

Junior Division, Prose

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An Invasive Species (an excerpt)

I lived in my own carefully curated ecosystem. One built on a radioactive wasteland, consisting of a network of memories—old and forgotten—living on the precipice of my neurons, ready to fire the moment familiarity sparked them to life. All my actions were instinctual—like breathing—built on my fleeting will to survive. I was the shell of a human, living in an ecosystem that caved in and expanded upon itself simultaneously.

Every muscle, tissue, and organ within my shell was a species dependent on another, an obligate mutualism between them—codependency in its rawest form. Each system—nervous, somatic—was a community that worked in tandem to survive the wasteland. My nervous system was built from ivy, leaving an insatiable itch beneath the surface of my skin.

On a good day, I could bear through the almost instinctual urge to scratch until it eased into the kind of ache felt when someone rhythmically traces the same patch of skin for too long.

On a bad day, I would find pain to be the only way to satisfy the itch, believing that if I could carve down to the nerve, I could cut it out. That I could detangle the spindling system from within me and use it to tie a knot. Even if I found a nerve, it wouldn't hold my weight.

My brain—its own complex species—would eat away at the old, unused, and weak pieces of my memory, replacing who I thought I was—who I wanted to be—with whom I needed to be to survive. I was growing and dying simultaneously, caving in and expanding upon myself like a dying star. The death of a guiding light to be born anew. I mourned my younger self, who was far lighter in holding the knots, and her innocence, which died in the onslaught of adolescence.