

Something Wicked, Something Wild **by Victoria Knight**

They used to hunt witches here.

It's a Fuxboro tradition to stand in the town centre on October the 19th and turn your head into the coming wind, taste the ash on your tongue, the iron. There were more trees back then, but pyres have to be made from something.

A slight shiver goes through me like an electric shock and roots me to the ground; even though age has faded it, I feel the pull of power that October brings. My name is Magdalena Spielmann the Ninth. My family has been rooted in Fuxboro since before there were trees, and we have a saying – power calls to power.

As the shiver subsides, I picture the night of the first Magdalena's ousting. I've heard the story so many times it plays out in my head like a memory; impossible, given it happened hundreds of years before my birth.

It was October. Fuxboro was new and cautious, and Magdalena the First was nineteen, only just, when she caught the eye of Henry Roth.

He pursued her relentlessly, gifting her flowers, which she let wilt; fresh pastries, which she gave to the hungry. The rejections stung, so Henry, the mayor's son – who had never been denied anything he'd tried to take before – made himself a resolution; if she would not live with him, she would not live at all.

The people of Fuxboro were suspicious, pliant. Their crops suffered from blight and they were hungry, desperate to assign blame to something out of their control. So when Henry whispered of the magic he'd seen Magdalena do, they opened their ears and listened. Fear rose within them like smoke. Like fire.

Magdalena saw them coming from her bedroom window – weaving through the trees, the bright flower of flames burning on the end of sticks. I know the fear she felt; I can sense it through the earth.

Magdalena did not flinch at the sight of the pyre. She said nothing to them, even as they bound her wrists behind the wooden pole at her back. Only when Henry requested her last words, offering one last chance to save herself, did she turn her head to face him, and say, "This will not be forgotten."

Something proud burns in me at that. We remember, I want to tell her. If there's one thing a witch knows, it's that there are different ways to survive, and Magdalena the First has lived longer than any of us.

I pick my way through the dark, the concrete paths beneath my feet slowly turning to dirt. Trees take the place of houses around me. Though it's so dark I can barely see the grey outline of my free hand in front of me, I'm not worried about losing my way. I could find Henry Roth's well with my eyes shut, through a snowstorm, through blazing fire. Power calls to power, and I'm being beckoned.

I sense him as I near the well. It was sealed over years ago; all that remains now is an impenetrable, tomb-like structure sitting in the middle of a clearing. I put a palm on the cool bricks. Something shifts; one slides aside. A strange sensation shoots up my arm, and I yank it away, a reel playing in my head of every wicked, bloody thing Henry Roth did after Magdalena's execution, before they caught him and banished him here.

Witches were not the only things to haunt Fuxboro.

Farmers woke to find their struggling crops pulled from the ground, their cows butchered and eaten whole; dogs went missing and children complained about scraping at their windows. Whispers wove through the town: Magdalena did not die as quietly as they'd hoped. Before she was devoured by the flames, she put a curse over Fuxboro.

It was almost a full month later when a father kicked down the door of his daughter's bedroom and found Henry Roth crouched, inhuman, over the mangled corpse of his eldest child, chewing on her shinbone.

As distraught as the mayor was to discover the monster was his son, he could not bring himself to order Henry's death. I know he's not dead. The talk is all about Henry's hunger, the people he killed, the way they bound and dropped him down a well deep in the forest and the solid noise it made when he landed. On still nights, it's not the wind that's howling. It's the hunger of Henry Roth.

A groan comes from deep within the earth, rumbling through my feet, up my legs. With effort, it spins into a voice: "Magdalena."

"Magdalena," He says again. "Is it over?"

I reach into my pocket, fingers grasping a thin match. My hand shakes it as I hold it over the hole in the bricks. I steady myself with a breath that goes all the way through me, chasing out the shivers left by Henry's groans, and roots itself deep in Fuxboro's earth. Something swirls in my blood. Heat bursts at my fingertips; the match is lit, and before the first wisp of smoke reaches me, I drop it.

The match disappears into the hole. A moment of stillness follows. It lasts barely a breath: light blossoms, and I feel heat come through the bricks as I sink to the forest floor, my back against the well.

Henry Roth screams as he goes up in flames and I know even though he shouts my name, it's not me he's calling for. It's the wind, I tell myself. Close your eyes, it's only the wind.

The well burns for a long time, longer than Henry's screams. When I stand, my back is black with soot, and my skin stinks of smoke; I look like I've crawled out of a fire. It's a thought that makes me smile.

It's October the 19th. The air smells of smoke, but the forest is silent, and I know there's nothing left in Fuxboro to be afraid of.

Wolf

By Matt Coleclough

The rumours of a thief with a bicycle spread slowly through the sleepy village, cast between households like washing lines by stern matriarchs, and passed around the fishing boats like a cigarette. Their simple dreams were filled with clicking wheels and shadows, and they woke to the taste of a stranger's breath on the air.

The blue eye of the bay had opened in the morning, and the boats floated lazily. In the plaza stray dogs lay in the sun, panting like the sea. From the boats, the village seemed to tumble into the water, narrow cobbled streets of grubby charming houses and dusty shops, the shore littered with broken nets and young lovers. On a balcony which overlooked the sea, a wire of a man slept stretched between two chairs, a hat shading his eyes, a necklace swinging from his fingers in the breeze which came off the sea. Below, a black bicycle rubbed its handlebars against the house, huddled like a stray cat in the doorway.

The man woke and hung his shirt on the washing line above the street and went inside in his vest. The house was dark and shuttered and quiet. He sat on the bed and put the necklace on the bedside table and read the paper and tried not to think.

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That year the spring came early and thawed the ice, and filled the riverbeds with mountain water. In the trees a bronze wolf lowered its nose to the floor and sensed the water and felt that it was faster and stronger than the spring before. Soon the men would come.

The wolf began to climb the mountain, and the forest became thin and the sun became strong and the days

became weeks. The night buried the mountains under a quilt of stars, and the wolf wept for his pack and the mountain water rushed away towards the sounds of the men's voices and the men rose earlier than the sun.

One morning the wolf rose and the sun also rose and the men had risen already. They were too close to give him up. It was spring and the men never gave up in spring, only in winter when the bronze fur was warmer across his shoulders than theirs and mountain water did not fill the night with footsteps. The wolf wept for his pack, and mountain water filled his ears and nose and eyes and mouth and soaked his bronze fur and the men came and shot him on the riverbed and his body floated down towards the sea.

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The man was shaving in his vest in front of a dirty mirror. He saw a face that had lived too carefully, beard mangy and brown and flecked with grey, cheeks pinched by remorse, eyes hanging on in quiet desperation. He saw hands that had not lived carefully enough, the scars like riverbeds cut through the valley of his palm and he remembered their banks breaking with blood and he washed them in a basin of mountain water.

The man finished shaving and dried his hands and went back into the dark room and ate without tasting and read the paper and tried not to think. He looked at the necklace on the bedside table and for the first time he noticed the pearls and remembered the pale smooth neck and the lovely face and the powerful father and he knew that men would come back for it, and that they would kill him slowly. The man went out onto the balcony and felt the breeze which came off the sea and wept.

There was a knock at the door and the sound of men's voices in the hall.

The Roses **By Elizabeth Ryder**

We planted the roses together, the day we first moved in, and at first we looked after them together as well. I bought special fertiliser from the shops to help them grow tall and green and he sprayed them with pesticide as often as he could remember, to stop the greenfly getting at them.

But then he suddenly seemed busier—he didn't even have the energy to pick up a watering can—and anyway, hadn't he done enough just by planting them? Hadn't he sprayed them with a hose just last month? What more did I want? The roses were my responsibility.

Surprisingly, even though he no longer paid them any attention, the roses didn't stop growing. After a few days their thin green stems swelled into black barbed briars, that twisted and writhed around each other like the arms of tortured lovers. Soon their brambles were so long that I couldn't get anywhere near them without scratching myself—I ended up having to water them from the upstairs bathroom window, which hung directly over the rose bed. I had to lean out as best I could, wishing I had somebody to hold my legs, and dangle my arms out the window with the full watering can (which I filled at the bath taps). After about two weeks, they had spread all around the garden, their thick woody stems slithering up the walls and making the front door jam shut.

Any attempt by me to prune them was met with violent opposition from the thorns. By the time the flowers bloomed, red and purple and blue and black, I couldn't think what to do. My friends had stopped coming over when the door had started to stick, my family when it had finally refused to open all together and I'd been forced to conduct all conversation through the crack underneath. I had nobody who I could ask for advice.

For the next year and a half I lived under the tyranny of the briars. By this time, they had made their way up the walls and over the windows, so I had to have the lights on even at midday in summer. At night I thought I

could hear them crawling along, whispering as they went, and wished that I could wake up the next morning to find them gone. But, always, they'd still be there in the morning and, sometimes, I'd even be glad of it. Their flowers were very beautiful and at least their shade kept off the sun.

As time went on, the garden shears on their hook in the kitchen (great crocodile heads that dwarfed my tiny secateurs) began to look more and more inviting. But the roses were the biggest thing I'd ever grown and, since they had blocked the sun and devoured all the nutrients in the soil, the only plants in my garden. I couldn't bring myself to destroy them.

He maintained that it was all my fault. Other plants weren't like this. It must have been because I fed them wrong, or watered them wrong, or planted them wrong— sometimes he felt like I didn't know how lucky I was having a nice garden to grow plants in. Otherwise I wouldn't have chosen to grow these flowers, instead of the prettier, better behaved blooms that the neighbours had. I just sighed and kept my head down— easy to do now that the thorny branches had gotten bored with climbing up the walls and had started coming in through the windows. I had to stay alert to avoid hitting my head on them.

The final straw came one dark day (which wasn't saying much— the roots of the plants had done something to the wires underneath the building and now the only light came from whatever small strings of sunlight could thread through the thorns) when I found a daisy growing in a small patch of soil by the window that the thorns had left. It was a small flower, eggshell white and sunshine yellow with traces of baby pink painted on the ends of the petals. The first flower I had seen in an age that wasn't a rose.

Bending out the window, I reached in between the thorns, trying to ignore the pain as they raked my bare skin, and scooped up it up, being careful to tease out every single root. I then brought it inside and planted it in a small pot of soil, relieved to have rescued it from being engulfed by the larger plant.

Through the window the brambles, thick as giant's arms, seemed to taunt me. How could I expect such a delicate flower to thrive without sunlight, warmth or, since the roots had twisted round and choked the pipes, water? Behind me the garden shears seemed to shuffle invitingly on their hook and the brambles and briars to lose their beauty once and for all. With a roar of defiance I picked them up and, holding them spread open in my hands I threw my full weight against the door. On the third time it flung open, with the earsplitting 'crack' of the thick stems snapping and breaking in two.

For a while, all I could see was the dark tangle of thorns, their branches stretching out and splitting off like hydra's heads while I hacked and snapped and the petals rained down around me like drops of blood.

I don't know how long I worked for, except that it felt like a lifetime. I was startled when I finally saw daylight and realised that I'd managed to cut myself a path from the front door to the garden gate. That's where I left him, still sitting in his dark and now empty house. I don't think he even noticed me go.

We live in a different house now, me and my daughter, with a garden blooming with tulips and rose hips and man in the moon marigolds. And daisies. Lots and lots of daisies.

Decisions

By Miranda Crawford

I sit at the table, wondering. Tea or coffee? Both warm and intensely comforting. Neither sweet, yet both undeniably satisfying. Tea, always served piping hot in the blue and white china cup. Milk in first, teabag left in for half a minute, stirred twice clockwise and once anticlockwise. No sugar. It is his drink, tea. The simplicity of making tea appealed to the control-fanatic side of his character. There is no guesswork with tea; it's all systematic, a sort of ritual that only he can perform perfectly.

Then, there is coffee. Bitter, yet rich, served warm in a mug with milk frothed right up to the lip. There's always a slight wildness to coffee, each sip bringing something new. Coffee is her drink. She sometimes says

the prospect of a cup of coffee is the only incentive for her to get up in the mornings, that it's the only thing with any true warmth in the house. He doesn't like it when she says things like that. Takes his cup of tea into the lounge and drinks it alone in there with a scowl on his face.

There was a time when the kettle and coffee machine sat happily next to each other, tucked up in the corner of our little kitchen. A time when cups and mugs were regularly shared, not segregated within the confinements of the cupboard, labelled, like they are now. My eyes wander to the kettle, sitting alone by the oven – as far away from the coffee machine as possible. She'd moved it; said she needed 'space' to make her own drinks once in a while. I'd seen how hurt he'd looked at that. All of a sudden the prospect of a nice warm coffee doesn't seem that appealing.

She walks in now, sees me sitting at the table and raises an eyebrow. Bags hang under her eyes, and her face is a chalky grey. Pity overwhelms me and I nod in answer to her unasked question. She puts the milk on the hob, gets out two mugs – her usual white and red, my usual blue and orange. I watch her deft and able fingers repeat the motions she has performed a hundred times, watch her lose herself in the heavily caffeinated tendrils of steam around her. She places my mug in front of me with a sort of triumph: Look, our family may be split down the seams but at least I can still make you a decent cup of coffee. I smile in return, take a sip. It scalds my tongue and pain courses through my mouth, but I look down with watering eyes, avoiding her gaze. Try not to stare too longingly at the kettle.

The front door opens: he's home. She immediately turns away, busying herself with her coffee. He takes off his shoes, taking care to place them furthest away from hers. Strolls into the kitchen, stops when he notices her. A pause. Then he heads towards the kettle with a purpose, head down, making the tea at double speed, on autopilot. She can't hide her disdain at the precision with which he submerges the teabag, and he notices. As usual, I am ignored.

She sets her mug down on the draining board with a resounding thud and he stirs his tea with such ferocity I fear he'll send the cup flying. My coffee has gone cold, but I down it with forced enthusiasm, for her sake. It's wasted on her; she doesn't give me a second glance as she flounces out of the kitchen. He smiles weakly at me and gestures at the kettle. He's made enough for two. Though I shudder at the prospect of yet another hot beverage, I comply. Sitting opposite me, he sets down my willow patterned teacup, and immediately I can see it's a good brew, as his always are. I bring the cup to my lips, anticipating the tea's warm kiss. But it's ruined; she storms in again – shattering the delicate and short-lived peace. He leaves.

I throw the tea down the sink. Coffee and tea just don't work together.

I can tell she has something to say, and I think I know what. There has been almost a year of them avoiding each other, one leaving the room when the other enters. What she says doesn't surprise me, but that doesn't weaken the blow. Neither of them are willing to fight for full custody of me, so she says I can choose who I stay with. My eyes stray to my blue and orange mug, then to the willow patterned teacup.

Tea or coffee. I don't want to choose.

Sunflowers

By Abiah Wyatt

The sunflowers grow wild outside our fence. They're tall with firm stalks and long leaves that crisp and brown in the sunlight. The black, seedy heads are as large as my palm and petals fringe them like icing on the edge of a birthday cake, as soft and yellow as a chick's breast, plump with new, tiny feathers. Every summer they're there. Our sunflowers.

We walk through them, away from the house. Warm sunlight is beginning to drench the fields in a buttery glow and the air is getting close. It prickles my skin with little sparks of heat that begin to burn my shoulders and neck. Squinting, I look down at my sweet girl toddling along beside me, grasping my skirt in her little red

fist. I put my hand on her soft, hot head and twist her little curly pigtail in my finger. We walk and walk through the towering plants, touching their gentle shoots.

There is a shadow of grey on the edge of a hill. It's a slight smear, but I see it. Summer storms begin that way. It swirls and blurs with the blue of the sky, like a pastel drawing someone has smudged with careless streaks of charcoal and water. Just like my bruise. Purple, blue, black, and tinged with yellow, along my forearm and up across my shoulder, dark and tender. I trace the mauve lines on my blotched skin with my finger. Like a map, the red roads split and spread to the little villages of burst blood vessels and hills of black swelling.

They're raw and inflamed. He hit me hard, and too many times. I remember my little darling trembling in the corner, tears pouring down her face. It seemed the blood and love from her heart had bubbled over and seeped into her creamy cheeks and made her body pulse red. That hurt me more than the beating.

Sweat glistens on our foreheads and my neck is damp. I push my long hair over my shoulder. There is no breeze to cool us; we just walk on, through endless heat and crinkly green. The sunflowers seem sparse here - sick. The ones back home are bushy and bright, heads full of fat, shiny seeds. It's because I tended them everyday, watered them, took out any niggling weeds and worms. I can't see the path that lead back through them now, they are so thick behind us that they seem to be bending over, sleepy in the sunlight. They hide it all. Everything. I'm not going back home to him. The smashed glass and violent words fill my ears and memory and I place my hair back over the bruising so I don't have to look and remember. So she doesn't have to see.

We leave the sunflower field - it's just prickly, brown grass now, like curls of singed paper. A dribbling creek slips and dips over stones. We hold our hot feet in the water and count the bumblebees that hum lazily in the stubbly grass. I look up at the sky again. Thin wisps of cloud are strewn over the blue, greying at the edges, like tufts of an old woman's hair.

We fill our bellies with dry bread and strong, crumbling goat's cheese and lick what water we can catch in our fingers from the stream, but it doesn't satisfy us. I'd left the flask there, at the house, in amongst his bottles of fiery whiskey and packets of raw steak slices. He'd butcher the animals in the kitchen, and before long it smelt of sour blood and brutality. The stench was always on him.

Hills roll around me like arched backs of creatures sleeping in the sun, waiting for a cool day.

"Mama?" The hem of my girl's dress is wet from the stream. She looks at me with her daddy's eyes and the little crease is there, from when she's worried, between her pale eyebrows. "I don't wanna go Mama. Take me back." I crouch in front of her and touch her soft cheek. She is flushed pink and her blonde hair has stuck to her forehead in damp strands.

"Why?" I push the hairs away. "You don't want to go home my love." But she just shakes her head, frowns and looks at her sandals. Her soft knees still have that little roll of plump baby fat like two little pink plums. A breeze blows through the sunflowers and they sigh.

"What daddy going to do without me and you Mama?" She squeezes my finger, and my heart. "What about my sunflowers?" Her eyes search my face. His eyes. My eyes. She is the perfect, soft fruit grown in the warm, earthy dirt of our bodies. I remember when she was born, he came in, rough and muddy, his hands under mine, my hands under her. I thought I saw a tear under the red, swollen socket of his drunken eye. I look over her head now, at the hills and boundless sky.

Slipping my good arm under her, she hops onto my hip and I stand. We walk a while, back towards the field of sunflowers.

"Sing me a song Mama." I smile as she lays her hot head on my shoulder and I sing her favourite song, until her breath comes warm and steady on my neck.

"Little white lily, flower of May,

Bring me a poesy for my wedding day.

Little blue cornflower, blossom of June,

Bring me a handful, bluer than the moon.

Little yellow sunflower, bud of July,

Summer comes and summer goes,

We'll have to say goodbye."

Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2017

‘Wolf’ by Matt Coleclough, 17, from Bristol. The most experimental in structure, Wolf was inspired by a school writing competition where the image of a wolf was set as the jumping- off point. This lyrical, beautifully realised story draws parallels between the wolf’s struggle for survival and the desperation of a local thief.

• **‘Decisions’ by Miranda Crawford, 14, from Datchet.** The tensions of a marriage breaking down and a child caught between two warring parents is told are captured through the metaphor of ‘tea’ and ‘coffee’ in this strong, visual story from the youngest of this year’s shortlist.

• **‘Something Wicked, Something Wild’ by Victoria Knight, 18, from Solihull.** Inspired by Margaret Atwood’s dedication to an ancestor persecuted for witchcraft in The Handmaid’s Tale, this evocative and haunting tale tells a story of revenge and retribution realised after centuries of torment.

• **‘The Roses’ by Elizabeth Ryder, 17, from Oxfordshire.** The story of a relationship in decline, this inventive and imaginative story of emotional abuse was inspired by the idea of sacrifice and new life in the midst of darkness.

• **‘Sunflowers’ by Abiah Wyatt, 17, from Cornwall.** A poignant and dream-like story of domestic abuse told with raw and brutal beauty, the sunflower field of sunflowers setting was inspired by a family holiday in France.

The overall winner was ‘The Roses’