is dark, like the night sky. No one knows where the ring is from, but this dusty, inauspicious thing is more complex than it looks.

The ring doesn't just stay in *The Shop of Wonders*. No, the ring can go wherever it thinks it might be useful. If someone really badly needs help, they will notice an old ring on their hand. Wherever, whenever, the ring will go to where it is needed.

The ring has an incredibly complex backstory. In Mesopotamia, it was a birthday gift for a rug merchant, from his young son, Raman. No one knows how this little boy created it. He didn't know the power that this hand-carved jewelry would have. As soon as the merchant put it on, his rugs sold like crazy. The son wore it, and so did his son, and so on. Eventually the ring was lost or sold.

The next time that we see the ring is in Timbuktu. A poor farmer found it, and wore it. He had experienced a massive drought, and all of a sudden, his crops grew back. He lived in riches for the rest of his life. After this, the ring resurfaced in England. A princess at a manor house in the country admired the ring. She thought it pretty. She had difficult decisions to make - whether or not to move her family. After she put on the ring, it all became clear. She decided not to uproot her family from a perfectly good home.

The last time that we see the ring is in Germany. An inventor struggling to sell his inventions put it on, and as soon as he did, his "clocks," sold like crazy. He received great acclaim for his work, and did very well. After that, the ring disappeared for a couple of hundred years and now it resides in *The Shop of Wonders*. So many people in this world are struggling and on the verge of death. The question is, who will find it, before it is too late?

The ring has been sitting in the shop for hundreds of years, simply waiting. In the end, only four people have a shot at owning it. They

come from four corners of the globe, and all need it for different reasons. One is a poor farmer, living in Africa, who needs more crops. Another is a merchant in the Middle East, trying to sell his wares. The third is a city girl in London, trying to make decisions about her life. The fourth is a man in Berlin who dreams of securing a job with a tech company. The descendants of the ring wearers all look for the doorway of ***The Shop of Wonders.*** Quite fittingly, the shop makes it fair. At the stroke of midnight, four portals open up around the world.

They all arrive at the same time. Immediately, three of the four begin scouring the shop. The merchant looks at the artifacts. The girl looks through the books. The Berliner looks at the paintings. Only the African farmer seems unconcerned. He has thought long and hard about this moment. The others search frantically, unable to find it, but the farmer has realized that the ring must find you, not the other way around. And with the other three exhausted, he walks up to the counter with a grin and plucks the ring from plain sight.

Once the man finds the ring, he goes back to the fields of Zimbabwe. Just as he expects, his fields grow back. But strangely enough, the man does not stop there. He uses the ring to start charities. Solve hunger. Combat poverty. But that isn't all. He works tirelessly to solve problems all around the world. But his final act demonstrates his true character, more than anything. For when he is done with the ring, he...

...returns it to ***The Shop of Wonders.***

Part Four

The Art of the Surreal

... in which writers use art from The Shop of Wonders (created by the Centauri artists) as inspiration for their work. The art might be the lost work of great Masters, paintings from another dimension, or they might contain codes, pointing to secrets beyond our understanding...

Words of Wonder

anon.

inspired by all the surrealist art pieces created by our Wednesday Fine Art class

As writers we work magic
to remake the world we know:
reshape, reform, release
reimagine

reality.

Monkeys burst from bulging eggs
growing five legs, fiercely
and chocolate melts below
a bulbous light bulb sun.
White whales rise from sizzling seas
to tell the swiftly passing time
and dogs emerge from meadows
taking flight with flapping ears.
Baseball bats snarl with snapping teeth
and cats grow silver wings and swiftly swim.
Penciled eyeballs blink
on a painter's palette
near a trio of teapots, tapering off
like Russian nesting dolls
while a walrus sits at a writing desk
snapped at by a sharp-toothed paperclip.

It's a wild and wacky wonderland
this world of wonders
where artists and writers work their magic
to remake the world we know:
reshaping, reforming, reimagining
our reality.

second thoughts

isla m.

you didn't think twice
about that postcard you bought
at that funny little shop
tucked into an alleyway
you had two dollars
you wanted an ice cream, but mum said no
so you bought the postcard instead
it was wrinkled
folded in the corner
with a weird little picture of a monkey on it
there was something a little bit off about that monkey
too many limbs
and creepy yellow eyes
but you didn't think twice
you just shoved it under your bed
and forgot about it
you didn't expect what happened late that night
while you were tucked in your duvet
you heard a scraping noise

scraaaaaaape.

like little fingernails
against the frame of your bed
then you heard whispers
and the ripping of paper
you looked under the bed
the postcard was there
the monkey was not
you didn't think twice
but you should have

No One's Cup of Tea

Cameron Green

Inspired by a pencil sketch of shrinking teapots. Each teapot is small enough to fit inside the next, and the smallest of all is so very tiny, it is impossible to tell what it is...

A tiny, unassuming porcelain object lay on one of the shop's wooden tables, its presence overshadowed by more flamboyant items. From the moment Mallory held it in her hands, it became apparent that its surface was anything but smooth. She could feel tiny crevices against her fingertips, creating scratch after scratch until her fingers resembled barcodes. Occasionally, she felt the touch of a smooth piece of fabric and this eased away her pain.

"Does anyone work here?" Mallory tapped a woman on the shoulder, clearly interrupting her.

"No," the woman scoffed, dropping the assortment of cloths in her hands. "Just the man by the front desk, but he hardly speaks. It's silent in here for a reason, can't you see?"

Mallory held the tiny, porcelain object tightly in her hands. She couldn't get help from anyone, and so she had to figure out on her own what the little object might be. However, before she had any time to think, the hand that was holding it became soaked in some kind of moisture. She pressed her nose against it and could tell it was rather salty - and she could even hear faint cries.

Weep, weep, weep, weep, weep.

For a solid hour, Mallory devoted all of her attention to the continuous cries. Why was this little object so sad? Perhaps its ability to destroy hands contributed to an overwhelming sensation of guilt. For the time being, all Mallory could do was listen. Validate its emotions and thoughts until she could figure them out on her own.

Plip.

As the sobbing ceased at last, a single droplet of a strange brown liquid began to spread out over the surface of Mallory's hand. *Earl Grey*, she thought to herself, her sight shifting towards her own travel mug of tea nearby. Though she had yet to find any logical reasoning behind her idea, Mallory began to wonder if pouring her own tea would help the sad little object. Perhaps it would quench its thirst, hopefully putting an end to its misery.

Without any more pondering, her free hand reached toward the mug until its lid popped open. As the porcelain object was infinitely

small, Mallory was sure to pour out only a droplet. *Please work*, she pleaded internally.

With a couple of feet of distance between Mallory and the porcelain object, she observed anxiously as one of its many crevices began to expand. What had felt like a piercing blade appeared to be a mere indent, circular in shape. In fact, it was hardly an indent at all: it had formed a flatbase. As the rest of the object began to morph and expand, the most prominent protruding blade revealed itself to be a spout. Waves of beautiful forest green began coating the object's surface until its movements finally came to a halt. The tiny, sharp gray object was nowhere to be found as Mallory smiled gleefully to herself.

"A teapot!" she exclaimed, ignoring the glaring customers around her. She had single-handedly rescued the thing from its sorrows. Holding the teapot in her hands, she could finally put a name to the soft, healing fabric she had felt earlier. It was a piece of cloth, which the tiny teapot had been using to wipe away its tears. The poor thing. Mallory couldn't begin to imagine the grief it must have experienced. Its only purpose in life was to help others, to serve tea through its glistening spout - yet, there it had laid, an ineffective misfit on a table full of treasures.

As Mallory walked up to the front desk to purchase the teapot, she couldn't help but feel as if she had achieved her life's ultimate purpose. It would surely seem small, unimportant and outright crazy to anyone else... but to her, it was pivotal.

It was no one's cup of tea but her own.

Animated Objects

Sadie L.

In ***The Shop of Wonders***, anything could be alive. ‘Animated Objects’ was the phrase used to describe them. One of these objects was a pile of dice that sat in a velvet bag. Waiting.

One day, the velvet bag was nowhere to be found, and if you were lucky, you could find the dice hiding behind something. Not long after that, eggs started to appear in the shop.

When they hatched, more dice were found inside the eggs. This was the beginning of an infestation. Because the owner never meddled in the affairs of the shop, nothing happened to the growing population of the Animated Objects. It didn’t help that when the dice were rolled, a scraggly, beaten up, red bear appeared. Its limbs were long and thin, like unwinding pieces of rope, and its sewn mouth never wore the same expression for long.

Many of the shop’s inhabitants had their own theories about the dice and the bears, and soon, everyone was trying to get rid of them. Of course, whenever they succeeded, it only caused twice the number of eggs to appear.

The owner realized that because of the Animated Objects, the shop was becoming devoid of customers. He had no choice but to involve himself in this problem. He created a closed-off section in ***The Shop of Wonders*** in which to keep all of these creatures.

Everything went back to normal, or as normal as things could become there, and the customers returned, and the infestation was gone.

There is a tale that says if you ever find the room where the Animated Objects are kept, you would be trapped there forever, slowly suffocating against piles of scraggly red bear, dice, and eggs.

That is one of the reasons the shop is as huge as it is: because the infestation is growing right under our noses, and the room keeps getting bigger and bigger, trying to accommodate the things living in it.

So, if you ever find a die hidden in between books on a long wooden shelf...

Don’t roll it.

I Thought It Was a Penguin

Kate Maly

“Do you think that it knows?”

“Know what?”

“Knows about how time is changing. How it’s moving, how it’s going and leaving. How it won’t ever stay.”

“Of course it does. There’s the sun, the moon, the stars, the rain, the temperature, the amount of fish in the sea—”

“Do you think it remembers what it was like to be young? To be in an egg?”

I turn to you, staring with an all too familiar gaze of expectancy. You laugh, and turn back to the little penguin, shrugging your shoulders and letting the fur inside your coat cover more of your neck.

“I haven’t researched the memories of penguins. I don’t think it’s too significant.”

“I feel like it *has* to, you know? Look at it.”

I point at the penguin. It doesn’t react to anything you or I do, it simply stares at the moonlight.

“If that was a human instead of a penguin, wouldn’t you think it was reminiscing on the past?”

“Yes, but penguins... aren’t humans. We could look it up once we’re back in the cabin, if you like. See if they have good memories.”

“Hm.”

You let out a puff of air, visible to the naked eye. I get out my camera, aware of your confused eyes on me.

The photo, when I take it, isn’t good quality. Everything, save for the penguin itself, is blurry.

“Why are you taking so many photos? We have enough already, and in better resolution.”

“This one is the best out of all of them.”

I lean closer to you, showing you the screen of the camera.

“It feels *real*.”

“Every photo we’ve taken is real.”

“No, all the other ones were taken with the purpose of wanting to be on a magazine cover. This one is for the purpose of having a photo, all for ourselves. To keep this sad little penguin with us forever, and so we can wonder what he’s thinking about.”

“You want to think about a picture of a penguin?”

“Mhm.”

My little affirmative hum ends our verbal conversation, yet we continue speaking as we stare at the penguin. I will keep asking you unimportant questions about your penguins, you will answer, and the penguin will remember.

A Ruby-Stained Reign

Amalyn Krings

The ruby taunted.

Its sparkling gem laughed at the onlookers, daring them to come closer.

The ring was a thousand years wise, but only a couple hundred years old. It bore its wisdom as a king bears his crown, with dignity and pride. And yet this ring was no king; its glimmering crest brought suffering to those who wore it, whispering lies to those who would listen. And now it sat on the glass hand, tucked away into a dusty old corner, as if it were a simple accessory. As if it didn't beg for control. As if its power-thirsty heart and cold eyes weren't longing for blood. Weren't longing for pain.

He had pin-needle eyes and a tight-lipped smirk.

He had slicked-back hair and worn skin.

He was tethered to me, and I belonged to him. The man wore me with dignity, begging for compliments then licking them up as they spewed from awe-struck mouths. I was beautiful, with a blood-red ruby and an ornate band to show it. My words painted ideas in the minds of listeners. I showed them the truth. I showed them the future. But the man was greedy. When the sun hid behind the trees and only darkness could be seen, he'd weep pathetic and tiring tears, and I would have to comfort him. I would tell the man I was worth all of the lies. Tell him I was worth all of the hate. But sometimes he would not listen. And sometimes, he'd try to rip me off his fat finger. Those nights were exhausting, but brought me joy as I watched him try to pull me off. Then one night, he managed it. I watched with amazement as I slipped off his finger and his lips up-turned into a smile of relief. He threw me out the door, letting my sparkling ruby hit the concrete. Then he walked away. Left behind all of the riches and gold I had gathered. All of the power we - no I - had gained. He left me a wounded and weak accessory, waiting for the next incompetent human to pick me up. It wouldn't take long, of course. No one could resist my immense beauty. Nor could they bear not to listen to the stories I had to share.

Suddenly, an old man reached to scoop me up. I smirked as he rolled me around in the palm of his hand, admiring me. But instead of

slipping me onto his finger, he put me into his pocket. My tales were muffled by the thick leather, and I had no choice but to lay there limply as he strode on down the road. After wasting minutes of my precious time, he dumped me out of his pocket, and slid me onto a fake finger. My abilities were wasted here, on a glass hand. Then, looking around, I noticed where I was.

In a shop. A dusty old shop.

Hah.

Naive little mortals, placing something as grand as me within reach of mindless puppets begging to be tied to string.

My reign had just begun.

The Listeners

Madeleine Opie

What happened? The last thing I remember is getting lost in... Rome? *No, no that's not possible, I live in... Where do I live?* My memories feel out of reach, as though even if I could catch them they would slip through my fingers like water. *I just need to get up and find someone. It's as simple as that.* I try to open my eyes, but they're stuck, they feel sewn together. I try to wipe whatever's stopping them from opening, but I can't move my arms. They feel...they feel...like...nothing. The realization hits me: I can't feel my arms, or my legs! *What's going on?* My thoughts are racing, I can't make sense of anything, I can't remember anything. I want to just curl up into a little ball, but I can't. Can't move, can't see, can't talk, can't... I can't do anything.

Ding! The sharp ringing of a bell resounds through the room...hallway...closet...box?

"Mama!" I hear the shrill voice of a young girl calling out. "I want the unicorn!"

I hear quick footsteps run by me.

"Honey." Another voice begins to speak, this one older, tired. "I said small, that's too big. How about this?"

I can hear the soft thumping of more footsteps coming towards me. I suddenly feel weightless and I get the weird sensation that I'm being lifted.

"Excuse me, sir?" I hear the person I assume is the mother, her voice now much closer. "How much for the red five-legged monkey?"

A third voice joins the conversation, this one deep, raspy.

"I'm sorry ma'am, that is not for sale." His voice is patient and monotone, and...familiar, though I cannot not place my finger on why.

"I understand," the woman says sharply.

I feel my body drop.

"Please be careful with the merchandise!" A hint of frustration pierces through his monotonic voice.

"Let's go," says the woman.

A few seconds later I hear the door swing.

"You're safe." I hear the cracking of arthritic joints and feel an eerie presence loom closer. "I won't sell you, at least not until I take your soul, that is." His voice is a raspy whisper in my ear.

Then, as if lightning has struck me, I remember.
I remember how I got here.
I remember the shop calling to me, begging me to come in.
I remember the old man, the owner with his piercing blue eyes
and wispy hair.
I remember leaving and longing to go back.
I remember the feeling of losing myself and the feeling of
never wanting to leave.
I remember the blue eyes, sharp as ice as I shrunk
further
further
further
from reality. Until there was nothing, no sights, no tastes, no smells.
Now I join those who have suffered the same fate, I join them
in an eternal life spent listening.
Forever...

Poem of Questions

Evan Mannik

Around the dice

Where are the mice?

Is this how this poem is going to go?

Is the writing going to flow?

There is a creature, tall and thin

Where is the rest of all his kin?

There is a can, in the middle

It is old, kind of brittle

There is nothing around, just space

Where, O Where, is this place?

It could be high, it could be low

Maybe I could someday go

The creature has a little red hat

Who made it? I don't know that

This place has a peculiar glint

Does everything have a tint?

It is foggy, it is clear

Do you hear that faint sound, with your ear?

The time is up, it's all done

But hasn't this piece only just begun?

Whispers of the Watchful

Zofia Juliet

In ***The Shop of Wonders***, where curios cling,
A book lies open, an ominous thing.
Eyes surround it, a spectral ring,
In the silence, their stares sing.

Shelves of oddities, trinkets of blight,
The book in the centre, bathed in faint light.
The eyes, they watch, through day and night,
Guarding secrets, hidden from sight.

Each eye a witness to the tales within,
Of magic, dark, and sorcerous sin.
The Shop of Wonders, where myths begin,
The eyes, they see, the veil thin.

So enter, if you dare, this trove of fright,
Where wonders and horrors equally alight.
But beware the book with eyes so bright,
For in ***The Shop of Wonders***, they snatch objects in the darkness of
night.

Part Five

Portals in The Shop of Wonders

... in which writers are asked to imagine the portals that lurk within The Shop of Wonders, sharing stories of how they got there, following the misadventures of characters who step through them, and telling stories of the bizarre creatures who wander through the portals, into our world...

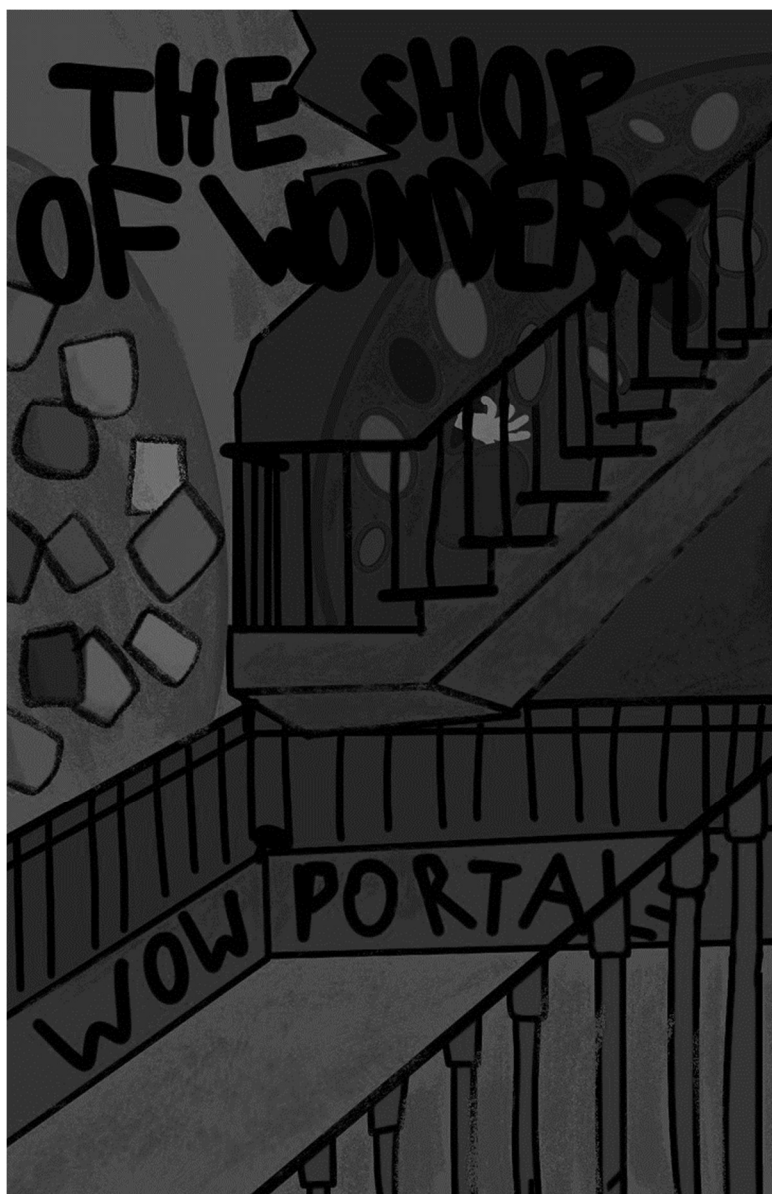


Image by Abigail Meijerink

Happy Face

Sadie L.

One day, you stumble upon a notebook. There is an immense feeling to it, as if it's instructing you what you need to do.

Without being told, you know that this isn't an ordinary notebook. It's a portal. You find a pencil in your pocket, which you don't remember being there, and you pull words from your brain, but you don't remember those being there before, either.

You flip through the dusty pages of the book and write, "Anywhere but here."

Nothing seems to happen at first, but then you go outside, Something is different. The people... they're all masked.

You stand in front of them and wave your hands around. Nothing happens. You are invisible to this new world. You peer into the eye sockets of a mask, but there are no eyes peering back at you. All the masks are simple. They are uncanny versions of a human face, forever caught in a wide, white-toothed smile. You go up to another person. Same face, same expression.

You can feel your hands shaking. Something is wrong with this world. You look up to the sky where there are billboards, all displaying the same thing.

"Get your happy face mask today! You will never have to hide your emotions again, because we do it for you!"

You hastily look for the notebook to bring you back, but there's nothing.

You are trapped forever in this fake world.

A Painting in *The Shop of Wonders*

Karina C.

“Oh wow! This must be a new shop!” says a little girl, during her daily walk through her small town. The town is a friendly place; everyone knows each other and everyone is very kind. She loves her town! Now, there is a new store for little trinkets and such. *A true Shop of Wonders*, she thinks to herself. Seeing as it’s open, she struts over to the shop and enters.

“Welcome to *The Shop of Wonders*, kiddo.” An old man greets her with a friendly smile. He probably moved here because of the peace and friendliness her town was known for. She smiles and greets him back, quickening her pace as her excitement increases. She wishes to see every nook and cranny of this shop.

The girl looks, gawks, gazes, and is in awe at the most curious objects she’s ever seen! This place is her new favorite! She’s almost reached the last aisle of the store! How exciting! She prances down the final aisle, then notices what she assumes to be a painting, covered by a dusty cloth, clearly untouched.

In her naturally curious nature, she hadn’t bothered thinking why the shop owner decided to cover the painting: it was on display, so it should be looked at! Thinking herself to be correct, she reaches for the cloth and pulls it down.

Dust flies off the cloth and stings her eyes. *Maybe I should have done that slower*, she thinks. She coughs and closes her eyes, rubbing them to expel the dust. However, when she opens her eyes again, she is greeted with an entrancing, amazing painting! She is absolutely starstruck! The painting is gorgeous, with its colors, patterns, textures. It seems to depict an imaginary world, crazy and nonsensical. She stares, wishing to memorize every single detail of this painting, knowing that she will want to tell her parents all about it, later on.

Sadly, the girl does not realize time is ticking on. Gradually, she becomes lost in the painting, not aware of the fate about to come her way. As the time passes, she blinks, not noticing how long she has spent without blinking.

That’s all it takes, a blink, and suddenly she feels uneasy. Suddenly, nothing feels safe. Everything is chaotic, blinding in its neon flashing colors. Everything starts hurting, her senses overwhelmed by the sheer onslaught of the environment she finds herself in. She is in

the painting's world, and while from an outsider's perspective it may sound fun and interesting, that world is torture. She doesn't even know if her body still belongs to her; she can't feel it any more.

"Someone! ANYONE! PLEASE SAVE ME!" Her voice glitches, and she feels her throat swallow something non-existent, but choking her all the same.

Her death is agonizing to the very end. Her mind is simply unable to comprehend the environment. She dies, unknowing if she is standing, sitting, or laying down, her head clogged with what feels like sharp objects, jabbing into every part of her brain.

"What a pity..." The shopkeeper looks at the now uncovered painting, glancing down to the discarded cloth on the floor. He picks it up and places the cover on once again, trapping the once-entrancing aura the painting exuded.

The girl was quite sweet, he thinks, but just too simple-minded to understand ***The Shop of Wonders***.

The shopkeeper walks back down the aisle and returns to his station.

He supposes it is time for a new destination.

A moment later, the shop is gone. The next day, a poor girl is declared missing. It's so sad to know that the parents of the sweet child will never learn her fate.

Untitled

Ariana M.

She flung the barstool back as she stood up and bolted for the shop.

She ran, and ran, nearly tripping a dozen times. When she spotted the shop she sped up even more, dodging people as if they were bullets. She whipped open the door of the shop, almost tumbling over the threshold. Then she looked around, eyes wide open, searching the room. She walked past endless heaps of magical things, her eyes darting like a pinball machine and then she began to clamber up each of the piles, searching desperately, scratching herself along the way.

Her hands bloody and her knees as red as a dragon fruit, she stepped over the peak and tumbled, closing her eyes and bracing for impact as she splattered onto the cold floor.

And that was when she saw it.

She picked herself up and walked toward the painting. The rope still dangled from it, but it was being tugged ferociously from the inside. Mustering the last of her strength, she pulled on the rope with all of her might. She grunting as she tugged, feeling as if she was going to pass out, and that was when her friend tumbled out of the painting.

Panting, they lay side by side on the floor of the shop.

The Shop of Wonders

Adya Bhartia

My childhood was not abnormal, not exotic. I lived in a house in Devonshire, England until, in a horrifying accident, my father drove our automobile directly off the road into a freezing lake in the dead of winter. Or at least that's what they told me. All I knew when I woke in a hospital bed strapped to a beeping machine with piteous faces all around me was that my parents were dead. This is where my story becomes interesting.

I was discharged from the hospital after a couple of days of monitoring and sent off to my Aunt Leslie's. She tried her best to lift my spirits but it wasn't much use. What is, after your parents die? Even after stuffing my stomach to the brim with mint-chip ice cream, watching all three of my favorite television shows and not moving to do much other than use the toilet, I still felt utterly depleted.

After two weeks, Leslie finally pulled me out of my cave of blankets, insisting that I accompany her to the market. Feeling more energetic than usual, I rolled out of bed, jamming on a pair of sweats and slipping on a thin jacket. Shrinking back as the sunlight burned my eyes, I flipped on my hood and marched toward the market, trying my best not to draw unnecessary attention to myself.

Aunt Leslie chatted for a full twenty minutes to her old college roommate, who just happened to be visiting Ms. Hopkins' vegetable stall at the same time as us. I jammed my hands into my pocket and wandered off, passing the market stalls and gazing at the buildings surrounding them. Most were alive and bustling with stern-eyed strangers, but one in particular caught my eye. It looked as if it was carved out of a gigantic slab of marble, glinting in the morning sun. Yet despite being the tallest and grandest of all the buildings in the square, everybody seemed to walk by like it wasn't there at all.

Intrigued, I stepped forward, passing Al's Crystal and Fortune Telling stall and crossing the dirt road. But the closer I got to it, the less lavish the shop seemed to be, and soon it shrunk into an eerily-familiar house, the exact one I had grown up in. Slipping into a syrupy, joyful, drug-like state, I lurched forward, bounding up my porch steps.

I looked up to find myself surrounded not by a busy, modern market but by wheatfields and a white picket fence. This *was* the house I grew up in! The familiar scent of my mother's chicken cutlets slathered in ketchup wafted through the air and I wanted to do nothing

more than burst into those grand oak doors. I didn't realize that this eerie store was a place of longing for anyone, and had adapted into being the very place I yearned for myself.

I heard a raspy bark, that of my late dog, Curly. However impossible it might have seemed I laughed, a rare sound of pure delight. I wanted to rush through those doors, crash into the living room and throw my arms around my parents. Tears of happiness sprung into my eyes as I bounded across the porch, banged open the doors and leapt into . . . a store?

Suddenly the smell of chicken was stamped out. Tears of disappointment stung my eyes. It was just a junk store. I huffed with irritation. Somehow I had allowed myself to be deluded, to the point where I truly believed I might embrace my parents and soak up their warmth one last time. Feeling like a brainless fool, I continued to stroll the aisles, unaware that nobody else seemed to be browsing, despite the crowds outside.

In its own way, the store was comforting, with the soft light of hooded lamps, a cream-coloured sofa and the aroma of burning candles. I flopped into a rigid rocking chair and despite being wooded, it felt as though I was sinking into a pillow of feathers. Before I knew it, I drifted off to sleep, dreaming of light summer afternoons, frolicking with Curly in the fields and getting called to an early dinner by Mother and Father before watching our favorite movies and chuckling as we played charades.

"Rachel," a voice said curtly, I wondered whether it was my Mother waking me for school. Snapping back to reality, my eyes flew open and I jumped out of my rocking chair, a wave of dizziness hitting me.

A stern-looking woman with a tight bun and glistening red spectacles loomed over me briefly before briskly walking away, yelling over her shoulder, "Well come on, your stay is limited, you know?"

I followed her, puzzled. "Ma'am, where are we?" I asked. "How do you know my name?"

"Well, this is *The Shop of Wonders*, of course," she said, fixing me with a demanding look as though this was blatantly obvious.

She continued walking and I jogged to keep up. We approached a counter and she slid me a flat, plastic card. She sat on top of a gaming chair, popping on a headset. Then she ushered me away, explaining that the card was a key to my room and mumbling that I should enjoy my stay.

“Sorry,” I said, unsure of myself,” but I don’t think I am supposed to be here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she replied. “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t supposed to be. Don’t worry. Divial will show you your way.”

Before I could say a word more, a monkey dressed in a bellboy outfit hopped onto my shoulder and I let out a yelp of surprise. “Hello, the name’s Divial,” he said, holding out a hand for me to shake. Still shocked, my mouth agape, I held out my finger.

“We love to see young visitors around here! Come on, we’ll treat you to the luxury suite, how about that!” He steered me towards a glass elevator, and we went up, up, up as he chatted about the activities available. “Although your options are near endless, Memory Lane, D & A Visitors and the Every Flavour Ice Cream Shop are my personal favorites,” he said, “although one time I bought a pint of grass-chip ice cream which was rather unappetizing.”

“What is D & A Visitors?” I asked.

“Oh, Visitors Dead or Alive,” he said. “You may talk to whoever you wish, dead or not. It takes place in the Firefly Orchard. The last time I was there I had a delightful cup of tea with Marilyn Mon—”

I cut him short. “Where is the Firefly Orchard?” I asked.

“On the ground floor in the back garden,” he remarked lazily, glancing at his polished nails. Hurriedly I pressed the golden ‘G’ button, eager to get downstairs. We slammed down in a rush as the elevator pinged. The ground floor seems to have adapted, for now it was filled with colorful strangers being directed by elephants, giraffes and parrots, all sporting bellboy attire. I whipped my head back and forth, looking for something resembling a back door.

“Calm down,” Divial muttered. “Head over to the line of luggage carriers.”

I obliged, and as I did so, I could not help but appreciate their remarkable craftsmanship. It looks as if somebody had woven gold into the inky black sky itself, fashioning it into the most beautiful baggage holder ever.

“Well, stop gawking and hop on,” Diaval scolded.

Hurriedly I sprung on and we took off like a comet. A shriek of surprise and joy escaped me as we raced through crowds of humans and animals of all shapes and sizes. After the adrenaline wore off, we screeched to a stop and my mouth hung open in shock at the

brehtaking beauty of my surroundings.

We were perched on a plane of cloud and inky blue grass that stretched out into the distance. Flora and fauna surrounded thousands perched on picnic tables, lavish lawn furniture or even blankets strewn on the cloud. The sky was open, galaxies stretching as far as visible to the eye as fireflies lit up the air, zooming in and out of sight. But the most spectacular sight of all was my parents, beaming meters away from me, arms outstretched.

Tears of relief slid down my cheeks as I ran towards them. I wished I could freeze time and stay enveloped in their love forever. We sank to the ground to talk and laugh, cry and hug. Time moved swiftly and before I knew it, we were all alone. "Rachel," they said, "we love you. And we miss you. We will follow you in your heart, but it is time to let us go."

I buried myself between them, grasping them tightly. "What if I don't want to let go? I wish to be here with you."

"One day you will, sweetheart. But it is time. Go, live your life, and when you are tired and your bones ache we will be right here beside you once more."

Shaking violently, I let them go and closed my eyes. And when I opened them once more I crashed... into Al's Crystal and Fortune Telling Stall?

"Watch it Rachel! You could have broken my all-seeing orb! What are you doin' anyway, standing there all glassy-eyed for the past five minutes? You look downright moony!"

My mind raced, running over the possibilities. Had I been hallucinating? Had I gone mad? But I looked down to find a pint of grass-mint ice cream perched in my hand. No. I hadn't imagined any of this, and now, I knew I was going to be alright.

I trudged back over to Aunt Leslie, trying to wrap my mind around the unearthly experience.

I smiled, and for the first time since losing my parents, that smile wasn't fake.



Image by Charlotte Urban

Part Six

Stories From The Shop of Wonders

*Stories should have a beginning, a middle and an end,
though not always in that order...*

A Narrator's Diary

Thoughts of an Infinite Observer

Cameron Green

1/21/24 - 3:29 PM EST - Customers ran frantically around the shop, trying to beat each other to the best finds as closing hour approached. It was mainly the centre tables that attracted the greatest audience, and many of the hidden gems had not even been found yet. In the middle of a tiny, broken shelf in the corner of the storage room lay a wooden ring. Its centre held a dark maroon gemstone, smooth to the touch in contrast with the sharp, spiky wood. Considering it had been resting there for months, perhaps its aura wasn't appealing. It also did not appear too easy to wear, so maybe its lack of practicality acted as a repellent to buyers. All things considered, the item seemed kind of pointless - unless it had a hidden purpose that had gone above peoples' heads.

Or below.

1/3/24 - 2:07 AM EST - It was the beginning of the 18th century. With all sorts of revolutions and constructions, streets were packed and commutes were near-impossible. The art of potions had not yet reached its modern form, so Zachary Griffifth was in luck. As society's chaos continued, Zachary seized the opportunity to practice his recipes until he perfected one to its core. All it took was a single splash on his heirloom ring for it to absorb the potion's abilities. Zachary Griffifth had (un)officially invented the first underground transportation ring in the world. At exponential speeds, he found himself able to travel anywhere in the city within a matter of seconds. He felt as if he was on top of the world, and he *was* - that is, until he was assassinated by an unknown figure. Someone must have become suspicious of his swift travels, but who would go to such measures to discover his secret? It must have been someone with a lot to gain - perhaps an advancement in their studies. The question is, *what* studies?

1/21/24 - 5:29 PM EST - The collection of antique clocks in the shop continued to tick simultaneously until they all chimed at once, the sound signaling the shop's closing. The shop owner hastily shoved guests out the door until the shuffles and footsteps faded to silence. His eyebrows knitted tightly as his thoughts took over his consciousness.

Those shallow consumers. They take all the tacky, tasteless accessories and boast to their friends about their new antique. But the ring is far more than a frilly antique. It's the future of our world, if they would actually choose it! Reaching forward for the last mini teacup on the shelf, he held it in his hands and smashed it to the floor. However, he didn't channel *all* of his rage this way. Marching over to the storage room shelf, he ripped the price tag off the wooden ring and placed it on his finger. He was no longer selling it in ***The Shop of Wonders***. The customers didn't deserve it. Besides, his fingers had abnormally large measurements. It probably hadn't fit on anyone else's hand but his.

Though, I think we both know that can't be true.

Wonderful Wondrous Wondering Wonders

Kate Maly

“I hope you’re not planning on boring me to death.”

“I just wanted you to be aware of everything the plot of land has to offer - I don’t want you to call me later all angry and upset, whining about how I never told you anything about the place.”

“Damien, it’s just a big old house!”

Gesturing towards the residence, Abri slumped their shoulders, jutting their right shoulder upwards awkwardly to halt the flow of their book bag sliding down it.

“Who knows? Maybe my sis is haunting you just for stepping on the property!”

“Keys.”

Damien, smiling nonchalantly, handed them over. “Just don’t be so pessimistic all the time,” he said. “Liven it up! And if you do meet my sister there, tell her she still owes me ten bucks.”

“Will do.”

Spinning the key around their finger by its chain, Abri looked the house up and down, ready to conquer.

“And don’t go missing in there yourself! I don’t want to be known as the guy with the house that swallows people up!” Wiggling his fingers and crouching over with a grin, Damien cooed in the most ominous fashion he could muster, chuckling moments later.

“Got it. Thanks, again.”

Waving behind them and heading towards the almost condescending doors, Abri stopped exercising their ring finger, sliding the key into the keyhole and turning it around. They heard an affirming sound from Damien and nudged the door open with one elbow, cringing at the dust.

Fanning the space in front of them with one hand, Abri used their other hand to cover their mouth, as if they were stepping into a room that housed the plague. It certainly fit the times— the interior of the small foyer had peeling wallpaper, a chandelier that swung in the breeze, a dark mahogany desk, and a barren coat rack tucked in the corner.

*Isn’t this the opening of every murder novel? they thought.
Hopefully not.*

Yanking the key back from the keyhole, they shut the door behind them, watching as the dust flowed between their feet. Leaving the creepy foyer, they made their way into a long hallway, branching off into a surplus of rooms, all illuminated except for the hallway itself. Tilting their head with curiosity, Abri stepped side to side, seeing how the light shone on something spikey laid out in the centre of the long corridor.

“Is he trying to kill me?”

Slipping a hand into their pocket, they flicked their finger to hit the flashlight button.

“Oh my—”

Didn't even clean the hallway... he was really being honest when he said that he didn't look over the place.

But what did he do here to justify all these bear traps?!

Dozens upon dozens of them were lined up in the hall, their maws glistening as they waited for their prey.

“Damien...”

Backing up, Abri retreated into the foyer, grabbing a hanger from the coat rack and holding it out like a weapon. Then they walked back into the hallway, towards the traps, armed with wooden objects, before getting into a pitching stance, feet planted firmly into the creaking ground.

“Time to see if the traps work.”

Inhaling as they closed their eyes, they raised the piece of wood like a javelin stick, and hurled it forward to land in one of the traps.

Abri squatted down and flinched as the piece of wood cracked in two, splinters flying through the air as the trap closed, like the maws of a crocodile latched onto prey.

Picking up the splintered piece of wood, Abri boosted themselves back onto their feet with a crack of their knees, reaching for their phone and scrolling down through their contacts to find the owner of the wretched house.

“This is *not* what I meant when I said I wanted some escapism...”

Pulling up his smiling profile, Abri called him quickly, hitting the speaker button and sliding their phone onto the table.

First ring.

Abri walked towards the door.

Second ring.

A steel lock held the handles together, clinking and clanking against Abri's futile efforts.

Third ring.

"Soooo sorry! Can't come to the phone right now! I'll probably never open my voicemail, so please don't try. Thank youuuu!"

Click.

"Some sick joke. I'm not going towards the bear traps, if that's what he thinks."

But how? ...

"Nobody is silent enough to do that, right?"

Murmuring to themselves, Abri took the lock into their hands.

"Dumb prank..."

They tilted it side to side, before sticking into it the broken end of the hanger, humming as they struggled to open the lock.

Can't see anything.

Leaving the piece of wood hanging in the lock, Abri flung their hand out, trying to wave it around before touching the ice-smooth desk and feeling along the surface for the volume keys along the side of their phone.

Adjusting their hand to grab it, they grunted in confusion as they felt wood, not the cool touch of their screen protector. Their phone was gone.

"Looking for this?"

The thought, *That's not Damien* overtook their mind, their last thought before a hand tugged their head back by the hair and delivered a quick punch to the underside of their chin.

Abri fell.

"Finally, you've been unconscious for forty minutes - I was considering dumping you outside the house."

Abri opened their eyes. This room, unlike the others, had intact wallpaper. Through Abri's blurred eyes, they saw that it was green and boasted an array of jungle animals.

"Oh my— I didn't hit you that hard, did I?"

The speaker wore clothes that could only be described as *overwhelming*. Every colour clashed.

Sitting behind a desk she grinned at Abri, watching their every movement as they took in their colour-clashing surroundings.

“You... aren’t Damien.”

“That’s right, dear!”

The jingle of steel handcuffs encased their wrists.

“Thera Williams, owner of *The Shop of Wonders*. Nice to meet you!”

She held out a hand towards Abri, smiling widely.

“Oh, my apologies. Budget has been running low lately, so I’ve had to reuse some of our assets...”

“You owe—”

A bit of blood dribbled down Abri’s chin, eliciting a shiver from Thera.

“You owe Damien ten bucks.”

“Do I?”

Cringing at Abri’s blood-soaked chin, she cleared her throat and laughed off their words. Then she folded her hands and leaned across the desk.

“I sincerely hope that he knows it was a joke...”

“If you unlock these and let me leave, I’ll tell him myself.”

Thera ignored their bargaining, instead standing up with a jolt.

“Oh! Right! Business!”

Taking quick steps over to a fax machine in the corner of the small office, she yanked out a few sheets of paper, tossing them on the desk. Then she scrounged around for a pen.

“You really are related, huh?”

“In case I haven’t said it yet— welcome to *The Shop of Wonders*! We sell one thing and one thing only, but you won’t ever need anything else!”

“Bold claim. You sound like every billboard I’ve seen on my drive here.”

“We sell only what is ideal for you!”

Sitting back down, Thera sighed and placed her pen down next to the papers.

“Now, dear, what is something you’d like me to grant you? What’s one wish you’d like?”

“I’d like what I came here for. To be alone and sitting in a room without anybody nagging me.”

A mixture of a laugh and a cough came out of Thera’s lips when she exhaled.

“That’s no fun at all! Listen to the inner child knocking in your heart— what does that child want?”

“To leave. I imagine the younger me would be terrified to learn that I’ve been kidnapped.”

“You *will* leave, once you tell me your wish!”

“Really?”

That’s a lie.

“I’m telling you the absolute truth!” Taking a sheet of paper, Thera wrote in big, bubbly letters, underlining it and then adding stars all around the words— **‘What do you want?’**

She slid the paper and pen over to Abri. Staring at their handcuffs, they rocked themselves back and forth, scooting the seat closer. Then they took the pen in their mouth and tilted it to the side to write.

Their efforts were cut short by a heel, slamming down on their foot.

“Ghh—!”

“My apologies, I keep forgetting that your hands are constricted!” She grabbed hold of the pen falling from Abri’s mouth and wiped it on a cloth.

“How about I just write down whatever you say, dear?”

With an aching foot and a deadpan expression, Abri nodded.

“Now, let’s get started.”

“... and I can’t remember anything more.”

“I would be surprised if you could. I didn’t think I would have to use *all* of these pages...”

Thera smiled at Abri, finally setting down her pen and loudly cracking her wrist.

“So, this is your wish? The one that you’ve wanted to come true since childhood?”

No.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“So this is the one, *true* wish that you want the Shop to help you with?”

“Yes.”

“Alright...”

Taking up the first paper of many, Thera ran her eyes over the cursive writing that slowly got more sloppy with time, clicking her tongue as she read.

There's no way she will grant this.

Thera flicked to the next page.

There's no way she will grant anything, period.

She skipped to the last page.

She has to let me out.

“Alright!”

Straightening the papers along the tabletop, Thera smiled.

“I will grant you your wish!”

She skipped around her desk, this oddly dressed woman, conjured a key from the inner workings of her jacket, twirled it around her index finger and slotted it into Abri's handcuffs.

Standing up, Abri stuck their hand out towards Thera.

“Phone.”

“So eager to leave! We've spent far too long making that wish to wind up with it never coming true! Come on!”

Behind them, Abri's captor urged them forward one gentle shove at a time, leading them out of the room .

“Was pink and yellow the best paint for a door in a *green* room?”

Grabbing the stack of papers, Thera smiled as Abri looked back at her.

“Trust me dear, you'll see much more magnificent things than a pink and yellow door.”

Staying uncharacteristically silent as they shot her a confused, almost doubtful look, she reached around them, twisting her hand.

“You'll let me go after this, is that right? I don't—“

“And now!” she boomed, “we welcome you to ***The Shop of Wonders.***”

She shoved Abri through the door.

Crashing forwards and jutting their arms out to brace themselves, they slid their left foot out, squinting as the bright room stung their eyes.

The sensation of wood under their palms and a lack of a surface under their foot made Abri open their eyes fully once more, their throat sore as a yelp came through the air.

Stairs. Many, many stairs, and many balconies. All going on for what seemed to be forever, spiraling down the walls into an abyss where the sunlight could not reach. The skylight window and the copious amount of colourful doors lining the walls of the sheer vertical room were not even the most confusing aspect. The walls, if they could even be called that, were entirely comprised of shelves, all filled to the brim with terrariums.

Looking back, Abri braced themselves on the railing, winded at the mere sight.

“... who are you?”

“Thera Williams, dear. Owner of *The Shop of Wonders*.”

“No, I’m asking if you’re some fairytale princess.”

“Why are you asking that?”

“*Normal* people don’t usually have a never-ending room.”

Thera laughed at the sheer bewilderment on her client’s face, walking next to them as she shut the door behind herself. Looking around proudly at her room, she set a hand on Abri’s shoulder, ignoring the shiver running through it.

“Yes, well, I’ve spent quite a while making this room like this. I’m quite happy with it.”

She winked at Abri.

“For the record, if anyone asks, I’d much prefer the title of ‘witch’ over princess.”

“... so we’re still in the realm of a child’s fairytale.”

Looming over the edge of the railing, Abri almost missed the sound of paper flipping behind them.

“I’ll be honest, dear. I haven’t had a client like you in quite a while... or ever, really!”

She grabbed one of the smaller terrariums off the shelf and lifted it out, then she held the small ecosystem in her hands for a moment before bringing it over to Abri.

“Many people just wish for one simple thing. Infinite money, superpowers, or even sometimes more wishes... the last never really worked out.”

Tapping the bottom of the terrarium, she smiled. "Take this, will you?"

Abri followed Thera's instructions, holding the lip of the flask properly yet supporting the bottom with their free hand.

"And now...?"

"Drop it."

Abri looked over the edge once more.

The ground was barely visible.

They looked back at the terrarium.

"... and the point of doing that is?"

"Just drop it!"

"It looks too pretty to drop."

"Oh, do I have to baby you now?"

Thera peeled Abri's fingers off the terrarium, one by one, tussling silently with her client.

"Drop it."

And so they did.

Resentfully letting go of the flask, they watched it as it fell down past each balcony, slowly drained of sunlight, then they flinched as the glass shattered.

"Aren't those flasks around \$20?"

"\$30 if you want one as high quality as that, dear."

"... hm."

Abri turned to Thera, their voice growing progressively more high pitched. "So what was the point of that?"

"Making your wish come true. Apparently, what you wanted more than anything else was a forest..."

Trailing over to the staircase to her right, Thera clicked her nails on each flask, bottle, and jar storing each little world. She squinted, holding the paper closer to her face as she read.

"... with infinite amounts of money growing from the leaves?"

"Did I say that?"

"I have it written down, dear."

"Oh."

"And so!"

Dropping the stack of papers on the ground, the owner wrapped her arms around a glass vase, carrying it and waddling back over to the edge. Taking one last look at the little scene she had crafted, she set it on the railing, shoving it over watching it crash a metre away from the previous one.

“Could you help me, dear? I need a few extra hands, or else we’ll be here all day!”

“Now, just tip this one over...”

The scene of a winter wonderland at an old, decrepit castle fell over, the tiny soldier figurines scattering across the messy floor.

Abri, winded and sweaty, squatted down, putting their head in their hands as Thera brushed past them and headed down the stairs. Even if it was barely visible, the glint of light on the broken glass pieces shone off the limited sunlight that filtered down, almost like a disco ball.

“That’s the tiresome bit over with!” she called up, her hand waving back and forth incessantly until Abri stood up.

“You’re not going to charge me for the *thousands* of dollars we broke, right?”

Sliding lazily down the stairs and leaning against the railing near Thera, Abri rolled their neck around, watching their captor waltz on over to multi-coloured mess. She clicked her tongue, scrutinising it all.

“... this one!” Plucking out a shard of glass and sauntering happily over to Abri, Thera showed it off happily. “Now just go over there, and we’ll make your dream come true!”

Pointing over to a small area free of terrarium remains, she patted Abri on the back, before lowering herself to the ground and carving a long line into the wood, smug and pleased with herself.

... *she’s like a child with chalk.*

Regardless, they wiped off a line from their forehead, waltzing over to the vague area and flopping into a sitting position.

Closing their eyes, they sighed, enjoying a small moment of relief from physical labour which was promptly ruined by Thera’s hands clapping together and the sound of her heels clicking farther and farther away.

“We’re ready!”

Opening their eyes once more, they saw two things.

The first was that the word ‘*PAST*’ was scrawled onto the floor.

The second was that Thera was back on a balcony, her hand on a switch.

Before they could get a word in, Thera cleared her throat, putting on her best announcement voice.

“Welcome to ***The Shop of Wonders!*** We are here to fulfill the wish of...” She looked down at Abri.

“What’s your name?”

“Abri.”

“We are here to fulfill the wish of Abri!”

Gesturing to the huge heap of terrariums, the carved wood and then Abri, she added, “The ‘what,’ the ‘when,’ and the ‘who!’”

Interrupting her speech, Abri piped up from below her with their left hand raised like a schoolchild.

“May I ask about the ‘how?’”

“You’ll find out, dear!”

With a wide smile, Thera yanked the switch backwards.

The floor beneath them started to quake. Gears shifted.

Slowly, oh so slowly, the floor gave out.

(to be continued here...)

A collaborative piece by the Saturday Creative Writing Salon, pulling together our work on hooks and elevator pitches:

Once Upon a Time in *The Shop of Wonders*...

A desperate owner faces bankruptcy and fears he must sell, until he is granted the power to have anything he wants... at a price.

A loose tile leads a lost girl to her destiny and a boring man unleashes the memory of his riveting past life.

Camilla is split infinitely, across realities. Can she unite them all and save herself?

A detective finds the murderer's confession from his latest case... but it was recorded in 1936.

An alien invention finds a home in the arms of the inventor who lost it, decades ago.

A man wakes up with no idea how he got there, or why he fell asleep.

A 14-year-old girl sees her future in a mirror and a thief becomes a prisoner in her own hiding place.

An aspiring journalist finds a five-thousand-page reference book analyzing the true meaning of life, only to discover the words scramble as soon as they are read.

A young woman with a failed life is given a second chance, but with dreadful consequences...

There was a shopkeeper, an eternal guardian to the wonders the shop contained, and a jailer to its horrors. This is how it had always been until they found him dead on his own shop floor. Now, an inspector representing the Interdimensional Investigations Unit must find a way to survive whatever killed the only person holding this place's monstrosities at bay...

Once Upon a Time in *The Shop of Wonders*

A collaborative prose poem by the Wednesday Creative Writing Salon

In *The Shop of Wonders*...

...stories were born, fused together by great authors who sat with quill in hand, pencil on paper, typewriter keys clacking, fingers dancing across their keyboards.

...historical figures sat and discussed humanity's problems. The shop housed wonders of the world, ancient artifacts sacred to humanity. Some of the most important decisions ever made were birthed in that musty, candlelit room.

In *The Shop of Wonders*...

... an old man sat on a rickety wooden stool, gently caressing a broken doll between his frail, bony fingertips. Though the dress was faded, the hair was falling out, and one arm was missing, the facial features were striking: rosy pink cheeks, bright blue eyes, and red lips. The old man stared down at the doll, which he had been seeking for many years and smiled, for now he felt complete, and with his final dying breath, he breathed his life, his heart, his soul into the little doll, before crumpling to the floor and disappearing in a wisp of smoke.

...an old, frail clockmaker sat on a stool he had carved from the cottonwood tree that grew in his backyard,. He was assembling a cuckoo clock that only let the birds sing on the hour and for one minute. There were clocks all around the shop, some made from paper mâché, some from burnt-out lightbulbs. The clockmaker was a strange little man who made his clocks in strange little ways, by adding tiny quirks or an incredible amount of uniqueness.

In *The Shop of Wonders*...

there were once no wonders at all.

