

SUMMER'S END

by Aydan Kanani

The sound of pattering feet echoed across the sidewalk, further down toward the pond where it joined the rustling leaves that had fallen just the previous day. A breeze spoke of the coming chill—one that would be harsh on the poor villagers of Ashdale. Some declared it a punishment, due justice for the neglect of their Gods. Insolence inviting doom. Other voices added dissonance to the choir: Pish-posh—I'll say—Nothing but hearsay. So entangling was such gossip that people failed to notice a small girl sneak away from her duties.

The worries that plagued her small village didn't particularly bother Lyse. She was a summer child, caring nothing of that which the adults foreboded. As far as she was concerned, summer had always been; would always be and—anyway—she didn't like such topics. They were too depressing, and there was too much fun to be had. Today she had brought her friend with her to gather flowers. "To make flower crowns," she'd explained when he had asked what for.

"Flower crowns? That's silly!" said Cass, who always held too tight a grip of his boyish integrity. Pink distress crept slowly up the sides of his neck. Lyse frowned. "It's not silly," she said. She thought flower crowns were pretty, and importantly, fun to make. Looking for flowers, thinking, choosing; carefully weaving them together into something similar, but new. "Do you not want to?"

Cass, now fully pink-faced, shook his head. Lyse shaped her mouth for a question—suspended, as Cass glanced her over. She had to wait him out.

"Let's do it." he sighed at last.

"The flower crowns?" said Lyse, who needed to make sure.

"Yeah." He smiled at her. "Sorry." His ears—a little bit pointy and marked with a myriad of new and old freckles all crowding for space—were peaking through the wisps of his hair. Lyse noted they had also turned pink, which brought her great satisfaction. She nodded at him as he reached out his hand, and clasped her own hand to it.



That afternoon was devoted to flowers. The two of them, both stubborn, both clumsy, needed time to recover composure. But the day passed, and they forgot themselves the way children could, their cautious conversations soon turned to banter.

They were exhausted by the time they collapsed, parched and soot-covered, with knees that looked as though carved from the gravel they had rested on. The shadow of a great oak covered their sprawling figures. The tree towered above them, a mass of brittle bark and branches, curling, sky-bound, as if to bathe in the last streaks of sunlight before

inevitable darkness.

Lyse struggled against her heavy eyelids, which were opening and shutting at odds with each other. She had stayed out for longer than usual; soon past dinner-time, unless she hurried home. They were much farther out than she had realized. The crumbling brick wall they had been strolling beside that day was visibly older than just a few hundred steps ago. The topmost row of bricks had eroded enough to let glimpse the sulky tips of the various tombstones lined up behind the wall. A graveyard, filled with people nobody longer knew, whose stones nobody cared to maintain. Cass had showed her the place. He went there often, though Lyse had only followed him once or twice; had one or two times been enveloped by the wistful quiet, and ached without knowing why. She wondered how Cass could bear it.

Cass was breathing very faintly next to her, for which she poked him in the ribs, *hard*. If he was—and he totally was—falling asleep, Lyse would have to leave him here. She could not very well drag his unconscious body home.

“Look,” she said, when he turned his bleary eyes toward her. She had to repeat herself one more time before he actually did. She was pointing to the sky, where a small cloud was slowly making its way across. All clouds seemed to her like they were headed somewhere; always moving in a great perpetual marathon. “That one kind of looks like something.”

Lyse had heard from her mother, who had heard from hers, that clouds sometimes took the shape of things. Cows, her mother had nodded, and cats, and flowers; and yes, even soup—likely because soup had been the five-year-old Lyse’s current obsession, and not because any cloud out there looked especially soup-like. Though they all somewhat did if you asked Lyse. Except the one she was pointing at—that one looked different. Perhaps: “Like a bird?”

Cass snorted. “Not even if you’re squinting,” he said, and he was right, *and* he was squinting. “How about that one?” He pointed to a cloud that looked even less like anything.

Lyse began to accept that thing-shaped clouds would elude them today—as they had everyday, even if Cass swore by the cloud-star he’d seen last summer—and said: “Looks like a regular cloud.”

“No way it does! It looks like a rabbit.”

Lyse shrugged. “I don’t see it.”

Cass scowled, then very sweetly said, “Revenge,” and pinched her. *Hard*. She yelped, scrambling to her feet as Cass tumbled away.

“I’m telling your mom,” said Lyse, rubbing at the dent he’d given her.

“Serves you right,” Cass said, but grinned. Lyse matched his expression, her features crinkling up from the motion.

“Let’s race back,” she said. “Win to choose, or lose in two’s!”

The rhyme they had learned in kindergarten had become cue for their daily contest. She turned and ran, not waiting to see if Cass would follow. He was fast, but today she was faster. She ran to the rhythm of her vigorous heart, windswept forwards toward fate. She ran, unaware of what awaited, but determined to outrun it.