

Triad

New voices in speculative fiction

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Welcome to *Triad*, a collection of the top three short stories of the 2014 South African Writers' Circle fantasy short story writing competition. What can you expect? Beautiful prose, wonderful stories and all-round delightfulness, of course.

So get going, then. Beautiful worlds await.

III

Withheld by Coraline Mead

Kaitsma stepped from the thrumming portal into the alley, the slight breeze through it bringing the stale, magicless air of Gerrig. She bent over double to wait out the transition nausea, sucking in deep drafts of the thickly scented air of Fromme. It was a smell she knew well, the smell of magic: of earth just before rain and the smoky tartness of a just-lit fire. After only a week in the barren realm of Gerrig, Kaitsma breathed the air in gratefully, fighting off images of the leafless, smoky forests and the huddled, dying Gerrig families. In her arms the smuggled Gerrig child, Penoso, turned restlessly, her nostrils flaring at the magical scent, her bones rattling with each movement.

“Not yet,” Kaitsma whispered. “Soon. But you have to be still, remember?”

Penoso curled herself uncomfortably against Kaitsma’s chest. They both knew what was at stake if she was caught.

Beyond the alley the jubilant chaos of Remembrance Day celebrations were in full swing. It was just the kind of chaos in which Kaitsma hoped she could go unnoticed. Voit always told her she had the appearance of invisibility. Everything about her was pale: her skin, her hair, her eyes – like winter ice. She hoped it would work in her favour today. Still, she would not go unnoticed by the portal guardians who stood sentry at the alley’s entrance, nor the massive stone warriors who flanked them.

Kaitsma pulled her cloak tight around her, shielding Penoso, and pulled her hood well over her head so that her face was in shadow – better they not see what had become of her face just yet.

The guardians pulled their eyes from the festivities and saluted as she rounded the corner.

“Any trouble on the way in, Commander?” asked the nearest guardian, a somber looking magician too old for a post like this.

Kaitsma licked her lips, praying her voice would not betray her. “None to speak of. Things are understandably quiet on that side. There’s hardly a need for you here. Seems a bit of a waste.” The last word stuck on her tongue, dry and familiar.

“Better to be prepared,” said the guardian. “At least you got home in time for the festivities.”

Kaitsma smiled. “Yes. Happy Remembrance Day. I think it may be the best one yet.”

After the stillness of the alleyway, the crowded street was a clamorous mess and as she hoped, Kaitsma went unnoticed in the crowds. The white flags of Fromme flew from every window, King Destan’s small green star hanging streetside. Before long she was flanked by two men, the hoods of their cloaks drawn low to shadow their faces. One walked close on her heels, his hand pressing lightly into her back once and then twice. Kaitsma recognized the scent of sandalwood and mint: Voit.

“Do you have her?” Voit asked.

She nodded, never looking in his direction.

“Then you have our aid. The others are on the roof tops.” He slowed slightly, allowing the space to widen between them until he disappeared into the crowds.

Kaitsma knew better than to look to the roofs but knowing more rebels were so near strengthened her resolve.

Fireworks erupted from the palace. King Destan's magic, no doubt – he was famous for them and other trivialities that entertained the rapturous crowds of Fromme. It was a waste of magic but a good sign for Kaitsma. The fireworks meant the party at the palace was just beginning. There would be all manner of magical distractions for them to feast on and every magician Fellow would be in attendance.

Kaitsma could not have timed it better.

At the edges of Fromme's city limits the palace pathways were alight with lamps, suspended by magical alchemy. There were no guardians to be seen in the gardens but the ornamental statues would rise to action if they sensed any magical attack. Kaitsma had commanded some of those same statues in the War of Plenty only a decade ago. They had won the war for Fromme, due to their invulnerability to ordinary magic. Kaitsma lingered at each statue, pressing a hand to their cold stone and remembering a simpler time when there was no portal and no need to compete for magic.

"*Hauivin*. Thank you," said Kaitsma, in the magical tongue of the warriors.

The statues did no more than lower their heads in response.

"Are you ready?" asked Voit, appearing beside her. Fourteen more magician rebels emerged from the darkness. They were charged with fetching Penoso should things go wrong – of which the likelihood was high – but each of them had been posted to Gerrig at one point or another and they were all committed to the same cause.

"Yes. Ready," she said to Voit.

Penoso shifted again, her skeletal foot striking Kaitsma in the ribs – a reminder of their mission. Kaitsma tightened her jaw and stepped into the light. The statues would not sense Penoso because they did not see non-magical beings. As frail as she was, Penoso would be a more powerful weapon tonight than any magic. Kaitsma was sure of it.

The palace doors were wide open – no one dared enter uninvited – so Kaitsma strolled in. Women and men were dressed in silk so fine it seemed to be spun right onto their bodies. Their hair was coiffed, their faces glamoured and their mouths constantly engaged in trivialities. Kaitsma was given a few surprised glances but in a celebration such as this, she was hardly anything to be astounded by. She aimed for the dais where the King and Queen sat, surrounded by magical Fellows who entertained them with tricks. Waste.

Kaitsma stifled her disgust and bowed deeply at the foot of the dais. She stayed that way, Penoso growing heavy in her arms, until someone noticed her and hailed the King.

King Destan was a conventionally handsome man: strong jawed and wide shouldered. He held himself as royals did, with an air of entitlement. And yet, Kaitsma had always sensed he was not to be trusted.

"Commander Kaitsma," said King Destan in surprise. "We have not seen you for some time. How goes our noblest commander? Have you managed to survive your dreary assignment?"

Queen Honete's mouth pulled into an obliging smile. She had always been wary of Kaitsma – and any woman who garnered the King's attention.

"My King, my Queen, I bring you a gift on this, our great Remembrance Day."

"A gift?" asked the King delightedly.

"Yes, my King. It is small but I believe it will greatly impact Fromme."

"Come then, let us see it," said the King. He leaned eagerly forward in his throne.

Kaitsma opened her cloak, revealing Penoso. The King's eyes widened as though a ghost had appeared before him. Kaitsma set Penoso on the pale marble floor, her blue-black, skeletal body a grotesque contrast. Penoso was so weak she sat crouched, arms hanging on the ground, her head resting on a knee. Her face was gaunt, her eye sockets deep and shadowed, her skin thin as paper. She barely had the strength to notice the crowd gathered around her but then she sniffed the air and her head snapped up. Her eyes widened and she looked pleadingly at the nearest magician, stretching out her trembling hand. The room went deathly still. After a few moments, Penoso no longer had the strength to keep her arm hanging there and it dropped to the ground with a bony rattle.

King Destan rose, shifting uneasily on his feet. He kept his eyes on Kaitsma instead of Penoso, his glare growing more ferocious by the moment.

"You would dare bring this creature to us on a night like this?" he asked.

"When else would it be appropriate, my Lord?" Kaitsma asked evenly.

"That thing is a sickness, Kaitsma. You cannot just bring things between realms and think there will be no consequences."

"I know there will be consequences, my Lord. And I will be happy to suffer them if my point is made."

"Your point?" asked the King. His blue eyes were full of steel; there was much at stake in a confrontation of this sort.

"The people of Gerrig are not a sickness but they are ill. And they have been allowed to become so because of us."

"Their inability to produce magic is not our doing," said Destan.

"We began the War of Plenty, my King. We began the imbalance in the portal. In what way would you say we are faultless?"

"Beware of how you proceed, Commander," said Destan.

Another tactic then, Kaitsma decided. She pulled magic from herself and formed it into a ball of light, handing it to Penoso. It had been difficult to withhold the magic from the child for the entire journey but they both knew it would be more impactful if they waited. Penoso grabbed hold of the light and pressed it into her skin, closing her eyes in pleasure. In seconds her face filled out slightly and her bones sounded less fragile. So little magic, such a great effect.

"If your child looked anything as weak as Penoso, would you withhold magic from her?"

"That is a ridiculous example. We take care of our children. The Gerrig are from another realm..."

"And yet we know of their suffering. We have the very thing that could help them. We have so much of it to spare that we turn it into entertainment and we waste it!"

The crowd hovered between disgust and resolute arrogance, neither of which would help the Gerrig. Kaitsma's heart tightened in her chest – had her people become so callous that the plight of a child could not sway them?

"There are thousands of children who look like this. Thousands. If each of you gave just a small part of your magic..." pleaded Kaitsma.

"Give away our magic? And what of the coming droughts? And the winters?" cried the King.

"You don't seem troubled with droughts when you turn your magic into fireworks. How many Gerrig could be replenished by that single effort?"

The King sat back on his throne and took a moment to gather himself, glancing occasionally at his closely watching patrons. When he spoke again his voice was controlled; a politician's voice. "I find your interest in the Gerrig admirable, Kaitsma.

But I can only be responsible for what happens in my own realm. What would you have me do? Give away all our magic? Leave ourselves defenseless and weak as the Gerrig? Are you prepared to do such a thing for your cause?"

Kaitsma lowered her hood for the first time. A gasp rose from the crowd. She knew her face must look gaunt and paler than usual, though not nearly as shocking as Penoso's face.

"What have you done?" whispered Queen Honete, her hand fluttering to her mouth.

"That bit of magic I gave Penoso was the last I had. Until the new moon, when I will be able to replenish myself. The Gerrig have no such luxuries. They have been so sapped of magic that they breed children who are unable to sustain themselves. We could turn that tide – all of us. The Magical Charter states that the use of magic is to be used for the benefit of any and all magical creatures..."

"Do not quote the law to me," said the King.

"Surely even you must bend to the law? And when we could save an entire people..."

"At what cost?" asked the King.

"Have you considered the cost of not helping? You have made them monsters by all you have withheld."

No one had noticed the change in Penoso while she spoke but Kaitsma had sensed it. She had hoped it would come to this – and she hated herself for it. Penoso shivered and rattled on the floor, baring her teeth as she smelled the magic so close and strong. The once fragile child had been awakened by Kaitsma's small magic and now she was ravenous for more. She was delirious with wanting. She flung herself at the nearest magician and toppled him. Taking his hand in hers, she bit down on his index finger, piercing the skin until she could taste the magic. And as she grew, he shrank, his skin sucking onto his bones. He rattled away from her, leaning up against a wall, eyes wide with terror. Penoso was fuller now, her hair growing back, her muscles flexing as she crouched to stare at the crowd. Her amber eyes were focused and casting around the room for more.

Penoso made to jump at the King but inches from his face she was frozen in mid-air. Through the crowd walked Voit, hood thrown back to reveal his dark angular face. He held his hand out towards Penoso, holding her there with his magic.

"The Gerrig can smell the magic from this realm through the portal," said Voit. "They are weak but they are desperate and they will breach the portal and feed off our magic just like this. If we do nothing they will always be monsters. And we will pay the cost as much as they."

He quietly handed a ball of lit magic to Kaitsma, resting a hand in the small of her back. She took it with relief, feeling the warmth of it flood her veins, taking the edge off her weariness.

Penoso hung in the air, a dark, wild shape with bared teeth and a desperate face. Kaitsma was not sure her demonstration had had the effect she wanted. The fear in the room was palpable, and fear was not as useful as compassion.

More hooded men and women emerged from the crowd. Fourteen of Kaitsma's fellows. Together they shielded Penoso in a cage of magic. She writhed and fought against it, snapping her small teeth at the watching crowd. Kaitsma nodded her thanks as they took Penoso away.

The Queen spoke first. "Are they all like this on the other side of the portal?" She watched the doorway where the others had just taken Penoso, her eyes hard.

"All of them. Their people are dying," said Kaitsma.

The Queen looked over at her husband. “The Crown should give its aid.”

The King’s jaw tightened, his eyes flashing menacingly for a moment before he smiled his oily smile and addressed the crowd. “The Queen thinks herself a King’s counsellor tonight. Perhaps she has been at Fellow Hammel’s excellent champagne.” He laughed, the crowd following him dutifully. “Come now, my love, I am not King of Gerrig. I am King of Fromme and she is a land with troubles of her own. Troubles that magic can cure – if we keep it close.”

The queen brushed at her cheeks to try and hide the deep blush that grew there. “Surely we could spare some... if they breach the portal out of desperation...”

King Destan waved his hand and her mouth closed with a snap. The Queen’s eyes widened in anger. Kaitsma had seen the King silence his subjects before but never the Queen. He looked out at the crowd who had begun to fidget. “The portal will not be a problem. It has long been the notion of the Crown’s council that the portal should be destroyed to prevent further wars and instability of magical distribution...”

“But you will sentence the Gerrig to death!” cried Kaitsma.

Voit held onto her arm, the sense of his warning flared on her skin. Had they failed entirely? Kaitsma could not help but glance over at the Queen.

“On the contrary, we may give them incentive enough – motivation, if you will – to find a solution for themselves. They cannot exist on our charity alone,” said Destan. He smiled warmly at his guests but Kaitsma could smell the fine traces of magic he secreted to win their trust. “We have worked hard for our magic, haven’t we, my dear fellows? The Gerrig should learn from us.”

Many heads nodded in agreement. Too many, too easily swayed. Kaitsma gritted her teeth. If Penoso’s transformation was not enough to convince them... there was only one path of recourse left to her now.

“Then I only have one more thing to say,” said Kaitsma.

King Destan leaned back in his throne, regarding at her with indifference.

“*Elispa Nay!* Come to arms!” Kaitsma cried.

The patrons screamed as the stone warriors from the gardens made their way from the ornamental lawns. They crashed through the doorways and onto balconies, brandishing their weapons until they encircled the hall.

The magician fellows beside the King stared in horror at the stone giants, knowing their magic was useless – only the King could turn them now. But as the King rose in outrage, ready to hurl his magic at the statues, Queen Honete waved her hand at her husband so that he stood frozen and wide-eyed, caught in a stasis of magic. His nostrils flared, his eyes flashing in horror as he realized his wife’s betrayal.

“Two can play at that game, my love,” she whispered to him before turning Kaitsma, “I’m sorry. I had hoped my dear King would see some sense.”

“At least we tried,” said Kaitsma.

Queen Honete turned back to the cowering crowds of patrons, her own bearing suddenly less fragile. “The Magical Charter states that magical aid must be given to any magical creature who is in need of it. Your King has failed to adhere to this law and in so doing has relinquished his right to rule.”

An uneasy murmur ran through the guests until the statues bowed deeply towards Queen Honete, signifying their loyalty. As Kaitsma guessed, it was difficult to argue with stones who could not be swayed by magic.

“Our King has lacked the courage to make necessary changes that might save the lives of an entire race. I will not be so foolish. The time for change is upon us.”

Kaitsma was under no illusion that the council, nor King Destan, would take these changes easily – there was still a long battle to fight. But as she thought of her rebels

restoring Penoso with small bits of their magic, she dared to hope that perhaps they might win in the end.

II

Salesman by Cristy Zinn

He wore his shirt slightly creased, his sleeves rolled to the elbow even though his tie was new and straight. These were carefully curated details that gave the impression of accessibility. That was important. People had to feel as though they could relate to him, trust him. He always sold more that way. His shoes were polished but he left his hair just a little unkempt so that they would appreciate his hard, daily walk. And his briefcase, his pride and joy, his essential tool, bore perfectly placed scuffs on the corners and scratches on the old brass latches. He could hear the slight clink of glass – his bottled hope. What was the old saying? Just a spoon full of sugar...

The heat was stifling. He fanned himself with his fedora and lingered in shady sections of the pavements when he could. The doors lined up along either side of the street in endless rows, beckoning to him. Whispered thoughts echoed from each house, telling him their dreams and their fears. He kept his smile banal to hide his pleasure at the latter. He must remain indistinct, unmemorable and at the same time, the answer to their hopes.

Children played in a garden nearby, enjoying the sprinkler in the heat. He turned to the house on the opposite side of the street – mothers were irrational about their children so it did him no good to pay too much attention to them. Paranoia was not a fear he could work with on this particular tour. He needed a subtler one.

It was the eleventh door that day and almost past noon. Too hot. Thankfully this looked like the kind of neighbourhood where glasses of lemonade were offered. The leafy trees, the stretched lawns, the low fences, the neat window dressings. The bland sameness screamed lemonade as much as it screamed mediocrity.

He climbed the whitewashed steps and knocked. A cat sidled up to his leg and rubbed herself against him like a familiar friend. Inside there were whispers of rushing. A new mother. A tired mother. This he could work with.

He straightened his tie and held his briefcase with two hands, in front of his body, making himself look young and kind. Neither were true. Still, it was not a difficult mask to wear.

The woman who answered the door was small, and despite her exhaustion had made the effort to tidy herself and dress well that morning – a façade to make her feel she was doing better than she was. Her cheeks were red from the heat, her once-styled hair was already damp with it too. The screen door between them was insubstantial. He could force his way in, it would not be difficult. But force had not served him as well as he had hoped in the past. A touch of sweetness did longer lasting damage.

“Can I help you?” She looked ready to close the door. Her mind was still on her child in its crib in the next room and she was disinterested – she thought she knew what he was.

He smiled. “Actually I was wondering if I might help you.”

She rested on her back foot, already pushing the door closed. “Thank you but I...”

“Are you alright?” he asked, feigning concern.

“Pardon?” she asked. She was surprised but then, no one had asked her that in a while. The baby was already a few weeks old; she needed to get on with life. It did not help for her to admit she was not coping.

“You seem tired.”

She smiled slightly. “New baby.”

He brightened his face with delight. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Not easy work being a mother.” He wiped his brow with a handkerchief from his pocket, smiling again. This face had nice teeth, it helped to use them. “It’s difficult to have your whole life change so suddenly. It’s difficult to be prepared for it.”

She nodded, relieved. Someone understood. Someone did not judge.

“Well, I won’t waste your time then. Sounds quiet in there so you’ll probably be wanting a rest.” He turned as if to go, slowing down infinitesimally and glancing tiredly towards the long rows of houses. “Still a whole neighbourhood of possible clients.”

There was a pause. He could feel the indecision hanging in the air, a palpable weight between them. He adjusted the suitcase so that the bottles inside tinkled slightly. She sighed and he knew he had won.

“I have a few minutes. Why don’t you come in for some lemonade and tell me about what’s in that briefcase. You won’t be long will you?” She chewed her lip, still uncertain. Already regretting her decision. Humans were blessedly predictable.

He smiled, showing her his gratefulness, his relief, and she relented, opening the screen door.

“Thank you so much. I promise not to take too much of your time,” he said and followed her into the cool, dark shadows of the house.

The kitchen was small. Old-fashioned orange and cream tiles alternated along the wall, closing the space in the dimness. The dishes were neatly stacked, just washed, but various sterilising agents, bottles and breast pumps littered the counter. She blushed, packing them into the sink.

“I wasn’t expecting company,” she mumbled as she poured his drink.

She handed him a tall glass of lemonade so cold and sweet it made his teeth hurt. The condensation on the glass dripped languidly, as lazy as the heat of the day. He sipped again while she quickly wiped the surfaces. Then she sat down across from him, hands folded on the table, expectant.

“So, what do you have in there?” she asked. She eyed the briefcase without curiosity. She was being polite. She did not care what was in the briefcase. Not yet.

He swallowed the last of his drink. “Is it alright if I put it on your table?” he asked.

She nodded. He raised the case and unlatched the clasps. He loved the snap of those locks, the echo of it through the room, the sound of secrets being unhinged. He turned the case once it was open and revealed the small glass bottles. Each one was different, each beautifully labelled with an intriguing vintage sticker and hand-lettering proclaiming the details of its contents. The bottles alone were intriguing, but the labels were always the thing that caught them. That and his own subtle convincing.

“What are they?” she asked. Her hand twitched.

“You can touch them if you like,” he said. “They are elixirs – one hundred percent natural, organic, and hand blended for better results.”

That alone would not sell it. That truth would do no convincing.

She nodded, picking up the one nearest to her. “What for?”

“All manner of ailments: weight-loss, exhaustion, decreased mental acuity, decreased desire, depression, loneliness. If you take a look at the list here, you will see that a number of elixirs can be blended for new results. Hundreds of women, like yourself, have seen the benefits of it.”

“I’ve never seen it advertised.” She must not think too hard. He must not give her time for that.

“I’m sure you have. At a health shop, perhaps? We simply find it easier to offer the elixir personally so that we can mix up the right blend for each person. Such things cannot be guessed at or prescribed over the counter. In order to be effective, we must take into account all aspects of the person.” She looked interested now.

Genuinely. “Take yourself for example: you would like to have more energy so that you can take care of your baby and your husband to the best of your ability. Some people would say that it is selfish to take care of yourself when you have so much else to do. Some might say you are selfish to want a moment’s peace. But I think those kinds of elixir might require more risk than you are willing to take...”

The woman looked up at him in surprise. Her hand around the bottle tightened.

“This one says *Time*. What does that do?” she asked.

He paused. Here came his most difficult convincing. He would have to sell it well. She was not going to be easily fooled.

“It stretches time. You will have time a plenty – approximately two hours extra per day.”

She laughed, looking at him dubiously. “Stretches time? Like magic?”

“In ancient times people would have called this magic, but it’s really just herbs. Blended the right way they have almost magical properties. Science has come a long way...” He was losing her. They were always irrational when it came to magic. He went on, “For example this one here, *More Me*, aids in self-actualisation. It switches on dormant channels in the brain which enable you to feel more like yourself – memories of yourself will be sharper and you will have the confidence to be yourself regardless of who criticises you. Your true self.”

This was not so much of a lie. A human’s ‘self’, their darkness, always seemed to take them by surprise. If only they knew.

Still, she regarded him like a toddler might regard a cat – desiring to hold it but remembering sharp claws.

“This one, *Dream Realisation*, is rather expensive and dangerous but well worth it in the end. You still have dreams don’t you? I mean,” he smiled kindly, pushing his sleeve up on his arm again, “just because you’re a mother doesn’t mean you give up on your dreams.”

She shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. She seemed surprised by her own emotion, struggling with the logic that told her she could not have everything she ever wanted.

He laid a hand on hers, squeezing gently. “People are quick to tell you to abandon dreams for a season but they don’t know how strongly dreams burn, do they?”

Her eyes met his, watery and desperate. Ah, he had landed it nicely. He felt the surge of certainty fill his chest.

“You can have your dreams. And continue your life. This elixir will see to that.”

“And is it safe?” she asked. “I’m breastfeeding... there are medicines I’m not allowed to take...”

“There is some risk but none to your child. They are mostly financial but what is the price tag on your dreams? You gave birth – were you rewarded for that? You should be. You should have some reward for that courage.”

She was nodding. Crying and nodding, holding on to the bottle as though it held life instead of death, her eyes hungry and her mouth drawn tight. So easy to convince. So easy to fool. Just a little bit of lie in among the truth. She would swallow anything to have what she wanted. They always did. For a moment, he wished he could be there to see the destruction and feed off her misery. She would do anything he said now, give him anything he wanted.

“There is just one thing I need from you, something essential in order for the elixir to do a proper job...”

The shadow flailed at his side as he dragged it from the house. Inside the thoughts of the woman were quiet as still water. The shadow of her soul would wrestle for a while but soon he would subdue it. It was a weak soul, only slightly textured. It would not make a very satisfying victory. He folded it neatly into a tiny square that he pressed into his jacket pocket, along with the others. Then he straightened his tie again and flattened his hair. Time to leave the suburbs and make his way to the city – where the souls were full of gristle and steel and where conquering them felt like a hard day’s work.

I

Once-Woman by Kerstin Hall

The house perched on the verge of the hill, overlooking the sea. It gave the impression that it could, at any moment, tip forward into the water. It was supported by barnacle-encrusted, salt-eaten and creaky wooden stilts, and on windy days it keened like a grieving child.

The Once-Woman who lived there didn't do company. There weren't many people out in this remote stretch of coastline, but those who were stayed far from the house. Some things were better left undisturbed.

Once upon a time... but never mind.

The things that came out in the night, they did not approach the house. The wraiths on the sea, the shadows beneath the gnarled trees, the small flying creatures that can be mistaken for bats; they kept their distance and found prey elsewhere. Children disappeared in the dark, but there was never discussion of extending the search for them to the Once-Woman's domain.

"Beware of the one who doesn't have a name."

She was not even used as a tool to scare the young into obedience. There was something about her – a gravity or a darkness or a sadness – that made using her as a common bogeyman seem sacrilegious. She was witnessed at a distance in the twilight hours, an indistinct figure with coal black hair lifted by the breeze. Watching. And then she would be gone again.

His name was Sal. Coming from nowhere, he walked into the village one day with no horse or company. Just very worn boots and a smile that may not have been real. He was not precisely ugly, but there was something about his face that discouraged affection. It did not seem possible that he had travelled so far on his own, but he insisted that he had come from the Capital. The shrewd, shriveled locals silently esteemed him a liar. He had a polished chrome revolver in a holster at his hip, but this would be no defense on the roads. In the way of real protection, he had only a single amulet; a string of worn black beads around his neck.

He did not belong there and he might simply have passed through, but the innate chivalry of the rough fishermen folk demanded that he stay at least for the night. Also, against themselves, they were curious. Sal was an oddity. Although hardened by the weather, the people were not completely cured of their capacity for wonder.

They offered him food, drink and a place to stay, expecting a story in payment. He was not forthcoming about himself, but he told them about the degenerating quality of the Wards and the recent failure of the army to subdue the hordes of creatures at the border. There was talk of a new Magician who had been successful in repelling a whole brood of Vampyrs. The royal family had produced twins.

The locals were not satisfied. This was news they could have received from the travelling caravans of merchants that came to the village every fortnight. They had expected scandal and glamour. This gossip was nothing new. They bid him goodnight and left him to sleep, comfortably accommodated in the stable.

Only, Sal did not sleep. He waited, listening to the horses shuffle in their stalls, swishing their tails and breathing slowly as they settled down for the night. A column of white moonlight fell from a hole in the roof, illuminating a tin bucket as if it were something sacred.

Once sure that the locals would have retired, Sal got up and left the barn.

The air outside was bright with the cold. The moon granted everything a silver-edged glow, turning the world metallic. Clouds hung in tatters in the sky, unmoving. There was no wind and silence had a kind of preternatural volume. In the distance the sea was flat, a mirror to the sky. The waves were inaudible, which was strange because they had been loud when Sal first walked into the village.

It may as well have been daylight; it was easy to see. Sal moved with surety, practically soundless over the rock-strewn hillside. He was the only thing moving in the frozen landscape, traversing a picture of reality. His warm breath produced regular bursts of white steam as the hill grew steeper.

The beads around his neck grew warm with apprehension, but Sal did not heed their warning.

There was the old house. In the night, it possessed a glamour and a dignity that daylight rendered invisible. The shingled roof was cool blue in the moonlight.

From here, it was already possible to hear the singing. Sal's fingers brushed the holster at his side, but he left the gun where it was. It was not what he was there for.

She knew he was coming, of course. But she let him draw nearer her domain. Her refrain was gentle, passionless. It should have been inaudible from so far away, for the Once-Woman was not singing loudly, but she might as well have been standing right beside him.

*Oh, the ocean deep, the ocean deep
Down below, my children sleep
With eyes of pearls and bones of stone
My children, my children, all alone.*

He was not afraid, not precisely, though maybe he should have been. Sal rolled his shoulders and approached the door.

*Oh, my only love, my only love
The salt water and the sky above
They swallowed me up and sank me under
And made me tear your flesh asunder.*

The door opened for him with a rusty protest and he stepped into the dim interior of the house. The wooden floorboards creaked as he walked across them to the back door. The air was musty and smelt vaguely of fish.

There she sat, in a rocking chair on the porch. She faced the sea; her long black hair a dense, knotted tangle reaching the floor. She did not look at Sal as he stepped out of her house, though she stopped singing.

He moved no further, waiting for her to acknowledge him.

She was occupied with weaving, using a small loom cushioned on her knees. The result of her efforts spooled out across the deck before her, shining softly in the pale light. She was using hair as her wool, hair of all shades and textures, painstakingly threading each strand back and forth. Her hands were dexterous, well-practiced.

"She did not mean to." The Once-Woman said at length, not hesitating in her work.

Sal took a few steps forward and leant against a post, watching her.

"She was not given a choice. The sea, it can be cruel." She continued. There was no emotion in her voice. "It filled her up and she forgot the rest."

“The rest?”

“The ones that used to matter to her. Before.”

“And then?”

“Then they were all gone. But the sea, it stayed.” The Once-Woman finished the strand she was busy with and carefully set down her work. She turned to Sal. Her eyes were silver and glinted like fish scales. Her lips glistened. “You should not have come here.”

His lungs were suddenly filled with water. He grasped his throat and tried to cough, water splashing from his mouth. His knees hit the porch.

She rose and stood in front of him. With tenderness, she lifted up a lock of his dark hair, testing it between her fingers. “I wish it were longer.” She said, with the barest hint of regret surfacing in her tone.

The water was salty and burnt his mouth. He reached out and took hold of her fingers beside his face, his closing softly around hers. Her skin was warm and her bones felt fragile, like a bird’s. His eyes met hers, unafraid.

The water disappeared. With the lightest touch of his lips, Sal kissed the hand he had imprisoned. Then he let it go.

“They were not all gone.” He told her. “There was one who got away. One you let get away.”

The Once-Woman turned from him. “She was not permitted to do that.”

“Perhaps not. But you did.” He stood up again. “There was blood in the sea, but you turned away. You let one of them run.”

There was a pause. The two of them were statues in the night, rooted like trees in their silence. Miles away, the people of the town frowned in their sleep and rolled over, disturbed by a tremor in the atmosphere. In the stable, the horses flicked their ears, listening to things that people could not hear.

“You should not have come here.” The Once-Woman said.

“I was not given a choice.” Sal replied. “I was at the mercy of something larger than me.”

“What was that?”

“Duty.”

“That is a choice.”

“Then so is love. But they do not feel that way, even when set against powers that should annihilate them.” Sal walked back to the door, leaving the Once-Woman behind. He paused. “I came to tell you that I knew, even then. I knew that you made a choice to love me, in spite of everything else. Even as I fled, I knew you were letting me go.”

“She cannot remember. You should not have come here.”

Sal left the house, climbing back down the hill like a ghost beneath the gleaming moon. The Once-Woman’s eyes followed him across the shining scene, but she let him go.

About the authors

Kerstin Hall was born in Cape Town in 1993. She currently attends Rhodes University in Grahamstown, where she studies English and Journalism. She is the founder and chairperson of a student society called *Ink*, which encourages creative writing and provides support to other writers at the university. She was shortlisted for the 2014 Short Story Day Africa *Terra Incognita* competition for her story "In the water". When she is not writing or studying, her interests include hiking, photography and culinary experimentation in the student residence microwave.

Coraline Meade is a one of **Cristy Zinn's** pseudonyms. **Cristy** is a writer enthralled by stories involving the fantastic – technological *and* magical. During the day she works as a graphic designer and obsesses over fonts. When she isn't working or writing, she dabbles in sketching and songwriting. She lives in Durban with her husband and two children who graciously endure her obsession with stories. She is an unashamed book nerd, which is why having her name on the spine of one is such a big deal... her first book, *The Dreamer's Tears*, comes out in March 2015. You can visit her blog at www.cristyzinn.com