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Overgrown: A Collection of Supernatural Narratives

By

Emily Cote

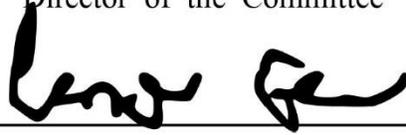
A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements of the University Honors Program

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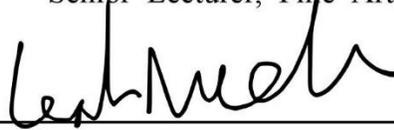
The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
to examine the thesis of Emily Cote
find is satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.



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ABSTRACT

Overgrown: A Collection of Supernatural Narratives

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Ph D, English

Overgrown is a collection of short stories stemming from nontangible anxieties, such as death, violence against women, and the queer search for acceptance. Each of the three pieces, including *Thoughts of a Downed Oak Tree*, *Wrong*, and *For the Living*, touches upon how individuals experience these anxieties and how they face them. I also selected *Overgrown* because all included pieces had to deal with a piece of reflection, overcoming or discovery. The Title *Overgrown* reflects both the sense of nature these pieces bring, but also the aspect of personal reflection they conjure. These characters engage with a degree of growth, whether that be in overcoming grief or coming to terms with their identities.

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Wrong

There is a town at the edge of the county. It is nestled between orchards and wild trees and its houses dot the flowing land around the bends of their river as it meanders through the town's heart. The town is a lazy sort of old, with aging oaks reaching over streets with full and healthy limbs. The people here are surrounded by forest and hills, all as familiar to them as the land was to their parents and grandparents. Yet rarely does a soul enter the hills that lead away from the river. The town's people say there is a creature who lives in those hills.

The creature in the hills resides in the crook of two meeting bends. The town's folk say the creature's home was carved out of the earth by its hundreds of hands, which drew from the hills wet clay. The path to its door is paved with this fingerprinted stone, leftovers from being thrown behind as it dug its burrow. It is said the creature plucked reflected sunlight from a puddle and planted spots of glow in its flowerbeds. There, sunflowers sprout and bloom and fade with the daily passing of the sun, and seeds glow bright like stars as they fall to the earth each night. The creature is said to pluck a few handfuls each day to illuminate their workshop as they work through the nights.

In it's workshop, the creature lives and works. It pulls materials from all matter of earth, from breaks in songs made by birds between their breaths to the ripples made by the diving of a frog after a damselfly. It spins these flecks into threads and glue and clay,

always with a creation in mind. See, the creature makes things, and it is so very good. So good, in fact, that no one notices when it replaces their things.

From plants to porch steps to the writing of one's own name, the creature makes things new. By all accounts, their replacements are identical in every way. Your grandmother's fern has the same sunburnt leaf that bends too much to the east no matter how she turns it, and the age of the porch step still complains as your foot presses any semblance of weight into it. The y of your coworker's signature still dips too low to be perfectly clear and skews up in a cute little tail at the base. The creature replaced them all, perfectly. Not for evil purposes or with malice, but because that is what the creature does. These replacements are harmless and impossible to spot. But this perfectness isn't always true. Living subjects are so hard to capture perfectly, but the creature manages. Shortcuts must be made to be convincing though. The living they make appear to perfect in every way like the rest of their creations, but they are so much more likely to break.

No one knows how long it takes to recognize when a person has been replaced; mostly because no one knows how long the new person has been in place. This new person, usually a child too young to yet speak, is a perfect copy, just like every other thing the creature molds. On these persons there is no seam, no signature, and no imperfection against the original. Even the hairs on their heads lay in the same imperfect ways as the child's did before. They are so good a copy, even the child doesn't know when they are a replacement, for the original would not know this either. The only way to know when a child made by the creature had been placed within a home is if it happens to be mishandled and breaks.

These replacements are fine people and are a matter of reality for the people of the town. It is widely believed that many people of the town are replacements from the creature but simply do not know. When a child breaks, the specs of wild the creature used to build it leak through, leading to an unknown variety of possible growths and physical changes. When these happen, they are seen as a need for support and healing, which the community tries its best to foster. What is more concerning is the environments that cause these cracks within the children in the first place.

Daxton.

Daxton Lavoy choose his own name. He grew up with a name that was lighter and carried soft consonants that left your mouth as easy as breathing. His parents loved it, and they loved teaching Daxton to spell it and cherish it like they did. Yet it weighed heavy on his tongue and the way it rolled under his teeth was sour. And so he began parroting the names around him until he found something he liked.

“My name is Cecily,” Introduced a girl on the first day of preschool.

“My name is Cecily,” said Daxton. This name felt like a hiccup, almost like a skipping record when he spoke it. Cecily. Cecily was fun and bounced his jaw, though it was smooth like a strawberry push pop.

“Now hush,” said his mother during their first playdate, “and stop playing. Go on and tell the girl your real name.”

Daxton did, and his skin itched. But when his mother left the room, he went back to Cecily.

Cecily was a fun name, but the way it formed circles eventually grew tired and repetitive. It was like being caught in a loop of hissing rings. Daxton vowed to try something new.

“My name is Riley,” introduced the redhead who sat next to Daxton on the first day of 4th grade.

“My name is Riley,” said Daxton. Speaking Riley made his lips curl into a smile as he spoke it. Like breath, it left him easy as an exhale on a summer's day. Riley. He said it low, and it grumbled in his chest like a toad's croak.

“Child, no it is not.” said his father as Daxton tried the name at the breakfast table. Daxton's skin itched and twitched as his father spoke. “How I wish you would stop mimicking these other kids.”

Riley too, though, grew slow. The sound was too baritone and lacked weight Daxton wanted to carry when addressing himself.

“Hey folks! My name is Daxton,” pronounced a man on the television.

“Daxton,” Daxton tried. He tried it again. And again. And once more. “My name is Daxton.”

Daxton grew to love this name, naming himself after the confidence he felt by pronouncing the strong, potent letters that left with direction from his chest. He cherished

the way it looked on paper and loved learning how to style the new letter *x* in his signature.

“My name is Daxton,” he said, introducing himself once more to his family.

His family refused to speak it, and his skin burned. “That is not your name,” They said. “You have a perfectly good one.”

“But that’s not my name. My name is Daxton,” Daxton said once more.

“No, it is not.” said his mother.

“That is absolutely not your name.” said his father.

“Yes, it is. My name is Daxton,” Daxton said once more.

“Your name is this,” said his parents, and they said the name they chose for him. It hung dead in the air and dead as it left their mouths.

Daxton’s form itched and unbuckled. The swaths of earth and wild that had been stuffed below his layers burst out, undoing the creature’s perfect mold, revealing bright wisps of color and bone and keratin underneath his skin. It plumed with color and tufts and wisps that flowed from the blue and black jaw that became his beak. It opened as Daxton spoke, his voice shaking and near tears.

“My name is Daxton.”

Bobby.

Bobby was a dapper little boy. His mom picked out his clothes every morning, laying out ironed blue pants and a button up on the bed he made the moment as soon as he got up. Forever the proper types, Bobby's parents always instructed him to top off with his look with a real, tied-on bowtie.

He was a joy to have in class. Bobby paid close attention in his schoolwork, and always got As on his spelling tests, As on math quizzes, and Bs on geography assignments (Why were there so many countries? Certainly, there didn't need to be that many, and certainly not all scrunched together). On the playground, he read and played on the swings; during lulls in school, he drew. By all accounts, Bobby was a laid back and easy kid.

But he was a quiet boy. Bobby would only speak during class when he raised his hand. Even then, his voice was so hushed that his teachers would have to hold their breaths to hear him speak. In the halls, the other students would never hear him if he opened his mouth, which he rarely did, as his voice was drowned out by footsteps and loose pencils clamoring around in backpacks.

On the day of their field trip, Bobby was flustered. He wore sensible shorts and a buttoned shirt that was usually closed all the way, but today, showed a school pride tee shirt underneath.

“Mister,” Bobby said, pulling on his teacher’s pant leg, “my mom was in a hurry this morning, so I dressed myself.”

“You did a good job,” His teacher said. Bobby was young enough that his mom dressing him was not unusual, but also not common for his age.

“Thank you, Mister, but I forgot my bowtie.”

His teacher made a face, then smiled wide.

“Well, I think that’s okay,” his teacher said. “Sometimes it's fun to try out new looks, and it looks like you’re rocking this one.”

Bobby paused and made a small kind of smile before joining his class on the bus.

His teachers had never seen Bobby talk so much before. They noticed it when Bobby’s voice began to carry on the bus, mixing with and even overpowering some of his classmates as the day went on.

“Good for him,” said one teacher.

“It’s nice to see him finally come out of that shell,” said another.

But, by god, did that kid have a wide smile. They all noticed it. None of Bobby’s teachers had ever seen a smile that big before. It was almost downright unnatural.

“I don’t think I’ve never talked this much with you, Bobby,” Grinned the classmate sharing his seat. “I like talking with you.”

Bobby's smile once again quickly came and took to his face, his grin widening to his cheeks and close to his ears.

"Me too," Bobby said, only a little too loud.

His classmate smiled too, and somehow Bobby's grin reached even closer to his earlobes. Then it bowed down and went to his neck and to his collarbone, then under his shoulders and to his ribs. His toothy grin, full of canines and molars, spread at his neck and opened as he talked and laughed, and his classmate talked and laughed too.

"Have you always had a smile that big?" his classmate asked.

"For a while," Bobby said. For a moment, his smile pinched closed nearest to his torso.

"I can't believe you were hiding that smile!" his classmate said. "I feel like I should have seen it before. You have such pretty teeth!"

"I never really, um.... Thought about my teeth like that. Thank you." Bobby said. "I like that you like them. I.... like your smile too."

"Thank you," said his classmate, their smile wide even for the normal size of children's smiles. Still, they shuffled nervously in their seat. "Do you... want to see something?"

Bobby nodded. His classmate pulled Bobby in close and rolled up their own sweater sleeve. Lines of green and blue and purple shimmered on their skin in tight dots; their freckles like fish or snake scales.

“Nobody knows, except for you and me,” said Bobby’s classmate.

“Whoa,” Bobby said. “That’s so cool.”

“You really think so?” They pulled down their sleeve as they spoke, completely covering the scales. “Thank you.”

As the two of them turned away for a moment, both of their smiles growing wide under their blushes.

When the school returned from the field trip, Bobby stepped off the bus laughing, his voice carrying over the class as he bounced toward his mother parked in pick-up. Her gaze from afar was a muted sort of horrified. As Bobby reached the car, his mother pulled another bowtie from her purse and tied it around him, making his button-up shirt and his neck-down open smile forcefully snap close. She quickly ushered Bobby into her car in one solid and practiced motion.

“We’ve talked about you going out like that,” she said curtly as she began to drive home. “It’s unsightly.”

Bobby said nothing. He watched as the school disappeared from the window. His classmate from the bus caught Bobby’s eyes as the vehicle went by them, the smile that touched their ears widening as Bobby passed their spot on the sidewalk. They waved.

Bobby smiled as wide as he could from his mom’s car and waved back.

Bella.

Bella thinks she is one of the children the creature replaced.

That's not true. She knows she is. And maybe the creature can fix her.

Bella left home early on a weekend morning, so she wouldn't miss class, and started walking to the hills. Her parents never asked where she was, and she never told them, as was their routine. Her parents trusted her to come back, and she always did.

Everything felt wrong with her. She could talk to others, but she couldn't stop thinking about her words before she could say them, and even after she spoke, she would regret them. Bella wanted to connect with people, but it was so hard. How did everyone else come up with their words so fast? And when she was speaking to the girls that sat next to her in class.... It was like she wasn't meant to be around them, like they were already advanced past her in the skill of being alive. They could just speak! With taking minutes to think about it! And Bella just couldn't.

Finding the creature's den was surprisingly easy. It was right where town's people always said it was; nestled between the crook of two meeting hills.

"Hello?" said Bella, quieter than she rehearsed. She peered into the doorway, which was wide open.

“Mmmh... Hello,” said the creature. It was working on something, the creature and its hundreds of hands focused on an object on its desk rather than Bella as she entered.

“Hi.”

“Hello,” said the creature once more.

Bella shuffled, and turned, and played with the necklace she had in her hands.

“Do you recognize me?” she finally asked.

“Do you recognize art after it’s been left in the rain?” the creature asked. “Clay figures sag and chalk washes away, but your work is still there after the changes.”

Bella paused. The creature, as if sensing her confusion before she processed it as such, tried again.

“Yes, I do recognize you,” the creature said.

Bella was once again quiet for a moment.

Why did you make me?”

“To replace the last one.”

Bella once again paused, letting the creature’s words hang in the air. She looked down to her hands, shadow and string and moving. Her skin had been freckled when she still had it, but now was fluid and not quite solid.

“Why did this happen?” She asked, holding up her hands. “My skin fell away, and now I don’t look anything like my family.”

“Something wore your outside down,” the creature said.

Bella went back to her hands.

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s the soil out here. It’s no good. Seeds can’t grow up proper in it.” The creature waved several tens of its hands to the window, gesturing to the plants outside.

“You have to plant the right seeds and nurture them right to get anything to take root.”

“I was misplanted?” Bella said. “I... I guess that makes sense. I always felt sort of out of place, I guess.

The creature shook its head. It finally dropped what it was working on and turned to Bella. All its hands dropped to its side and hugged its chest and crossed and fiddled its thumbs.

“I made you perfect. Did you know I made you with the shadows from the first blue moon that touched this valley’s creek? I sewed you together with the breath of stars so well that you couldn’t tell my stitches from the curves and lines naturally at your fingertips. You were always made for wear and tear, and life, and growing. Every part of you was and is perfect, down to the swaying of your heart and soul. I have nothing to do with the feelings in your chest, for you are a perfect copy and person. I made your body, but your soul is your own.”

Bella stopped playing with the necklace in her hands and it faded into her body, entangling with the loose threads of shade that now held her form.

“So it’s nothing you did,” Bella said. Her heart fluttered in her thoughts and made its way to her eardrums. She thought of what to say next and was frustrated that she had to. “This is just me then.”

“Yes. And that is wonderful.”

The creature kissed the top of Bella's head. Frayed threads of shadow grazed it’s face as the creature pulled the child close.

“There is nothing wrong with you, child. It is the soil peeling at you, but I made you too good to fall apart. Instead, you just crack and wear down like proper art instead of breaking outright. I am so sorry I made you too perfect.”

The creature kissed the top of Bella’s head once more.

“You are an exceptional child. Not because I made you that way, but because you simply were made to be.”

Part 2:

Thoughts of a Downed Oak Tree

A hand pressed into your inner thigh. Your eyes were so aware.

No longer innocent, you knew what follows for the part you were being made to play, as did the girl who came before you. I am sorry for this and the thereafter, though I played no part in your suffering. You played so many parts, though this was the last thing you ever got to be. You were so many things. Beautiful and ugly and enduring things. But you were made to be this too.

There was something buried within me. Past wood and buried in rings. The scar of a young love's knife still bares echoes on my skin, spelling their names that I cannot read. These words are still taut on me, still just decipherable as scars through my bark and age. The two that made that wound loved me once. Loved my pockets, my curves, and my arms. They loved my neighbors and loved the water they could watch while sitting at my feet.

Their love outgrew me. but their sweet-drunk whispers are still honey in my veins.

I knew the marks that were their names, but I knew them beyond the words marked in me. I knew her still after their love began to decay, and I grew to know him by the harsh cutting he used to write into me. Tears poured from her when she spoke to me

of the man she once loved, though to her, she was simply crying at the foot of her favorite tree. The hurt of her fell into the hardness of my skin. I think that was the softest she would be touched in that time based upon the bruise and blue that peaked from her collar. Desertion of her marriage called her. The man who hurt both our skins called louder.

She visited me less as the volumes of his voice perpetually grew. Eventually, his voice came to be a howl over all the others in her life, and he eventually drowned all the others out out. Her voice was too eventually drowned out, and she never returned to me. I do not know what happened to her.

She never came to rest by my side as she once did, but I wish a pleasant sleep to her now. Enough time has passed that she is almost certainly passed on. Rest never came to the girl written in my skin most of the time I knew her, and I hope she found it.

Time was kind to me. Age is nothing but scars from time, and age comes all too easy to ones like me. You knew this age more than the woman I knew before.

You came to me much wiser, much older than my first woman. I never got the chance to know you like I did her. But the yearning to be touched, embraced in arms thick with strength and fever I recognized in her as I did you. Both of you laughed in the downpour I met you in. I embraced your reprieve from the hot summer's rain.

The pair of you, you and that man, embraced at my roots. Sweetness was not as free from you both, yet the honey was there for you just the same as it was for the woman before. The decay love brought her came to you so much sooner. I only watched. Dear girl, I am so sorry; the only part I can play is witness to you.

Did your side ache as mine did when as he carved his name into you? As the skin around his letters closed, did your skin burn as it failed to be once more whole?

When the fight from you faded, he pushed you a final time. Water filled your unclosing wounds as the stones tied to your shoes dragged you down deep.

A girl once cried into the length of my skin that bore her name, then another came to weep in the lake that rests below my feet.

While age ceased coming to you, it continued to build within me. Time has been kind to ones like me, but it still comes. Collapse was the fate that was eventually passed to me. In my moment of falling, I made myself fall to you.

How different you are now that I can look at you in the water. How you stare.

Your skin has fallen away, freckled with rot and dead. Hair strangles the silence of you as it drifts surface bound. A fish-bit hand breaches the top of your dark curls and extends toward the mirrored, shifting sunlight above your head. The spare arm at your side is caught in wild green, and it drags you deeper to a muck that tugs at the edges of what remains of you. You are so close to me. I reach, but I cannot grab your outstretched and skin-bare fingers.

Dear girl, you deserved not what happened to you. You deserved to kiss and to be kissed, to be entangled by another in arms that choose you as you choose them. Earth reaches for you now because your chosen partner selfishly stole anymore choice from you. I cannot return this choice to you, but I can bring you something you deserve.

When I fell, my downed body grabbed the attention of the living.

Fisher folk cast lines that stick and hang from my bones. They bring lures and bobs that hang from my skin and take the fish that nibble at yours. One day, I think they will hurt you. Your hair will be caught in the swing of a net or one of your fingers will be plucked from a stuck hook. They will not recognize you, but they will know someone who does. It will hurt, but dear girl, you will be found. I am only sorry it will take so long. I am in the way, and their lines get caught in my fingers before they snag you. But I simply cannot stop my reaching to hold you.

You are loved, dear girl, by the many who knew you before. I know this to be true, I simply have too. They must search for you still. But though it be selfish, I want to hold you until someone can save you from my branches. I don't want you to be alone until then.

Part 3:

For the Living

I've lived in this house my whole life. It was my grandmother's once, and I spent all my summers in her overgrown garden and in the creek that cut through the woods her property overlooked since I could toddle. In the middle step of her porch, I carved my name, next to all my cousin's names in the spot that got overtaken by morning glories every spring.

Inside, every spec of wall space was covered in photographs and mementos, originally with a planned purpose. As the years went by, any semblance of pattern was tossed as more and more memories were tacked over the faded baby-blue paint, forever her favorite color.

Grandma called her place the cottage, and she loved it. Even when the cottage was too small for all her family, she loved it. As grandma aged, she couldn't bear to upgrade the old place, even to fit all her grandkids, who she loved oh so dearly. Luckily, there was another building on the property fit enough to sleep in, so she didn't have to.

There was an old wooden church about half an acre from the house, set a bit farther back on the shared, unpaved driveway. The old place was once a protestant church. It has been said that it is older than the town, and I've never had a reason to doubt that. The wood of the place was aged, so much so I feared I would drop right through the floor with a misplaced step, but the church was so well kept that the planks barely made

even a creak under any weight. It had no stained glass and no carved pews. It was a simple building. There wasn't even a sign on the old place. We simply called it the church. Grandma's cottage was originally built to house the grounds keeper, who mostly cared for the cemetery joined to the property. When the church's membership outgrew the building, they sold the land and moved to a bigger building deeper in town. It was sold cheaply and passed around through the years, where it eventually ended with my grandparents, and eventually, me. The land and the buildings belonged to the deed holders, with the understanding that the cemetery always remained open to the public.

Grandma raised us to not fear the cemetery, despite what the television told us.

"The dead are just bodies," she would say while she gardened, always spending extra time on her spoiled tomato plants, "and they are moving on to their next job. They help the world grow, you know, by feeding the worms and the roots and things that help our veggies grow big and strong—Just like how your Grannie feeds you."

Grandma's arrangement with the cemetery never struck us as odd. It helped we barely got to see it used. Despite the church needing a bigger location, the town never truly expanded, not like others in the area had. Because of this, visitors to the cemetery were rare, and new occupants even rarer. It was more often that the church was rented out for weddings and graduation parties. I had never seen a full burial on the property until I was an adult and I had never had to clean up after one until grandma passed.

I had never seen the woman that came from the woods until after then either.

It wasn't immediate. Sometime had passed after we buried grandma. Grandma always seemed so calm about death and returning to the earth, but inside her casket, she looked so fake and artificial, like she was made of plastic. It didn't seem like her anymore. Her face looked so like a mannequin, and I doubted it would change for a hundred years. I could see her then, resting in the ground, the roots she always spoke about unable to use her body. When we buried her in that box of wood and metal, I was relieved to have what we made of her out of sight.

Grandma left me the cottage, and I promised to love it the way she had. I was simple like her in that way. You know when a house is your home. Weeks after her passing I had finally begun to work through her belongings. I loved the woman dearly, but I had never understood the sheer bulk of her things. Maybe we could have slept in the house all this time had it not been for her mass of storage totes, pictures, knickknacks, and unfinished projects. It broke my heart to start throwing some of those memories away. But it was time for me to start making the place my own.

"Goodbye grandma," I said, taking the first of her many photos off the wall. Gently I placed it in the tossing bin. "I hope you managed to feed something that grows into a good tomato."

I stayed up late that night. It was hot and I left the cottage windows open. Grandma's mementos from her grandkids were starting to work into nice piles for each of them to come pick up. Rylee, Eric, Michael, and Rylee again. My cousins and their kids could figure what they wanted to keep of their items next time they came over.

I happened to be turning my head at that moment— a firefly had caught my eye as it drifted lazily out the window. It was so late to see a lightning bug glow, so my gaze trailed after the thing.

That is when I saw the figure bent over my grandmother's grave. I did not recognize what it was at first, hunched over like an animal as it reached into the ground. Hell, I didn't even hear the damn thing. The woods were as talkative as they always were that time of night, unbroken by movement in the yard that usually hushed them. I watched as the thing pressed deeper into the ground. It struggled getting up, not for lack of strength. There was a clear sense of power from it; rather, it seemed to be struggling to gain a decent grip. Even from the house I could see the mass of its figure, built and sturdy. It almost seemed it was leaning on a pair of bad knees, like grandma's did in winter, and it was bracing itself for the stand up. The glow from my windows was enough to see the outline of the limbs of the thing and the shifting movements of its hair and the round of its torso.

“Hey. Hey!” I called as it dug.

Turning on the porch light did nothing to catch the thing's attention. Now in that light, I saw its back as it was turned to me. It did not seem bothered by my being there at all. The thing looked to be a woman, yet her movements were too slow and sharp to be just that. Each bend of an elbow had real force behind it, as if the elbow's owner had to push through rust to get it to bend. More apparent yet were the faults cutting into her skin. They were black with scabs in the porch light, some pink and open and oozing. She

was too far away, and I shouldn't have been able to see wounds from where I stood, at least not with her moving still, and yet she still dug.

She was crouched on all fours, her arm buried in the plot of my grandmother's. I don't know how long I was watching her, but I couldn't look away. Finally, she managed to grip what she was digging for, her body popping straight up as if strings on her had been pulled taut from above. What she had in her grasp I could not make out, but I felt my soul drop as I watched a limp and familiar shape get dragged out of the dirt and through the yard. The baby-blue of my grandmother's burial dress was caught in the porch light as the creature stepped into the tree line. With shaking hands, I managed to lock my door after the woods had swallowed both the figures.

The next morning, grandma's plot was undisturbed. It looked the same as when I laid flowers on it the day before. Yet when I drove a fence post into the ground, it kept plunging. Four, five, six, more than seven feet down before it stopped. The casket my grandmother was buried in was open.

My family had never been ones for ghost stories. We were the faint of heart types mostly, and ghosts and the undead were reserved for Halloween and the month leading up to it. The only things that ought to be rising from the soil were Jesus Christ and Tiger Lilies and other green things. And yet, that thing was certainly none of those things.

I spent the rest of the day exploring the other plots. Sure enough, my fence post dug deeper than closed caskets should allow in damn near every plot. On one or two I think I hit rocks between two or three feet down, but that was expected in bluff country. The further I went back, the less give I ran into. In the back of the cleared cemetery acre,

it seemed the more faded the grave marker the more roots cut off my driving. Here, sections of the woods were starting to reach into the lot, but not enough yet to cast a shadow, let alone spread sturdy roots like the ones I was hitting. At the very edge of the cemetery, the grave markers were faded enough that reading them was impossible. Hints of engraving marked their middles and old lichens pulled at their indents. My post damn near bounced back as I hit those thick roots hidden in the soil.

That night I waited on the porch for the thing to come back. The woods were humming as they always did, only hushing as I stood to stretch or refill my glass. I watched all manner of things tumble out of those woods, four legged and furred, feathered, and scaled. Yet nothing like that woman. The next night I did the same, and the night after. She never came back those nights.

I was beginning to think I had dreamed the whole thing up until the old man off main street died.

A delivery man had found him, still looking asleep in the oak rocking chair that overlooked his daisy patch. He died the day before, his afternoon nap sometime slipping into something more permanent than the evening.

His daughter came into town just before his body was taken away, and her husband and their children came later in the day. The old man's empty home filled for the next few days as children and brothers and cousins crammed onto the antique loveseats and well-worn dining room chairs. I drove past a few times, on grocery trips at first and later to give my condolences. He was a kind man, despite his faults. A trio was gathered around the flowerbed when I left, whispering hushes about his family scandals as if the

old man were still alive and might catch them gossiping. It was a few days after he passed that I got the call to make sure the church and the cemetery were clean for the ceremony.

I set up the usual layout of the church and dusted it as best I could. The city gardener came out early that week and mowed the cemetery and church lot for me. I told him he didn't need to mow the cottage yard, like I always did, and he did anyway, like he always did.

All that commotion kept the cemetery quiet for a time. Orange light from the chapel kept the gravestones warm during the night of the ceremony, and the night after the usual curious critters sniffed at the newest scents of the upturned soil. Rain waterlogged the land the night thereafter, coaxing worms out from drowning through the next sunrise.

More days passed. Flowers left at the site faded and died, then got replaced by the artificial yellow blooms the town gardener kept in his trailer. The last visitor was always a distant of some kind; A disowned child all but banned from the funeral or an unknown lover by the family, only learning of their loss through the chitter of bar talk, or sometimes even a cousin that forgot to check their phone. This time, it was an older friend: A man in a tweedled coat, looking too cold to be out in the early spring. I watched him as he entered the cemetery from my garden that paralleled the fence. He stood tall before the granite letters bearing his friend's name. He lit a cigarette and left it at the base of the stone, placing an unlit one at his lips.

“Gave these up some time ago,” he sighed, “and I don't think I could handle picking them back up, even for you.”

The old man stayed the whole while as the cigarette on the grave slowly burned away, leaving a pile of ash and a wasteful amount of body as it prematurely sizzled out.

He took a long breath as the last of the smoke dissipated off the stone.

From his pocket he pulled an open pack, knocking it twice against his outturned palm. He pocketed his own still unlit cigarette and knelt beside the grave. His hands lingered over the name in stone and even longer over the inscription: *Companion, Father, and Friend*. Beside the burnt-out cigarette, he left the newly open box of light blue American Spirit.

“Goodbye, friend.”

Slowly, he pulled away from the grave marker and made his way to his car, half parked in the ditch as it was shoulder. He wiped his face with his collar as he pulled away.

Somehow, I knew she would come after this.

I stayed out that night, basking in the glow of the porch light. The normal buzz built about as night fell.

Racoons gathered under the birdfeeders at the edge of the wood. The larger of the bunch knocked the house shaped feeder so that it continuously poured seed to the gathering flock below. I dared not to shoo them off, for fear of spooking anything else in wood.

I turned back to the cemetery, and there she was, making her way through the back gate. I hadn't even heard her enter the yard, let alone move through underbrush at the tree line. Silently she moved, still unbothered by me or my porchlight. I beamed my flashlight at her as I left the porch. She kept on moving.

She beat me to the old man's grave. By the time I got there, she was shoulder deep digging. Up close, her body was barely just. The scabs I had seen the first night were the size of my closed fist and welted across her body. Smaller ones were blemished between them. None of them were completely closed. I could see right into her skin, where her insides were black and almost caramelized with something. I waved my flashlight once and something beneath her skin moved deeper inside, away from the light. I stifled a gag at the way the thing moved. The main body was unbothered by the internal shift, still digging in the newest grave.

She was tall, though not unusually so. Mostly enough that I wouldn't ever describe her as short. She was broader though, the tone of her once muscles shining even through the mottled state of her skin. Her bicep shifted as something pushed by underneath it.

Soil pushed against the woman's skin as she dug. The earth pursed against her skin as a pair lips would against an out tongue. I was only able to hear the popping of the wood as I stood above the grave. It was so faint, buried beneath six feet of soil, rock, and root. She shouldn't have been able to reach her arm down to the casket as it was no longer than mine, yet the polished cherry wood below us shattered below her grasp.

The sound stopped and the woman froze. She stayed still like that for a moment, still bent and reaching. It was like she had broken. Then, like a puppet, her limbs and body popped up all at once. In one of her limp arms was the body of the old man. Despite being buried for almost two weeks, he was still pristine. The casket had done its job and stayed shut. He didn't look alive by any means, but he didn't look fall apart dead either. The embalming had done its job. He laid there, limp in the grasp of whatever the woman was, like an overly stuffed rag doll. There wasn't a spec of soil on his body, save for on the half that was still half-buried.

The infested being turned, looking to me with her worm ridden and defeated eyes.

I scrambled out of her way as she made toward me. She wasn't looking at me though. It was the gate behind me she was going for. She pulled the old man's corpse behind her, not making a noise as their two forms made their way through the cemetery. The hole she had made at the grave fluidly crumbled in on itself.

The thing moved past the bird feeders, not warranting even a glance from the raccoons that had gathered beneath it. The group chattered irritably only as I passed. When she cut into the forest silently, I followed.

Even without the moonlight, the woman's skin was incredibly visible. She was pale and yellowed. Her skin had looked like it had been bleached and dehydrated, like cooked meat left out to sit too long. It was stretched taut and split open in places where it hadn't been eaten through by bugs, as if the strain of moving caused her dried joints to splinter. As I followed, the holes in her skin grew more active. They were moist, a clear liquid of some sort trailing beneath her outermost layer. A legless thing slithered by in

one of the more visible gaps. Legged things crawled out more often. A single insect wormed its way out of the in-between of her finger skin and crawled onto the corpse's shoulder as it was dragged. It disappeared between the folds of his suit.

I followed for some time, working deeper into the woods than I had ever had tread before. She left no trail, foliage folding gently back into place behind her and the dragging corpse as they went. My path was something more permanent.

When the woods opened, the creature shifted its path slightly. I found myself in a clearing, full of granite and exposed soil. The moonlight reappeared, illuminating the space better than my flashlight could. Trees reached lazily into the space, dropping heavy leaves and shadows even in the dark. Smaller growths pushed more greedily into the site, spreading from the densely packed forest floor, and springing between chunks of gravel and dips of stone. Moss and lichens reached at nearly every surface that was semi-shaded.

The creature dragged the old man's body to the edge of the space, tucking his head half into the exposed roots of a tree at the forest line. Like the plants before, the roots folded back into shape after she placed the body between them, and the moss and roots slowly began to envelope the old man. I watched until only a mound of green was visible, and even long after.

The moss at my feet began to sway. It was slow, and I jumped back. The indent I left popped back into place, leaving a mark to show I was once there. The moss below me began to sway again, and this time I left it. The swaying stayed slow.

The woman watched long after the growth had overtaken the old man's body. I don't think she was able to see through her broken eyes, but she stayed there for a long while after anyway.

Without a visible trigger, she was tugged back into existence. Her back was to me, and she shambled deeper into the clearing, passing more of the green mounds of root and foliage. The further back she went, the flatter they became, until they were indistinguishable from the green forest floor that pressed in around her. At the end of the clearing, a large stone was erected out of the ground, reaching well past the tip of the woman's sternum as she stood. Too, it was covered with green, the monument almost unnoticeable amongst the growth around it.

"Hey," I managed. My voice barely left me, but as quiet as it was, it was thundering in the silence of the clearing. "What is this place?"

The woman paused, her body swaying as a breeze brushed against it. Without moving to face me, she spoke.

"You are not supposed to be here," she said. There was no distinct rise or fall to her dictation. It was as if the wind was speaking rather than her, carrying the steady and monotonous sound with a singular gust of air.

"Is this where you took my grandmother?" I asked,

With both arms, she weakly gestured to the mounds closest to her.

"There are bodies here," she, or the wind, said. "But bodies do not have names."

The flashlight in my hands was shaking now, so bad that I could not keep it steady on the woman.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What is this?”

“Those boxes you use now are so tight,” she said, “And the chemicals you put inside them are so harsh.”

Finally, the woman turned. In the shaking of the light, her face came in and out of view. Beside the pores and welts that dotted the surface, her face was almost perfectly intact. But it didn’t look right, as if the texture of her face was no longer made of only skin, but something else; something plastic or man-made. She spoke again.

“The dead have served your purpose. Please let them serve their next one.”

And she just looked at me. Her eyes were dead and defeated, but they look to me with such sorrow. Suddenly, the woman dropped at the foot of the monument as if the force holding it upright decided all at once to let go.

It only took moments for lichens to slowly start tugging and seeping into the open pores of her skin, covering her insides and outs. The growth around her body shuffled and settled until her resting place was completely covered by earth. Even still, the outline of her body that hadn’t decomposed was visible yet in the green.

As I left, I found the other mounds to be the same, with shapes of bodies still being decipherable through all the growing. In the center of one these masses, I found the familiar pointed arrows of a sprouting tomato plant.

Artist Statement:

Overgrown is a collection of three short stories stemming from nontangible anxieties, such as death, violence against women, and the queer search for acceptance. Each of these three pieces, including *Thoughts of a Downed Oak Tree*, *Wrong*, and *For the Living*, touches upon how individuals experience these anxieties and how they face them. The title, *Overgrown*, was selected because all of the piece's touch upon themes of reflection, overcoming or discovery, all of which are traits that lead to personal growth. *Overgrown* reflects both nature visuals these pieces bring, but also the aspect of personal reflection they conjure. The characters in these pieces engage with a degree of growth, whether that be in overcoming grief or coming to terms with their identities.

Thoughts of a Downed Oak Tree is the shortest of these three pieces. This piece was originally inspired by a fallen tree I used to fish under as a child. It always struck me how all the branches reached downward, as if the tree was reaching for something underwater. In earlier drafts, this piece was named Dryad/Naiad after the Greek nature and water spirits. Though they are unable to connect, the narrating oak tree expresses an emotional connection to the two women. This old title was meant to invoke feminine traits onto the oak. However, *Thoughts of a Downed Oak Tree* better reflected the somber tone of the piece. This piece deals with themes of violence against women and the helplessness women feel in watching these violent acts play out to others.

After the second woman the tree is emotionally connected to is killed, the tree grieves: "The decay love brought her came to you so much sooner. I only watched. Dear girl, I am so sorry; the only part I can play is witness to you. (*Thoughts of a Downed Oak*

Tree 16).” This is especially heartbreaking to the tree as instead of watching this woman fade from her life as the last one did, the tree witnesses her murder. Despite being an audience to this act of violence, the tree is not active in the narrative she witnesses as she is unable to move. But there is still the desire to help.

I was also inspired by the phenomena of true crime and women’s connection to it, both in fascination and in often victimhood. When it comes to podcasting, women account for 73% of the true crime audience (Boling 101). This is reflected in the oak’s inability to help either of these women. While the tree is actively engaged in watching these women’s narrative, she is completely unable to impact them. Though there are differing theories as to why women prefer these podcasts, one of the most prominent theories is that women connect with and sympathize more deeply with the violence these women face than men do. While men account for the majority of global homicides, women account for the majority of those killed by family members or intimate partners (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 13). The tree, which is intended to be female coded based on its pointed empathy toward women, stands on the outside of this violence. While the tree sympathizes with both victims, the tree is unable to act in the presence, encountering a sense of helplessness.

Once the second woman’s living story concludes and she is killed (20), the oak tree can then act. When the tree ages and falls, it creates a popular fishing spot in the body of water it is seated next to. This sets up for the woman’s body that is hidden in the water in the water to eventually be hooked and discovered. While the tree is powerless in the moments of violence, it eventually grows to overcome its sole obstacle of being stationary. “Collapse was the fate that was eventually passed to me. In my moment of

falling, I made myself fall to you (*Thoughts of a Downed Oak Tree* 17).” In the Oak’s only moment of agency, it falls toward the woman with two goals. To both draw attention to the woman in the water, but also offer her comfort. Though the woman is dead, the tree can attempt to overcome guilt it feels from being unable to act while both women it knew were attacked or abused.

The largest deviation from my original plan was in *Wrong*, which was originally intended to be a mostly illustrated piece. However, the more it developed, the more it became apparent that between illustration drafts and written scripts, the words were always more potent than the actual image. I was excited to attempt a graphic piece, but *Wrong* was ultimately better off divorcing its original plan. Early iterations also focused even more on the kids, with the three children highlighted in the piece going through school and slowly unraveling into creatures as they experienced different trauma and stimuli. However, this layout was abandoned early on, as the tone it was leaning into fell flat.

Wrong focuses on the trauma experienced by kids, especially those falling in the queer spectrum. The creature in this piece creates copies of things, exactly mimicking all traits the item or person it replaces had before, with one notable exception: “The only way to know when a child made by the creature had been placed within a home is if it happens to be mishandled and breaks (*Wrong* 3).” The creature, based upon beings such as those found fae folklore that snatch and replace children, is not creating queer individuals, but rather making copies and replacing individuals in the town, some of which happen to be queer. The creature is not an evil or good entity; It is simply doing what it is naturally meant to do: making things. When the children it creates encounter

extreme stress, this illusion breaks, and we see the wild the creature used to make them break though. In one Daxton he extreme stress he encounters is his parent's rejection of his name. In the real world, this stress of rejection leads not to a transformation, but rather to increased rates of high levels of depression, illegal drug use, and attempted suicide rates (Katz-Wise). Parental rejection, no matter how subtle or outright, leads to increased risky behavior and decreased mental health in LGBTQ+ youth. An implication within this piece is that there are other people in the community who are replaced like the queer children highlighted within *Wrong*. However, as they do not experience this sense of rejection, however, this sense manifestation of rejection does not appear to them like it does the children. It is worth noting there are other factors not related to queerness that cause extreme emotional distress and decrease mental, but they are not addressed in this piece.

One of my largest inspirations was a theory was one initially introduced to me in queer and fan spaces. This theory proposes that this queer connection to monsters and other monstrous entities is due to a shared sense of outsidership to society. As Harry Benshoff describes this in *Monsters in the closet: Homosexuality and the horror film*, "To create a broad analogy (regarding the queer relationship to monsters), monster is to "normality "as homosexual is to heterosexual (Benshoff 1-2)." However, this affinity expands into other genres beyond horror, other breaching into spaces of fantasy, romance, drama and even sit-com like properties. In these spaces, it is also believed that queer individuals connect to monsters and inhuman entities in media more than straight and cisgender individuals because it was one of the only forms of representation queers readily had commercially available. As per the Hays code, which regulated film in

America beginning in the 1930's, queer representation could not be projected in a positive light on screen as it was considered to be a display of "Sexual Deviancy". Thus, queer characters were portrayed as villains. Because of this, many stylings of typically evil character began to be associated with queer traits: "The same logic in which the villain wears black should apply to the homosexual so that the audience can quickly identify him or her as a moral and medical deviate (Noriega 30-31)." Despite the code no longer being in effect, similar attitudes surrounding queer representation continue, and queer and queer-coded villains continued to be some of the most readily available representation to both broad and queer audiences. Combined with villains often being paired monsters in popular media, it is easy to see where this connection in queerness to villains and monsters can be made. Additionally, a fear of rejection from society based upon traits uncontrollable by an individual are shared by both monsters and the queer individual.

It is for these reasons the children in *Wrong* undergo a monstrous transformation or possess monstrous traits. These are physical representations of the otherness these children encounter via their experiences of rejection. While this change marks a sense of separation from their families, these changes also represent a sense of ownership over their own experience; Though this can be outward expression of identity as it is with Daxton name, this ownership can also come in the form of a quiet admission, as it is with Bobby and his friend sharing their monstrous feature with each other on the bus.

Daxton is the most apparent in his queer connection. His journey is his exploration of gender through the names he tries, which he mimics or "parroted" from the world around him. His parents continually deny these name changes, and thus deny his

exploration of identity. This comes to a head with the line ““Your name is this,” Said his parents, and they said the name they chose for him (*Wrong* 6)”. When they finally reject his chosen name and refer to Daxton as his dead name, it is finally emotionally triggering enough to cause him to unravel, revealing a bird-like being underneath. This form was chosen to reflect his copying of the names of others, much like how parrots or crows will mimic phrases and sounds they hear.

Bobby was the reverse of Daxton’s outward expression. Though unclear what made him unravel in the first place, Bobby was dealing with the aftereffects of his monstrous change and his parent’s attempt to hide it. They do this with a bowtie placed to keep the monstrous portion of his mouth shut. When this trait is revealed via his forgetting to wear it, he quickly finds himself more readily expressing himself and finding a friend with similarly monstrous traits on the bus. Bobby’s mother is quick to cover this personal expression, despite the acceptance from his classmate and teachers. Bobby’s segment was meant to reflect the attitudes parents of queer kids sometimes takes; that an aspect of their child is unnatural and needs to be hid. This can lead to a split personality in the change, with one personality expressed at home, and a more authentic one expressed at school, like Bobby began to explore here.

The final section with Bella reflects the feelings of personal rejection experienced by queer children, and how this can lead them to seek acceptance and explanations about their identity in places outside their usual communities. After Bella asks the creature what is wrong with her, it explains that there is nothing wrong and that she is perfect. “You are an exceptional child not because I made you that way, but because you simply were made to be” (*Wrong*, 14). The creature expresses that it did not make her Due to the history of

queer representation being lacking, I did not want to end *Wrong* on a down note. Though Bella is unsure why she feels different and anxious around others, she has a positive and accepting entity that expresses the perfectness and normality of her identity, something that not all queer children have. Her ending is one uplifting of her identity purely for the sake of it deserving to be.

The inspiration for *For the Living* is an admittedly odd one. A personal confusion of mine is that I don't understand the human connection to bodies. While we are living, yes, we are connected with our physical forms in a unique manner. Humans and their bodies are truly inseparable while living. But when we're dead, it's just meat. Human bodies are just hair and skin and things that are not the person who was alive after the person has died. Admittedly, this piece that leans into one my personal perspectives the most. *For the Living* tackles what happens to bodies after we no longer need them and this need to preserve them post-burial.

After the narrator buries their grandmother, they begin watching over the cemetery their family owns thereafter. This leads to the discovery of the woman in the woods, who pulls the grandmother's body from the grave and drags it into the woods.

When people who knew the grandmother stop grieving, the woman from the woods appears. This happens only after the narrator begins cleaning out the cottage and saying goodbye to the grandmother's photo. This happens again after the old man's death. The woman only appears here after the old man's friend in the jacket leaves a cigarette and verbally says goodbye. This timing was chosen to mark the end of the grieving period. While the characters are still grieving their loved ones, they are no

longer mourning the bodies; instead, they have transitioned to their memories. We see this in the narrator discarding some of the many physical photographs of their grandmother and the man in the jacket being the last person to visit the old man's grave.

After our loved ones are done mourning our bodies and move on to only our memories, the bodies are no longer needed to serve that mourning purpose. The grandmother mentions this while she gardens:

“The dead are just bodies,” she would say while she gardened, always spending extra time on her spoiled tomato plants, “and they are moving on to their next job. They help the world grow, you know, by feeding the worms and the roots and things that help our veggies grow big and strong—Just like how your Grannie feeds you.” (*For the Living* 20)

When viewing the grandmother's body, the narrator expresses discomfort at the unnatural and artificial look that the grandmother's body has taken due to the embalming process. This disturbs them, as it breaks the natural cycle their grandmother always spoke about.

In reality, individuals are often uncomfortable with the decomposition of the body postmortem. According to one study, annihilation of the body, or decomposition, is one of the six major factors in determining why people fear death (Florian 728). By pulling the bodies out of the cemetery, the woman in the woods is moving them on to their next purpose, as the grandmother wanted. She takes the bodies into a clearing to decompose, giving life to greenery and insects, and in the case of the grandmother's body, a tomato plant. This woman is not acting with cruelty, but rather as what it sees as necessary to help the natural cycle. This piece, though eerie, is not meant to be scary. When humans

end, our bodies continue without us, and they help foster new life. Embalming and other forms of preservation are forms of avoiding that fear. Letting go of this connection to the body is an important step of the grieving process. Life is cyclical, and humans are no exception, despite how we hang onto it.

Finally, thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed spending some time here with me, and if nothing else, I hope you found something to carry with you.

With Love,

Emily D. Cote

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