



MAGIC

WHAT THE KEEPING LEARNED TO REMEMBER

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE	Sasha Loomis
TWO	Dario Selo
THREE	jmarsh
FOUR	rpenguin
FIVE	Cora Lindgren
SIX	Sammy Hall
SEVEN	Iris Beddoe
EIGHT	Olive Kassen

Chapter

ONE

written by Sasha Loomis

The trees didn't speak in words exactly. More like a sensation of cold water running backward up her spine, carrying messages in the current. Nell stood very still, aware that her left shoe had filled with beetles she couldn't feel. They poured out when she lifted her foot, each one wearing a different expression of mild disappointment. "You'll want to listen with your teeth," said the oldest tree, or possibly it was the youngest. Time worked differently for things with roots. Its bark had grown around several objects that shouldn't have been there: a silver thimble, three piano keys, someone's wedding ring still attached to the finger. Nell opened her mouth. The October air tasted purple. "Not like that," the tree corrected, though its leaves had all turned into sleeping moths. "Like you mean it." She tried again, biting down on nothing. This time the message came through clear as glass, which is to say transparent but slightly wavy, distorting everything on the other side. The trees wanted her to find something they'd lost. Or maybe they wanted her to lose something they'd found. The beetles were reforming into a shape that resembled her grandmother, if her grandmother had been made entirely of clockwork and regret. "The orchard keeps what it takes," explained a middle tree, one that might have been an oak except it grew pears full of sawdust. "But sometimes the keeping forgets itself." Nell understood completely, in the way you understand dreams while

you're still dreaming them. There was a door somewhere between the roots, and the door had a problem: it had grown hinges on the inside, which meant you could only lock it from the place you were trying to keep out. The logic was immaculate. She knelt down, pressing her palms against the earth. It was warm, which was wrong for October, or right in a way that made wrongness irrelevant. Something hummed beneath the soil, a frequency that made her fillings ache with nostalgia for teeth they'd never been part of. "There," said all the trees at once, their voices suddenly individual: a child's whisper, a merchant's bark, a widow's singing, a sleeping king's command. "There where the worms make their parliament." She dug with her bare hands. The dirt was cooperative, moving aside in neat spirals that preserved the tunnel systems of creatures with too many faces. Six inches down, her fingers touched something that flinched. She pulled it up carefully: an apple the size of a human heart, beating. It was very old, this apple. Old enough to remember when the orchard had been a lake, and before that a cathedral, and before that a mouth. Its skin held the imprint of all the hands that had almost picked it, generation after generation of almossts accumulating until the fruit was heavier than iron and lighter than intention. "You'll need to plant this elsewhere," the trees informed her. "In the place where you buried your real name." Nell stared at the apple. It stared back through eyes it shouldn't have had. She couldn't remember burying her name, but that was probably the point. Things buried deliberately are always easier to find than things you've forgotten you lost. The beetles had finished assembling themselves into her grandmother's form and were now putting on a small play about the invention of mercy. Nell watched for a moment, the apple pulsing in her cupped hands, warm and terrible and necessary. Somewhere in the distance, a door was trying to remember how to be locked.

Chapter

TWO

written by Dario Selo

The question of whether she had actually buried her name, or whether the trees were asking her to remember something that hadn't happened yet (which is its own kind of burial, when you think about it, the interment of potential in the grave of the conditional), occupied Nell's mind as she walked between the rows. The apple beat against her palm in rhythms that corresponded to no human pulse, though it might have matched the cadence of something older, something that predated the invention of circulation as a concept separate from the movement of sap through cambium layers. She found herself considering the mechanics of forgetting. Not the passive variety, the slow erosion of detail that happens to everyone's childhood, but the active kind, the deliberate burial the trees had described. It would require, she thought, a certain violence. You would have to know your name well enough to kill it, which meant knowing it better than you'd ever known it while you were using it, the way you only truly see a tool when it breaks. The beetles, having concluded their performance (mercy, it turned out, was invented accidentally by someone trying to create a more efficient form of cruelty), were now dispersing into the grass, each one carrying a fragment of her grandmother's disapproval. The apple's eyes followed her thoughts with interest, or possibly with hunger. The distinction between interest and hunger, Nell was beginning to suspect, only

mattered to things that couldn't photosynthesize. Everything in the orchard was always hungry and always interested and always neither, existing in a state that language kept trying to collapse into something binary. She pressed her thumb against the apple's skin, which gave slightly, and felt something give way inside her own chest, a corresponding pressure, as if she and the fruit were on opposite ends of a very short lever. Where do you bury a name? Not in dirt, obviously, though dirt was where you buried most other things. Names required different soil. Memory, perhaps, except memory was where names lived in the first place, so burying one there would be like trying to drown a fish. Unless, she reasoned (and reasoning in the orchard was always dangerous, always productive), you drowned it in memory that belonged to someone else. She tried to remember her grandmother's face, and instead remembered the beetles' approximation, which was somehow more accurate than the original, the way a photograph of a ghost is more ghost than the ghost itself. The trees were watching her with their non-eyes, which were really just knots that had learned to look. She could feel their attention, patient as geology, curious as mathematics. They had time. They had centuries of time, millennia of it, time enough to watch every possible outcome of every possible choice branch and fruit and fall and rot and seed and begin again. But Nell only had the time she was standing in, this particular October, these particular seconds leaking away like sap from damaged bark. She found the spot because it was the only place in the orchard where nothing grew. A perfect circle, perhaps three feet across, where the grass stopped as if meeting an invisible wall. The soil there looked newer than the soil around it, though new was a relative term in a place that remembered being a lake, a cathedral, a mouth. She knelt, the apple still beating, and began to dig again. This time the earth was not cooperative. It clung to itself, resistant, the way scar tissue resists the knife. Six inches down (everything important, apparently, happened at six inches), her fingers struck something that wasn't stone or root. She excavated carefully: a small wooden box, plain, unadorned, the kind of container that achieves

significance purely through what it contains rather than what it is. The lock had no keyhole. The hinges, she noticed, were on the inside.

Chapter

THREE

written by jmarsh

The lock's mechanism existed in a dimension perpendicular to the one where locks typically resided, which explained why Nell could open it simply by holding the apple against the wood and humming a tune she had never learned but which her bones had always known, the melody that plays in the spaces between vertebrae when the spine remembers it was once a tail, before that a rope of nervous light connecting the first mind to the first fear. Inside the box (though inside was perhaps not the correct preposition, as the box appeared to contain a volume larger than its exterior dimensions could accommodate, the way certain silences contain more sound than actual noise ever achieves), she found a collection of objects that she recognized with the peculiar certainty reserved for things seen in mirrors held at angles that shouldn't produce reflections: a spool of thread made from frozen moonlight, already melting, the liquid pooling in silver beads that rolled upward; seven keys, each one shaped like a different confession; a photograph of a door she had walked through every day for years without ever wondering where it led when she wasn't looking; and beneath these, folded with the precision that only terror or love can achieve, a piece of paper on which her name had been written in ink that was simultaneously fresh and centuries dry, the letters forming a word she could read but not pronounce, recognize but not remember, a name that fit her the way a

house fits a ghost, which is to say perfectly but only in the architectural sense, only in the way that absence fits into the space where presence used to live. She lifted the paper (the apple's heartbeat quickening, or perhaps her own, the distinction collapsing under the weight of proximity), and beneath it discovered the reason the box was so much larger inside than outside, which was that it contained, pressed flat like a botanical specimen, an entire orchard, miniature but complete, each tree rendered in such microscopic detail that she could see individual moths sleeping on individual leaves, individual fingers protruding from individual sections of bark. This orchard was identical to the one surrounding her, except that in this version, in this pressed and flattened iteration, all the trees were blooming, which was impossible for October, which was impossible for trees that existed in multiple time states simultaneously, which was impossible in the way that only the most essential impossibilities can be, the kind that reality is built upon rather than constrained by. The trees above her, the full-sized ones with their non-eyes and their patient geology, began to keen, a sound like wind through stones that had learned to weep, and Nell understood (though understanding in the orchard was always a kind of drowning, a submersion in meaning that left the lungs full of comprehension and empty of breath) that she was holding the orchard's original blueprint, the first draft of itself, the version it had been before it learned to exist in sequential moments rather than all moments simultaneously. This was what they had lost, or what they had found, or what the keeping had forgotten in its keeping, and she was meant to, what? Restore it? Destroy it? The instructions were implicit in the weight of the thing, in the way the paper seemed to pull toward the earth as if it wanted to root, to grow, to become again what it represented. The apple opened its mouth (because of course it had a mouth, had always had a mouth, she simply hadn't been looking at the correct angle to see it), and spoke in a voice that tasted like copper and October: "Plant me in the centre of the buried orchard, or plant the buried orchard in my centre. The grammar is negotiable. The outcome is not.

Chapter

FOUR

written by rpenguin

The blevins then took forth right with the sword!

Chapter

FIVE

written by Cora Lindgren

The apple's flesh parted under her thumbnail, releasing something between sap and blood, viscous enough to cling. It smelled like the moment before rain, that pressure in the air that makes animals quiet and skin prickle. Nell brought her thumb to her mouth without thinking, tasted iron and sugar and the particular bitterness of things that have waited too long underground. The folded orchard in the box began to uncurl. Not metaphorically. The paper was moving, its creases softening, edges lifting like petals responding to heat. She set it on the barren ground and watched as it slowly inflated, each pressed tree swelling into dimension, bark gaining texture, leaves separating from the page's surface. The miniature orchard was growing, or returning to a size it remembered being, and as it expanded the real orchard around her contracted, trees leaning inward, their branches creaking with something like hunger, something like grief. She dug her fingers into the apple's wound, widening it. The flesh inside was white, crisp, ordinary except for the way it bled that copper-sweet fluid and the fact that she could feel it flinching away from her touch, withdrawing into itself the way muscle contracts around injury. The mouth the apple had spoken through was gone now, or turned inward, or she was looking at it wrong. Everything in the orchard required looking at wrong, required the eyes to unfocus and the mind to stop insisting on coherence. The

ground beneath the expanding paper orchard had begun to warm, then to soften, then to breathe. Nell pressed her palm against it and felt the inhale, the exhale, the terrible patient rhythm of earth pretending to be lung. This was the centre, then. The place where burial and planting lost their distinction, became the same gesture performed with different intentions. She squeezed the apple. More fluid ran between her fingers, pooled in her palm, and where it touched her skin something shifted. A memory that wasn't hers surfaced: standing in this same spot when it had been lakebed, before that cathedral floor, before that the soft palate of something vast and sleeping. The memory tasted mineral, ancient, true in the way that only invented things can be true, uncontaminated by the compromises of actual occurrence. The paper orchard was knee-high now, each tree the size of her forearm, still growing. She could hear them, their voices threading through her teeth like the full-sized trees had taught her, but younger, uncertain, asking questions instead of making statements. They wanted to know if they were real. If they had always been real. If the version of themselves that had learned sequential time had betrayed them or saved them or simply forgotten them in a way that erased the difference. Nell knelt and pressed the apple into the breathing ground. It sank immediately, pulled down by gravity and something else, some magnetism between fruit and soil that existed before orchards, before apples, before the first cells decided to collaborate on the project of wanting. The earth closed over it with a sound like swallowing. For three heartbeats nothing happened. Then the ground erupted. Not violently. Gently, the way mushrooms emerge, the way certain flowers open only at night when no one is performing observation. A tree broke the surface, bark already thick and ancient, branches spreading with the speed of something remembering rather than growing. It was unlike any tree in the orchard, and it was exactly like all of them, a synthesis, an average, a voice speaking in the dialect that exists between languages. The paper orchard had stopped growing. It surrounded the new tree in a perfect circle, each miniature trunk as thick as Nell's wrist now, each one blooming with flowers that were also

moths, or moths that were also flowers, the distinction rendered irrelevant by beauty and impossibility in equal measure. The full-sized orchard leaned closer. She could smell them now, their bark, their sap, the beetles that lived in their crevices and the moths that slept on their leaves. Smell was too simple a word. She was breathing them, taking them into her lungs where they dissolved into understanding. They were waiting. The new tree was waiting. The planted orchard and the surrounding orchard were waiting, and Nell realized with a certainty that lived in her marrow that she had not solved anything, had not restored or destroyed, had simply moved the problem into a different shape, given the orchard a new centre to orbit, a new heart to beat around. And the beating, she understood, her teeth singing with the knowledge, had only just begun.

Chapter

SIX

written by Sammy Hall

The beating had a rhythm she could map, if she paid attention. Three pulses from the new tree, then two from the paper orchard circling it, then one long shudder from the full-sized trees leaning overhead, and the pattern would start again. Nell sat back on her heels and wiped apple-blood on her jeans, which seemed like the thing to do when your hands were sticky and you'd just planted a heart-fruit in ground that breathed. Her grandmother would have known what came next. Not the beetle-version, the real one, the woman who'd kept a garden where nothing grew except on Tuesdays, and even then only plants that had opinions about the weather. Nell tried to remember what her grandmother had said about planting things in the wrong season, but all she could recall was something about intention being more important than calendars, which was the kind of advice that sounded wise until you actually needed to use it. "So," she said aloud, because talking to the orchard had worked before, sort of. "Now what?" The new tree didn't answer. Its branches stretched toward the October sky, bark already marked with the same wrong-objects-grown-through pattern she'd seen on the first tree. She could make out a button, a nail, something that might have been a tooth. The accumulation of things that shouldn't nest in wood but somehow did. The paper orchard shivered. The miniature trees were still blooming, flowers opening and closing in a

rhythm that didn't match the larger pattern but didn't contradict it either. Nell reached out and touched the nearest one. It was solid, real, warm with photosynthesis or whatever passed for photosynthesis when you'd been a drawing five minutes ago. The bark had texture, tiny ridges under her fingertip, and when she pressed slightly the tree swayed as if she'd pushed a full-sized trunk. That was the problem, she realized. Scale. The paper orchard existed at the wrong size, and the new tree existed at the wrong time, and she existed in the wrong grammar, standing in the centre of three orchards that were trying to be one orchard and failing in interesting ways. Her teeth started singing again, that cold-water-up-the-spine sensation translating into something almost like language. The trees were explaining, all of them at once, their voices layered like harmonies in a song where every note was the melody. They'd been fragmented, they said. Or they'd been whole and had forgotten wholeness. Or wholeness had forgotten them. The prepositions kept shifting, refusing to settle into a configuration that made grammatical sense. What they needed was simple. What they needed was impossible. Same thing, really, in a place where hinges grew on the inside of doors. They needed her to choose which orchard was real. Not all three. That was the problem, the centre she'd created by planting the apple. Three versions of the same place couldn't occupy the same space, not without someone standing in the middle and deciding which one got to be literal and which ones got to be memory, metaphor, might-have-been. "I don't know how to do that," Nell said. The trees knew she didn't. They were asking anyway, which was either cruel or optimistic, and with trees it was hard to tell the difference. She looked at the full-sized orchard, patient and massive and full of objects growing through bark like the world's slowest museum. She looked at the new tree, young-ancient, a synthesis that hadn't decided what it was synthesizing. She looked at the paper orchard, blooming out of season, each miniature tree perfect in a way that real things never managed. Her name was still in the box. The paper with the writing she could read but not pronounce. She'd left it there, folded, when she'd taken out the flat

orchard. Maybe that was the answer. Maybe the orchard didn't need her to choose between versions. Maybe it needed her to claim one, to sign it, to write her name in its registry the way you write your name in a house's deed when you stop being a guest and become the person responsible for the plumbing. The teeth-singing got louder, confirming nothing, which she was learning to interpret as confirmation. Nell stood up, brushed dirt off her knees, and reached for the box.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Iris Beddoe

The box was heavier than it had been. Weight that didn't exist in grams. In the tongue. She lifted it anyway. The paper with her name had refolded itself. Origami logic, edges meeting without hands to guide them. She pulled it out, watched the letters swim. Still readable. Still impossible to speak. Her grandmother had taught her this: a name written down isn't a name anymore. It's a contract. The singing in her teeth changed pitch. Lower now. Urgent, but not rushed. The way roots grow when they find water, certain and patient and absolutely committed to arrival. She held the paper against the new tree's bark. Nothing happened. Wrong tree, then. Or wrong method. The orchard dealt in blood and beetles and things buried at six inches, not in simple transfers of paperwork. She should have known. Magic that worked cleanly wasn't magic, just filing systems with better aesthetics. The paper orchard reached for her. Not the trees themselves, they were rooted, anchored in their returned dimensions. But the moths on their leaves, or the flowers that were moths, separated and lifted. Seven of them. One from each miniature tree in the circle's perimeter, plus one from something she hadn't noticed before, a sapling no bigger than her thumb growing at the exact centre, right where the apple-heart had gone down. They landed on the paper. Where they touched, the ink began to move. Not bleeding or running. Rearranging. The letters of her

name unstacked themselves, broke into component strokes, then reformed into something else. A map, maybe. Or a formula. Or the kind of diagram you'd find in a book about surgery, showing where to cut and in what order and how deep before you reached the thing that mattered. The moths lifted off, returned to their trees. The paper showed her three names now. Hers, still unpronounceable, at the top. Below it, two others. One written in sap, one in rust, both equally legible and equally impossible. The orchard's names. The full-sized and the miniature. The versions that had diverged and couldn't remember how to converge. The new tree had no name. She could see that now. The space where its name should be was blank, waiting, a signature line on a contract that needed both parties to sign before it could enforce itself. Her teeth knew what to do before her brain caught up. She bit her tongue. Deliberately. Hard enough to draw blood but not hard enough to make her stupid about it. Blood welled, filled her mouth with copper and salt and the specific taste of choice being made in real-time. She spat on the paper. The blood touched all three names at once, because distance on the page had stopped being geographic and started being taxonomic, categories collapsing into each other the way species sometimes do when the ecosystem can't support distinction anymore. The names drank. Around her, the orchards shuddered. Not the three-beat pattern from before. This was synchronized. All of them at once, the same motion, branches bending in the same wind even though the wind was only blowing in the grammar between then and now. The paper burst into flames. White flames, cold flames, the kind that burned without heat and left ash that drifted upward instead of down. The ash touched the new tree's bark and stuck there, accumulating, forming letters that were also scars, that were also the opposite of scars, tissue remembering itself into unmarked wholeness. A name appeared on the trunk. She could pronounce this one. "Nell," the tree said, in a voice that was her voice, the one she used inside her own head where no one else could hear. "That's not my name. That's yours." "I know," she said. "You can't give a tree your name. Names don't transfer. They're specific." "I'm not giving it." Her tongue

hurt where she'd bitten. The words came out slurred. "I'm lending." The tree considered this. The full-sized orchard leaned closer, then leaned back. The paper orchard dimmed, then brightened. Both of them watching. Both of them waiting to see if a loaned name could hold three versions of a place in alignment long enough for them to remember they'd always been the same place, just seen from different angles of October. "Alright," the tree said. It started to grow.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Olive Kassen

The growth made no sound. That was the wrong part, the part that told her this wasn't ordinary arboreal expansion but something closer to memory filling a gap it hadn't known was there. The trunk thickened, bark spreading like slow water, and where it spread the paper orchard began to dim, not dying but receding, the way stars recede at dawn without actually going anywhere. Nell tasted October in the blood still pooling under her tongue. Bitter. Final. The full-sized trees were bending now, branches reaching down, and where their tips touched the new tree's crown they stuck, grafted, the wood flowing together without seam or scar. She watched a branch that had been separate become continuous, watched the boundary dissolve, and understood that the orchard was deciding which version of itself to keep by becoming all of them at once, layered, the way a single moment contains all the moments that led to it if you're willing to look at time wrong. Her name on the trunk was changing. The letters stretched, split, became three words where there'd been one. Nell couldn't read them. They were in the language the trees spoke, the one that required teeth and spine and the parts of her that remembered being other things before they were her. The paper orchard was ankle-high now. Shrinking, or sinking, returning to the two dimensions it had escaped. The moths lifted off in a cloud, confused, then settled on the new tree's branches, which were also the

old trees' branches, the distinction finally meaningless. She tried to count them and lost track at forty, then found the count again at seven, and both numbers were correct because counting in the orchard worked like everything else worked, which was to say it worked until you expected it to make sense, then it shattered into true things that couldn't coexist. The ground under her feet solidified. That was the first sign it was ending. The breathing stopped, the warmth faded, and she was standing on dirt again, ordinary dirt, October dirt, cold and dense and done with magic for the season. The box in her hands was empty. She looked inside to confirm, saw nothing but wood grain and the faint outline where the folded orchard had rested. Her name-paper was gone, consumed by the white flames or absorbed by the tree, and she couldn't remember which would be worse. "It's done," the tree said. Not her voice anymore. A new voice, assembled from the voices of every tree that had contributed a branch, a root, a memory of being separate. Nell's tongue had stopped bleeding. She swallowed copper and spit and the residue of a contract she hadn't quite understood when she'd signed it in blood. "What's done?" "The keeping. We remember now how to keep ourselves." The trees around her, the ones that had been full-sized and were still full-sized but somehow more aligned now, more unanimous, straightened. Their branches withdrew from the new tree's crown, pulling back but not pulling away, leaving connection the way you leave a door open when you're still in the house, just in another room. She could still feel them in her teeth. Quieter now. Content, or as close to content as things with roots ever got. "What about my name?" She meant the paper, but she also meant the other thing, the name she'd had before the trees taught her to bury it, the one she'd used when she was something simpler than whatever she was now. "Still yours. We only borrowed the pronunciation." The beetles were back, pouring out of the ground in their usual single file. They didn't form into her grandmother this time. They just stood there, mandibles clicking in what might have been applause or might have been the beetle equivalent of laughter. Hard to tell. She'd never been good at reading insects. Nell set down the

empty box. Stood. Brushed dirt off her jeans again, though the dirt here didn't really brush off, just redistributed itself, patient, waiting for the next burial. The orchard spoke once more, all its voices layered into one. "October's almost over." It was. She could feel it in the air, that edge where autumn tips into something harder. The trees would stop speaking soon. Would stop speaking to her, anyway. Unless she came back. Unless she remembered how. She walked toward the edge where the orchard met the road. Behind her, the new tree settled into its name, into being the centre of a place that had finally learned how to be whole. The moths on its branches were already sleeping.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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