

Bed of Leaves

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**Abstract**

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When her brother, Arthur, disappears, Cassie is the last to see him. Guilt-ridden and pushed aside by her mother, her classmates, and the very community she calls home, Cassie is forced to seek her answers in the one place she has left: the woods. But the forest is not all that it seems, and as she steps beneath the copse of trees, Cassie begins to realize that she is not alone.

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# BED OF LEAVES

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By N.L. Sweeney

The following is a selection from the book-length manuscript created in fulfillment of the requirements of the University of Washington Bothell's Creative Writing & Poetics MFA. This chapter has been chosen as a sample of the work and has been approved as sufficient evidence of thesis level work by Rebecca Brown and Miriam Bartha. Following is a short statement of poetics. Look for the rest of the work in publication soon.

## Chapter 1

It was foggy the day I lost Arthur. We were out on the deck. Despite the fog, the air felt warm. I spread myself out on the swing, dangling my legs over the arm as I swung back and forth. The fallen clouds caught the sunlight and made the air golden and made it seem like we were in the middle of the sun. Arthur brought his Team Rocket coloring book and lay on the deck, the book out in front of him. He liked to make sounds while he worked, practicing James's bubbling laugh or whispering the names of the *Pokémon* under his breath. Mom had insisted it was cute, but Mom hadn't been trying to read *The Daring Adventures of Supergirl*. My best friend Patrick had lent me the book for the weekend from his dad's collection. On my fourth try to read Supergirl's monologue, I slapped my magazine down and said, "Can you please stop?"

Arthur's crayon paused its furious scratching. Even in the muted light, his eyes squinted up at me. The nurses at school had said we should take Arthur to an optometrist, but Mom saw that as a personal affront to her parenting skills and said Arthur's eyes were just fine.

"I'm almost done," he said. He held up a blue Arbok, smiling. He'd never been good at colors, either. He always got blues and purples mixed up. When I didn't immediately praise him, his brow furrowed, and he added, "I colored in the lines this time."

"Cool," I said, flipping my magazine open. "Color in the lines quieter." I could see him wilting over the top of my page. "Arbok should be purple. You're using the wrong color again."

I positioned the comic so I wouldn't have to see his pouting lip. After a little, he settled back into the quiet scrawling of his crayon. When I glanced up, he'd switched to a darker shade of blue. A light wind rustled the broad leaves of the trees. In *The Daring Adventures of Supergirl*, Psi's mindblast fizzled out and Mr. Pendergast swelled and twisted into Decay.

"I'm hungry," Arthur announced.

He'd moved up alongside the swing. It took a physical effort not to push his cherubic face away. "Okay, so you're hungry," I said. Decay roiled and tumbled and grew.

"Mom said you were in charge today," he said.

I set the comic book to the side, so I wouldn't crinkle it in my clenched fist. "What about it?"

"Can you make me something?"

"I'm reading," I said. "Make yourself a sandwich. I'm waiting 'til Mom gets home."

His face scrunched. "But I don't want to."

"Well." I shrugged and brought the magazine up between us.

His whole body deflated with his sigh. He stared out at the street before finally going into the house. A few minutes later, he came back with peanut butter all over his hands and a sandwich clenched in his fist. His mouth made a wet smacking sound that made my teeth clench. Strawberry jelly ringed his lips in a sticky emulation of lipstick. When he finished, he started tapping on the deck.

"Can we play?" he asked. Then when I didn't respond, he whined,

"You never wanna play anymore."

I rolled my eyes. Maybe if I actually got the chance to have my own space, I would *want* to see him. "I just don't want to play right now," I said. "Could you just stop asking me questions for five minutes?"

"What am I going to do then?"

"Oh my god." I rose and stared into those blank blue eyes. "Let me make this perfectly clear for you: I. Do. Not. Care."

His eyes drooped. "But—"

“Please just leave me alone,” I said. “Kick a ball. Run a marathon. Just do it away from me. Do you understand?”

Arthur’s lip quivered. Fake. “I just wanna hang out.”

“Well, I don’t want to hang out with you.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. His voice still had that ear-grating, fake chord to it. He just wanted me to say he was okay, that I wasn’t upset anymore.

Dragging his feet across the deck, he slumped onto the stairs.

“I thought I made it clear,” I said. “I don’t want you here right now.”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

I shot him a glare.

Arthur pushed off and stamped out into the yard. The fog curled around him.

Watching him walk off, I could almost see the frantic anger tightening Mom’s brow for letting him wander off alone. “Where are you going?”

Arthur spit. He always spit when he was angry. “I thought you didn’t care where I went. That you wanted me gone.” His hands clenched by his sides.

“Arthur,” I growled, standing. “Tell me where you’re going.”

He took a couple steps like he was going to run but stopped when he saw me move to the edge of the deck. “I’m just going in the forest,” he said.

Our house had been the last one built in the neighborhood. Something about an environmental zoning law. Because of that we sat right up against a broad forest, Carver Forest. A path from our front yard led off into the trees. We’d heard coyotes once or twice before, but most didn’t come that close to our neighborhood.

“No further than the path,” I said. “And be home before sunset. I’ll be angry if I have to come get you myself.”

He shrugged, turning.

“Arthur!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, and the mist swallowed him.

I picked up my magazine for what felt like the 30th time that afternoon and slipped back in. On the edge of my awareness, I heard the snap of twigs beneath Arthur’s feet, the crack of a stick against one of the trees, the scuff of Arthur’s shoes on the road.

A soft breeze ruffled the corner of the final page, and I closed the comic book. The light breeze chilled my legs, and I rubbed them to warm up. At some point, the fog had pulled back into the woods. A glance at the orange blaze on the horizon let me know I should go start dinner soon. I took one more look at the empty space where Arthur had been.

“Arthur,” I called. “I told you to stay near the house.”

I slipped my sandals on and crossed the yard. “Arthur!”

No response.

“I swear to God,” I started, then broke off the oath in case Arthur was listening and told Mom. “Arthur, get back here right now. I need to start dinner.”

Nothing.

Wide leaves heavy with cold autumn dew shifted and creaked. Thick trunks leaned forward and back. The mist hung like sheets between the trees. The forest stretched back into white-grey infinity, the silhouettes of branches slipping into the background.

I followed the soft sway of trunks down to the curl of roots and moss. Rich, dark soil spread out beneath them, laced with more moss and short shrubs. A few short sprouts stood at

the edges, but otherwise, the ground was free of growth. The wind sighed between the trees, and I found myself sighing too. I sipped the cold air like that first drink of water after a long summer night.

As I stepped into the trees, the fog wrapped its cloak around me. The outline of the house evaporated into white distance, and the forest rose in its place. The silence here was natural. The only sound was my breath and the flex of bark around me. Brown needles clogged the edges of the road. The drifts of fallen cloud dampened the sound of my footsteps. I breathed in the earthy scent of wet wood and loam.

A short thick stick lay in the middle of the road. A long line traced along the path, one Arthur must have carved as he walked. My nails dug into my palms. I cursed for real this time and followed his trail.

The cold air wrapped around me, eased aches and tensions that I hadn't realized I carried. My heartbeat steadied to a gentle thrum in my chest. I slowed my pace, stopped, and ran my hands over the tufts of moss clinging to a low-hanging branch. I bent to examine a solitary pink flower standing sentinel in one of those rare spots where the canopy let light reach the ground. I shook my head at myself. I wasn't here to look at the flowers.

I knew every tree, every leaf, and every toppled log. My fingers brushed rough bark and the fronds of squat ferns.

Mushrooms dappled the sides of trees and sprouted from the soil. Above me, the canopy rose like a sheet in brief suspension before it floats down to the bed.

There was only one place Arthur would have gone. We had a spot in the wood, a place I shared with him when he was younger. Sure enough, down the road was a snapped stick, discarded to join the needles.

I cupped my hands to my mouth. “Arthur!” The woods ate the sound. Twilight cast the dark sides of the trees in purple. Cold air seeped in. Only a month before, Arthur and I had broken off spears of icicles from a hill deeper in and thrown them like javelins at imagined shadow invaders. But had Arthur thanked me for playing with him then? Of course not.

Our spot was hard to miss. A mound of dirt rose up out of the greenery, and on top, a western red cedar tree stretched into the air. With the added height from the hill, it towered above the other trees. We’d spent long sunny days leaning against that solid trunk, but the real shelter lay beneath. The hill curved inward before it met the top, forming a little cove underneath. There, a few of the roots dangled down to obscure part of the entrance to our little hideaway. The dirt there was soft enough to sink into. I bent down so I would be able to see in, but Arthur wasn’t there.

The path twisted between the trees. “This isn’t hide-and-go-seek.”

Silence.

A chill traveled down my spine. There was less gold in the sky now. The world was cast in muted purples. The only light I could see in the patches of sky, hid behind the thick weave of branches.

I stepped off the road. Spongy fallen needles and leaves sank beneath me, and I lifted my feet over sprouts of white fungus. “Arthur,” I said. “I am not in the mood. Get over here right now.”

Branches quivered in the breeze. I heard a rustle and spun to find an empty space between two thick trunks. No, not empty. A highlighter yellow shoe had lodged itself in the knot of a root. It was Arthur’s. I grabbed it.

I glanced about for its companion. It'd be just like Arthur to hobble around with one shoe, dragging his socks through the dirt. And of course Mom would blame me for the laundry. "Arthur," I tried one more time. "I'm not going to wait around for you."

Maybe Arthur was already home by now. Maybe I'd just missed him or maybe he'd tried to sneak past me once he knew I was following him. I tucked the shoe under my arm and walked home.

The sun had fallen. The streetlights had flickered on. I checked, but there were no muddy sock prints on the deck. I tossed Arthur's shoe to the side of the door. Maybe he was just out back still pouting. I glanced at the clock in the dining room. Six-thirty.

"Crap!"

I kicked off my sandals by the door and rushed to the kitchen. I'd have to skip the hotdog slices and just make the macaroni. Three boxes because Mom had had such a long day. I even sprinkled some parmesan into the mix. I was stirring the last of the sauce in when I heard the garage groan open and Mom's car pulled up.

When Mom walked in, she looked immaculate as always, in a sharp black blouse and grey pencil skirt. Her eyes looked sleepy, but somehow not a single one of the hairs in her tight bun had slipped free. She sighed as she set down her purse. I knew from experience that if someone showed up at the door or a friend of hers came over, she could slip back on that bright, chipper I-don't-need-to-sleep smile. It used to make me angry how quickly she could swap like that, but lately it had just made me sad.

While she was tossing her car keys on the entry table, I crept toward the backdoor. I had to find Arthur. I gripped the door handle.

"Hey, sweetheart," Mom called.

My spine snapped straight. “Hey, Mum.”

Her earrings made a soft rattle beside her keys. “I missed you today.”

“I missed you, too,” I said. My heart quickened. Everything was going to be okay. “I’m just going to go and get Arthur really quick.”

“Wait,” she said. She moved up behind me and wrapped her arms around me, giving me a tight squeeze. “I have to get my Cassie snuggles in.”

“Right,” I said.

Mom pulled back. “Are you okay, baby?”

“Yep, yep. I’m fine,” I said. “The mac n’ cheese is still in the pot.”

I closed the door behind me. The backyard was a small patch of short cut grass. Mom paid my friend Patrick, the one who gave me Supergirl, to mow it once every two weeks. The grass grew long and wild where it met the trees.

I called out to him. I checked along the side of the house. The edge of the trees. Nothing.

“Arthur!” I yelled.

Mom pushed open the door. She was silhouetted in the light from the dining room.

“Cassie,” she said, slowly. “Where’s Arthur?”

“I don’t know.”

## Statement of Poetics

### Writing for Accessibility

Literature and I have always had a complicated relationship. Growing up, I leaned as far as I could away from Ivory Tower texts. *Pride & Prejudice* bored me. *Moby Dick* baffled me. *To Have and Have Not* frustrated me. When a classic book would get brought up in a discussion, my hackles immediately went up.

Recently, I have found an appreciation for books that fall in the literary genre. When I have stepped outside the classroom, I have been able to appreciate the witty banter of *Hamlet*, the dark imagery of *Lord of the Flies*, the clipped diction of “Hills Like White Elephants.”

What bothers me most about books that sit firmly in the Ivory Tower of Great Literature is not the books themselves but how much they are revered. Every sentence of a text is dissected; every loose word drained dry. The result is something devoid of any content. The analysis of the text has taken the experience out of it. Rather than letting the words wash over me, I feel forced to take each droplet one-at-a-time.

Placing such analysis as the expected end-result of “quality” literature creates writing that anticipates this dissection. Writing becomes a performance, and often form overrides function.

None of this is to say that a text cannot be served by its function. *Hamlet*’s descent into madness would not be as powerful were it not for the intimacy of an audience. Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” would not have been nearly as effective as a narrative account of his father’s drunken behavior. But as a writer, I am interested in creating work that invites the reader into an experience and not into an analysis.

While I can find joy in reading poetry and in analysis, that isn’t what I want to write. While I want to create deep, seductive prose, I am not interested in drawing attention to my craft at the expense of my content.

I want my writing to be readable for a broader audience of readers. But how can I make my work accessible? Some might point to the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level, a measurement tool used to help determine what grade-level you write at. The tool factors in how many syllables each of your words has and how many words you use in a sentence. While a guideline, the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level is used as a guide for creating readable content. *Bed of Leaves* sits at a 9th or 10th grade reading level, whereas normal conversational speech is about 6th grade reading level.

Accessibility, for me, isn't about the length of the sentences or how many syllables are in each word. It is about having the tools for comprehension in reach. I am comfortable with having references (like the Green Man references I will speak about later), but these references aren't necessary for comprehension. Accessibility for me means that no matter what skills a reader comes to my book possessing, they will be able to find a way to connect with it.

Really, that was the problem for me when it came to Ivory Tower literature. The way it was presented asserted that the proper way to appreciate literature was to find out what components had made it. With my writing and my style, I want to signal to readers that this book doesn't require analysis. It just invites the reader to follow the story.

To facilitate this, I've turned to models, in the sense that Samuel Delany uses the term in *About Writing*. A model is a recognizable structure employed as a sort of scaffolding for a narrative. The pattern of building tension and catharsis in a horror movie, the hero(ine)'s journey, the fall of the tragic king, these are all models used by writers to form the shape of a narrative. The specifics differ from story to story, but the model is the same, and as Delany puts it, models resonate with readers.

My book follows the model of a fairy tale: the call, the warning, the descent into the forest, and the success/failure. Cassie loses her brother and meets a boy in the woods. He warns her about the dangers of the woods. She delves deeper into the forest and the scenes in Carver's Forest take up more

and more of the novel as it progresses. All this culminates in Cassie's encounter with Arthur and the choice she has been warned about.

The history of the fairy tale is oral. Though in France these stories were told in noble houses at soirees, fairytales also passed from mother to child, sibling to sibling, peasant to peasant. The fairytale is a formula that belongs to the people in a way that poetry and the novel, arguably, do not. Fairy tales and folklore live in a space outside of academics and outside of class.

The themes this book explores are complex, and the way I write about them isn't simple, but the structure is familiar, which allows a broad spectrum of readers to follow the narrative.

One of the main concerns I have when it comes to Delany's models, though, is that making one's writing fit into preexisting structures can create work that is formulaic and predictable. When a model is followed too closely, the reader will know what is coming next, which can remove a lot of the tension from a work. Sure, there are times when I'm reading my smutty gay romance novels when I want a little predictability, but that isn't the kind of work I am interested in writing.

I think where I find myself as it regards formula is in the twist. I enjoy leading my reader down an established path and then splitting off into the forest. That's part of why I love rewriting fairy tales: their familiarity as a form and their flexibility for reconfiguration.

An awareness of the model I am working within allows me to use my readers' expectations against them, to perform a Judo redirection of energy and motion, and the twists I make upon texts are in conversation with a dialectic that is available for a broad audience. It is this combination that keeps me excited as a creator and gives my readers the utensils for digging into my text.

There is a glaring gap in this accessibility conversation. Accessible to who? While I want it to be a book that uses a familiar framework, the fairy tale can be a form used in stories for adults as well as children. It is tempting to say that my key readership is everyone, but a book written for a young adult

audience is very different from a book written for adult readers. Especially with a book written about a young person, it is important to key readers in early who the intended readership is.

*Bed of Leaves* is a book about a young person that is written for an older reader. For me, that means less clarifying and more trust for my reader.

### **The Invitation**

Ever since I was a kid reading was an escape for me. I wanted to immerse myself in it, escape from the world for a little. So, I read fantasy novels and books with deep, immersive descriptions, ones that pulled you in.

I remember feeling this the first time when I read Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*. I felt bound and surrounded by the feelings and sensations Bradbury described. But this was a feeling that was familiar to me even before I could read.

Every member of my immediate family is trained in hypnotherapy. Since I was a kid we did self-hypnotism and hypnotized each other for everything from sleep to little aches and pains. Hypnotism, at its core, is guided imagination. You invite the client in to experience a journey, and they guide the journey themselves; they choose to turn the page, and they make the constant choice to "buy in" to the narrative being woven. With *The Illustrated Man*, I felt hypnotized.

The work done to help clients slip into that state shares a lot of similarities with pulling the reader in. Reading begins with an invitation, a hook. Often that hook is description and establishes the scene or scenario. In hypnotherapy, you must engage all senses because not everyone can see as clearly as someone else or hear as well as a different person. In hypnotherapy, the goal is to give the conscious mind as little to argue with as possible in order to turn up the volume on what's going on deeper down in the mind, so this engagement of all the senses doesn't leave the client struggling to "see" a forest if

visualization might not be their strong suit. Further, this allows them to sink into a space and interact in that space.

One of the means of inducing trance is to inundate the client with details, switching between scenes until the sonic quality of the words takes precedence. I used this as a model for my scenes in the forest, weaving together a web of details to lure the reader in and, by overwhelming the senses, to create a calm, white noise for all the senses. While I don't intend to lead my details into the point where they become more about the sound than the images evoked, I do want to create the same effect for my readers, crafting lush imagery that surrounds and pulls at the imagination.

Ultimately, the forest is leading Cassie through an induction: relaxation, an invitation, and a heightened state of internal awareness. Cassie's awareness, however, is turned outward.

That said, I want to be careful of overdoing it. Readers can get a lot of information from very little detail, especially when it comes to people. If you give them just enough description to form a person, the broad strokes of a paintbrush, they will fill in the details. If you overwhelm them, they will feel like a text is heavy and become lost in the words rather than the experience of the words.

In anime, they have what are called the *sakuga* scenes. These are moments where the quality of animation jumps drastically. For the duration of the scene, the images are sharper, and more frames are added to each shot. This isn't to say that the quality of writing should only go up at certain points, but that more heavy descriptions should be used to further a theme, to emphasize tension, or to represent a character's emotions.

In life there are moments we can recall with perfect clarity and others that are more like suggestions than memories. These moments we remember say as much about the events as they do the person doing the remembering. Though this story is not epistolary, it is a first-person account, and the fact that the forest scenes are so rich reinforces how the forest feels more real for Cassie than the outside world.

My thought for how to approach this in my fiction relates strongly to some of my hopes for this piece. Even in the sections that were in-scene out in the world, I tried to restrain some of my descriptions. I wanted the forest to be realized in a way the outside world wasn't. So that even when I used descriptions at her school or home, I wanted it to engage one to three senses as opposed to all of them. If my readers fell into a trance, I wanted it to be a light one.

### **The Feels**

One of the areas where descriptions are stretched are in emotions. The easy route, of course would be to just tell the reader what someone is feeling. There are times when this kind of explicit explanation is helpful and needed. I have a tendency as a writer to go too far in the other direction, replacing discreet explanations with abstract sensory descriptions. Sometimes, this can have the opposite desired effect, leaving my reader more uncertain of what is going on than they would otherwise be.

For examples of the use of emotion in other works, I looked to books like Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, which also features embodiment of the unreal. The genre of my model stories was especially important to me because in speculative works, the line between metaphor and reality can be blurred. In a realist literary novel, someone can feel like their fingers are freezing, but in a speculative context, someone's fingers could be turning into ice. That example is a little odd, but there is an extra level of consideration when using abstract language in a speculative piece.

In Alderman's work, she takes the supernatural ability of electrocution and grounds it in the body. When women interact with this strange, new ability, the descriptions are always centered around feelings and scents and visceral body-emotion connections. This serves to ground the intangible in something we can touch or imagine.

Emotions, too, can be slippery creatures that evade both common sense and often naming. My hope is that by grounding emotions in Cassie's body, they become more easily felt by the reader and thus more understandable. It is one thing to say that you feel sad and another to recount the hot feel of the tears on your cheek or the way your body crumples as if your strings have been cut.

One of the main themes of my work is about possession and what it means to be centered in your own body. The forest pulls Cassie's awareness outside of herself, but is that such a bad thing? Cassie has so much interiority when she is at home. In her moments where her emotions sink into her, she feels sadness and guilt and pain and frustration. She feels alone. The forest offers her a break from that, it soothes the pain and wraps warmth around her. It makes her feel connected to something bigger than her.

I don't have an answer for whether the forest's offer is good or bad. My goal with my novel is to show how seeking that answer is complicated. Entire religions center around the idea of dissolution and breaking the cycle of attachment. In our Western context we place inherent value in the preservation of the self, but when Cassie feels more removed from her emotions and her body in the forest, she feels comfort and belonging. Is it so bad to want a break from the cycle of pain?

## **Environment**

One of the most integral parts of my novel is the setting. In my work, I've split the environments into two distinct categories that have probably become more apparent the more I have spoken about them. They are the forest and the outside world.

I wanted the forest to replace the symbol of home, so that it becomes a welcome respite from the rest of the world instead of the other way around. This can be seen in the structure of each chapter, with scenes alternating between the two settings, in and out like breath. The forest is where answers

are found, where calm can be realized and where Cassie can be herself without answering to someone's expectations of her.

The descriptions in the forest are lush, more than just being vibrant, though, I wanted them to be inviting, seductive, dark, and mysterious (all while still being comforting). I didn't want a setting that felt flat and unresponsive. I wanted the forest to become a character of its own, just with different ways of communicating. I wanted it to feel alive.

In earlier drafts of the novel, the forest didn't come into the narrative until "Chapter 4." Arthur's disappearance still took place in the woods, but the earlier scenes where Cassie goes out to find him, and later goes with her mom and neighbors, were much shorter.

In this book, the forest is one of the main characters, and I wanted it to be introduced as early as I could, alongside most of the other characters. I want to have the setup for the things to come, the seeds that will sprout into a tangle of vines. I modeled this after *A Sudden Light* by Garth Stein. In this book, Stein pulls up images of death to set up the space long before we get to the house, and the narrator even comments on the personality of the place and how it seems to move with a will of its own.

My book is not alone in this model of place as character. Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* had environments that served as antagonistic forces in their books. The Biologist in *Annihilation* struggled against the mysteries of her environment and the secrets kept from her. Ivey's characters struggled to survive in the hostile environment of Alaska, that is until the Snow Child came into the story.

In both these books the environments establish atmosphere, but these same spaces also seem to have motivations. In *Annihilation*, this motivation is wrapped up in the unknowns of what transpired in Area X. The narrator, Rachel, questions what the purpose of this place is in such a way as to create

intention within its spread. In *The Snow Child*, the environment takes the form of a young girl, and the two characters work in tandem.

In *Bed of Leaves*, my intent is to weave personality through description. As with any good character, Carver Forest's personality comes through in its actions. As Cassie comes closer to the forest, scenes featuring the forest come with more frequency.

A setting, however, is more than just place. It is also time. I think of this, too, as two distinct sections: the anachronistic forest scenes and the chronological main story line. The forest scenes take place along three stretches of time: one generation ago, when Sam decided to enter the forest; Cassie and Arthur's early childhood, which reveals some of their unique connection to the woods; and the not-so-distant past, which involves anecdotes about Arthur and Cassie. The anachronism of these scenes allowed me to put them in thematic order, placing them in conversation with the main story thread.

### **The Eye of the Camera**

I cannot mention these scenes, however, without commenting on point of view. I chose to keep most of this book in the first person because I wanted the narration to feel close and personal. The limited third can have bleed between the main character and the narration and descriptions, but I wanted the bleed to be inseparable. Because this work is both fantastical and psychological, I want there to be very little room for interpretation in the text itself. In other words, I want there to be room for the question of reliability.

As I mentioned before, however, it is not epistolary. In Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* series, the main character, Rachel, was also the narrator of the work. But as the book moves forward, Rachel reveals that she has written this book after the fact. While some readers might appreciate this, I felt frustrated by the need for this conceit.

When I dive into a book, I am willing to assume that anything could happen. I just accept that it is in that POV simply because it is. Also, when it comes to *Bed of Leaves*, I don't have a presumption about whether or not the narrator is still alive at the completion. These sorts of mental hoops only raise more questions. If this is a diary, how did it end up a book? Is this world our world? Why is the author's name on the front page? I have seen this done elegantly in books like *The Dark Lord: The Early Years* by Jamie Thompson Dirk Lloyd, where there is a playful metafiction of how one of the main characters is mind controlling the author, but when it comes to POV, I am willing to suspend my belief about why the book is written the way it has been written.

This is strongly related to the way I read and why I read. Books are an experience. Growing up, I needed to take breaks from reality. I needed to get away from the world around me. Storytelling and reading helped me do that. When I write, I want to create the same for my readers, an opportunity to step into a different headspace and experience. In the case of this book, which is especially psychological and emotional, that means first-person is useful.

With third-person, the narrative voice has a certain amount of credibility with the reader. When a story has a layer of removal, trust is established, and unless we are given a reason to distrust the narrative voice, we assume a level of clarity (even in the case of close limited third). There is a reason history books are written in the third person.

My themes of interior narratives, loss, and the body all lend themselves well to the first-person, as it allows me to sink deeper into emotions. With the main character narrating the book, the reader knows that the chosen images are subjective. With her use of words and her understanding of the forest, we can assume that Cassie is intelligent, driven, and detail oriented. She also tends to turn her attention outward rather than inward, seeing her feelings reflected around her rather than in herself. Her emotions are experienced physically as opposed to cerebrally.

Cassie's perspective is limited, which is why she makes so many mistakes when it comes to her treatment of those around her. What makes this book a book about younger people for adults is that the book expects the reader to see the dramatic irony inherent in the actions of the main character. A lot of the tension of the piece comes in how Cassie navigates her loss and guilt while making assumptions about the motivations of those around her. Central to *Bed of Leaves* is learning to question Cassie's choice of where to "point the camera."

In Cassie's interactions with her mom, for example, she focuses on Naudine's failures in communication and her controlling nature. But with an examination of subtext, a mourning mother rises to the surface, a woman who is trying to hold her sadness, her shame for blaming her daughter, and her fear of losing her daughter all together. She is failing, but she is working so hard to connect to her daughter, but in doing so, she ends up only isolating Cassie further.

Through interactions like this, I want to force the reader into a position where they question Cassie the same way that those around her do, following the themes of the ways we judge youth and "send them into the forest." Having the reader's experience of the text be through Cassie's eyes, while bringing up moments where the reader will distrust Cassie's analysis of the situations she is in, creates more tension and complicates these moral questions.

In earlier drafts, I had Cassie's forest scenes taking place in the third-person, with the language becoming more distant from Cassie as her focus turned more toward the forest around her. While this fit the dissolving of self that I wanted to accomplish, readers often experienced a sense of confusion, and in later drafts I was able to pull back this point of view shift while maintaining the distance.

I did, however, keep the scenes of Arthur in the woods in third. The first instance of this kind of scene comes in at the top of "Chapter 2" seemingly from nowhere and without explanation. I did this because I wanted to indicate the shift of style and signal to the readers that something different was happening. I also wanted to make room for questions to form.

If it were kept in first-person, readers would just accept that now Arthur is telling his side of the story, but I wanted readers to ask who was writing this new narrative. Is it the forest? Is it Cassie?

### **Waiting for the Answer**

One of the main motivators for what keeps readers reading are questions. More than that, questions that are answered, or questions with enough evidence to create a conclusion. In other words, a novel doesn't have to spell out the answer for readers.

The most basic question is one that almost every fiction reader asks when they open the first page. "What is going to happen?" *Bed of Leaves'* narrative questions are what happened to Arthur, who is the boy in the forest, what will happen to Cassie, and are the events taking place in the forest real or in Cassie's mind.

Arthur's whereabouts is the main question which is given a possible answer at the end, and the identity of Sam is revealed in the closing chapters as well. As for the final two questions, the answers are unclear, however, there is enough evidence to form different conclusions. Some examples of this are that Devon never explicitly says he can see Sam, the bottle that Cassie got back, the fact that Evan can't see Sam, the knowledge that Devon's brother was named Sam and was lost in the forest, the dreams Cassie has leading up to Arthur "coming back," and the scenes of dissolution and becoming the forest that are littered throughout Arthur's scenes.

The pacing on these bits of information is key. While outlining the work, I kept in mind that quality which comedy and horror share: catharsis. This is the lead up to the joke, the slide of strings as the masked figure sneaks up on the hero(ine). After the punchline, we laugh. After the hero(ine) gets away, we sigh. If you were to map out the structure of a lot of successful stories, this rise and fall of tension would look like a series of peaks and valleys, rising toward the inevitable climax of the novel.

At each of those peaks, I either provided evidence toward one of those bigger questions or answered one of the questions of the subplots, such as what would happen to Evan and Cassie's relationship after she lashed out at him.

I don't explicitly answer some of the main narrative questions because the answers themselves are the less interesting part. People don't tend to go to horror movies to watch the hero(ine) run away—or at least I don't. The part that keeps me reading a book is the anticipation of those answers.

By allowing room for those answers to continue to be thought about after the book is closed, the book continues to grow. We talk a lot about holding our reader's attention while they read, but what about while they are away?

Some of my best reading experiences came when I felt like I was still in the world after I finished them. When I read *The Power* and I momentarily forgot that women couldn't electrocute people. When I read Karen Thompson Walker's *Age of Miracles*, a story about the world's rotation slowing down, I woke up wondering how many hours would be in my day. When I read Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, I started thinking about the intangible things we can taste in a meal.

Those books stayed with me when I stepped away because they engaged my sense of curiosity and wonder. That is what I hope to do with this book. In the same way that people step away from a movie and ask what people think happened, as in the ending of the movie *The Fountain*. I want to leave room for consideration and breath, for the experience that I hope to create with *Bed of Leaves* to continue beyond those final pages.