



LAMPREL SONG

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She awakes, confused for a moment by the light in her eyes. And then she understands: Her seven-year rest has ended, and another 14-hour shift has just begun. The remnants of her dream include the feeling it was important and the anxiety of being unable to remember — things she often feels waking up after so much time.

Then a yawn reminds her of her body. She stretches out arms and legs, inspects her toes. The number on her forearm looks more like a shadow by the capsule's light. She presses a button and waits as the hatch slides back. Digits pulse on a monitor a few

yards away, and a progress bar grows in size. The computer is loading.

She sits upright, still dazed, unaware of her surroundings: the buzz of the wardrobe opening, suggesting a jumpsuit; the computer voice announcing the date, time, and current political stability; and her own desire to escape the heat, to return to the cool air of the capsule.

She approaches the console, opens a drawer, removes a cup, tissue box, and disinfectant. She washes the cup, vaguely pondering her dream, then throws the tissue, grayed with dust, into the disintegrator, opens a second drawer, and takes out a jar of instant coffee. She starts the thermosterilizer and waits five minutes.

The blinds flick open as she's sipping her coffee. The lamprels, their heads swaying fifty yards from the windows, stretch out towards the horizon, bristling with thorns. The sun, thinly shrouded by clouds, casts a bluish tremor on them.

The computer is done loading. The cursor blinks. She pulls on her jumpsuit, types in her password, and gets to work.

Two hours later: she smiles. It's a good crop. The lamprels' growth rate has steadily climbed. She might even have noticed it with the naked eye, in the absence of a monitoring system, just by peering out the window and gauging the size of their heads. Their thorns have grown stronger too, although still no match for the combines' blades; and the Corporation has even discovered a market for them. As she makes herself another coffee, the computer explains how over the last seven years the thorns have been processed into buttons and jewelry, and some collectors have even started purchasing them whole — as souvenirs. It's hard for her to imagine the kind of aristocrat who would sport a lamprel-thorn ring or earring. She looks at the number on her forearm, then hits the red button, makes more coffee, and stares out the window.

The combines roll in from far away, from the boundaries of the plantation, allowing her a few minutes to admire the lamprels as they rock back and forth. Some clouds have gathered in a sort of oval over the tower, in a shape resembling a lamprel from a child's drawing. *Interesting*. But they dissipate presently as a buzzing approaches — all at once deafening.

It's time for the harvest.

Although she's been at this job for a while, she still likes to watch. White-turned-bluish beneath the planet's strange sun, the vehicles barrel down their tracks; blades jutting out in front, dancing so frantically they resemble insects' wings. Lamprels go flying with every slice, captured by the combine's many pointed antennae, cut into smaller pieces, and — once in lengths appropriate for human consumption — collected through one of the hundreds of orifices opening and closing along the vehicle's surface. It's a spectacle of such exacting efficiency that it seems almost natural, a symphony of lamprels loosed from the ground, turning to light, and then vanishing beneath an indifferent sun and the remains of a cloud that, for an instant, looked like a lamprel, but now isn't anything, a shred hanging on without reason.

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She awakes. The uneasy feeling lasts longer this time. As if, just prior to waking, she'd felt a kind of sadness.

-4-

She hates having to work on days like these, when getting up proves difficult. With her last job, in the mines, the sleep period was two months and the work shift, ten hours. Coming out of it was easier, the world didn't seem so foreign upon opening her eyes. And then there were the furloughs — one every three years. She could go spend a month aboard some station, carry on something of a social life, go looking for a man, have lovers. All their names she's since forgotten, but her locker holds a record in photos and videos, a locket. Even that was an existence of sorts. But once she lost her second appeal — and with it the status granting her access to mine work — her options were this or Earth prison. And everyone knows there's nothing worse than Earth prison.

Today, she nearly runs out of time on her shift. Evaluating the harvest takes longer than usual after the scanners indicate that some lamprels — those closest to the equator — have developed a type of clotting in their cores.

She dispatches a probe to perform a biopsy and waits a long time for the results: it's still lamprel pulp, only hardened by a new protein and altered in its

composition, grouped not into vertical fibers, but a sinuous pattern instead. She relays these results to Management, who responds to proceed with the harvest. By the time the final combine leaves the plantation for the tunnels, dusk is already gathering. The sun has shrunk down and shines like a rounded sapphire on a lamprel-free horizon.

She climbs into the capsule feeling anxious, having had no time to exercise or shower off. Although it's true that the muscle re-activators keep her body in perfect condition during sleep, and the computer microscopically cleans her each day, the older she gets, the less she trusts these capsules, these monitors, this computer — everything lacking hands or eyes or a heart, everything that doesn't know what it means to dream.

She sighs. She tries to calm down, but can't. She hates this planet, its blue sun hanging over the plantation once every seven years, filling the lamprel seeds with energy. She hates the Corporation and the young man, always a new one, who answers her messages. She hates that red-and-white logo, the emblem of some galaxy. She hates the exobotanist (what was his name?), the inventor of this deranged

way of boosting lamprel growth. She even hates that other world, one she's never seen, the lamprels' home planet. She hates herself for falling in love with Vasilio at fifteen, precipitating the events that brought her out here, to this life broken up into 14-hour days, punctuated by interminable periods of rest, plagued by sad nightmares she can never recall.

But mostly she hate the lamprels. She hates their fat stalks, pale green, bowed by the weight of their heads. She hates their thorns, prickling beneath the sun. She hates the stubborn way they gather light for 14 hours, locked up in their seed pods, just so they can spend the next seven years growing in the night, slowly populating the farms (all Corporation-controlled). She hates the way they creep up in size, inch by inch. Hates knowing they'll be fed by the irrigators as she sleeps. And that they'll grow: first a tiny stalk seemingly unable to withstand the blasts of water, then a head, a single thorn, then suddenly a young lamprel, absurdly searching for the sky, a stupid plant manipulated by the Corporation and the blue sun and the long night, a rarefied deformity living despite itself, spawning thorns for an ecosystem that no longer exists, *goddamned* plant, nearly artificial, the center of her days. She hates the

taste of its pulp: slightly sweet with a minty tang. And now, drifting off to sleep, she thinks about the way the lamprels enter her thoughts, how they grow infinite in her imagination (weakened as it is by cryogenic sleep). And she's not yet sure if she hates this. She's not sure if she hates seeing the lamprels in her dreams. By now, anyway, she's asleep, and already the first lamprel peeks out from the wells of her consciousness. And, of course, she'll have no memory of this when she wakes.

* *

She awakes, heart pounding. Minutes go by, eyes kept shut, trying to calm down. She opens her eyes. The computer's finished loading. *So, is this the real world? But then where are the lamprels' voices?* Already the memory of these things is fading. And only now does she hear the chime of the alarm, insisting she get up.

She's startled. It's never made that sound before. Soon enough she remembers: it goes off when the operator shows no signs of activity after fifteen

minutes. *But has it really been that long? Why didn't I hear it before now? What time is it anyway?*

She hits the button and waits impatiently as the hatch slides away. How strange to have spent so much time, wide-eyed, in sorrowful half-sleep, deaf to the alarm, barely seeing the room around her or the distant sun through the open blinds.

She's so focused on making up the lost time that she doesn't even realize how much the lamprels have grown until the computer notifies her a half-hour later. Then she goes to the window and holds her breath.

Their heads now sway in the wind barely 20 yards from her feet. They're bigger, and in some of them she thinks she can detect a change in color, a scarlet hue. She stares a long time at these strange lamprels, trying to determine if the color of their heads is actually different. Or even whether — unless the clouds' shadows are playing tricks on her eyes — their texture hasn't changed as well, whether irregularities, wrinkles, perhaps scales have formed. But the computer now summons her back.

Before going ahead with the crop evaluation, she sends a message to Corporate. Their response comes almost immediately: the higher-ups are more than satisfied . . . the new nutrients appear to be working as planned. She has no idea what they feed the lampreys, and she doesn't care; all she wants is for someone to rid her of this strange anxiety, that same dread, it's now clear, that plagues her in her sleep. The young man writing the messages this time is a timid sort who won't be easily coaxed out of boredom and who has no desire to talk. She closes out the chat and gets back to work, but opens it again a few minutes later.

The pulp, she explains to the young man, has altered as well. He asks her to submit the files. She complies.

A long silence follows. She's oddly tired for having drunk cup after cup of coffee all day.

Finally, the young man answers: "The Corporation has been expecting these results." She relaxes slightly. Feeling stupid, she asks if there's any danger. He types a monosyllabic "no," and she signs off with a certain affection she would never dare to

admit. *He probably has a girlfriend, she thinks; he's probably a good person.*

But an hour later, the fear returns when she presses the red button and the blinds snap shut.

She launches the chat. They take their time responding. And then the young man explains how new corporate policy requires all blinds to remain closed during harvest. She asks him what she should do now — in the time left before sleep. He suggests playing the computer in a game of chess, checkers, or cards. She says she doesn't like playing with machines. He suggests listening to music. She signs off, now openly bitter, and closes the chat.

She looks for headphones in the drawer of the console, plugs them in, and presses play on Rachmaninoff performed by Tessarolo. She shuts her eyes, and her mind floods with images of her father, of the meadows of Mars VII beneath the rain, of conservatory classrooms, and of Vasilio most of all. Of his face not yet deformed by drugs, his guitar invariably slung over his shoulder, a cigarette on his lips. Of their first apartment together, of the

spectacular view of the city at night, of their flights by motorcycle. And with her eyes closed, she cries.

She's suddenly frightened by something faint mixing with her memories. Perhaps she's heard a muffled sound from behind the window. Or else — although she doesn't want to believe it — she's glimpsed a lamprel. Or, rather, she's glimpsed a cloud in the *shape* of a lamprel floating above the combines, perfect this time — thorn, stalk, and bulb — in the sky behind the blinds.

She shakes her head. She goes to sit up and pour herself some coffee and discovers the world has turned to fog. She blinks. The vague chaos remains. And the sound is growing louder now. She's no longer sure if she's sleeping or awake. The Rachmaninoff has faded, dissolved into the combines' roars and those other, interminable growls, which no machine could produce.

It's the lamprels singing. They're crying, stirring lightly as if in wait. And all at once, through the thick, shut blinds, she sees them jostle savagely, swinging their heads, some of them dodging the blades for an instant, crashing impotently against the

combines. But the antennae surround them, begin to tear at them with mechanical ease. The two sides struggle, lampreys groaning beneath the bluish sun, the combines dealing out death and storing the canned remains within the depths of their holds.

She is motionless, awake. She's sure of it: she *is* awake. The final movement of Rachmaninoff's third concerto still bubbles up from her headphones, now in its final measures. She watches the blinds.

Rising to her feet, she goes to the window and brings her ear in close to the metal. Hears nothing. She turns on the monitor and opens the chat, but the young man's shift has ended. She's all alone.

Her fingers trembling, she types a message to Management. She says nothing of the dream, simply tells them she's tired of the job, that she's quitting after the next cycle, that she's ready to be sent to Earth. She reads back the message and presses send. Then she stores the headphones in their drawer, looks over at the blinds, and shudders. Peeling off her jumpsuit, she hangs it in the closet, and climbs into the capsule. She curls up in the fetal position (forbidden by the manual), hits the button, wraps her

arms around her body, and closes her eyes. *This nightmare will be over soon*, she has time to think before falling asleep. *Soon I won't have to live anymore among lamprels.*

* * *

She awakes. Or, does she? So much time has passed and she's listened to the lamprels singing for so long that she can't be sure. But this feeble body seems to be hers, and this space, the capsule.

Before her eyes, whether opened or closed, a lamprel's head is swaying. The window is broken. Two more plants, further off, have grown such that they've invaded the tower, their stalks bending. But for whatever reason, it's this nearest one that interests her.

Although she knows her oxygen must be escaping through the hole in the window, she's not afraid. She recognizes — remembers without ever having heard — the voice of this lamprel towering above the rest.

It bends toward her shallowly and opens its greenish eye, shining between two thorns. She smiles.

And then, without knowing why, she begins to sing, and the lamprel rocks back and forth to the rhythm of her voice, which fumbles as best it can for the high notes of Schubert's "Ave Maria." And suddenly, the lamprel's voice is ringing in her head, melancholic and pure, adding just the right tones, transforming her attempt into something new and shining like a teardrop in her palm.

When they finish singing, the lamprel, in its hushed voice, asks the goddess whether she finally understands, or if she'll once more call the demons back. And, although knowing it's a lie, she tells them that the demons are all dead, and there'll now be time to dream of other things.

Translated by books Lozano Johnson
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For M.

