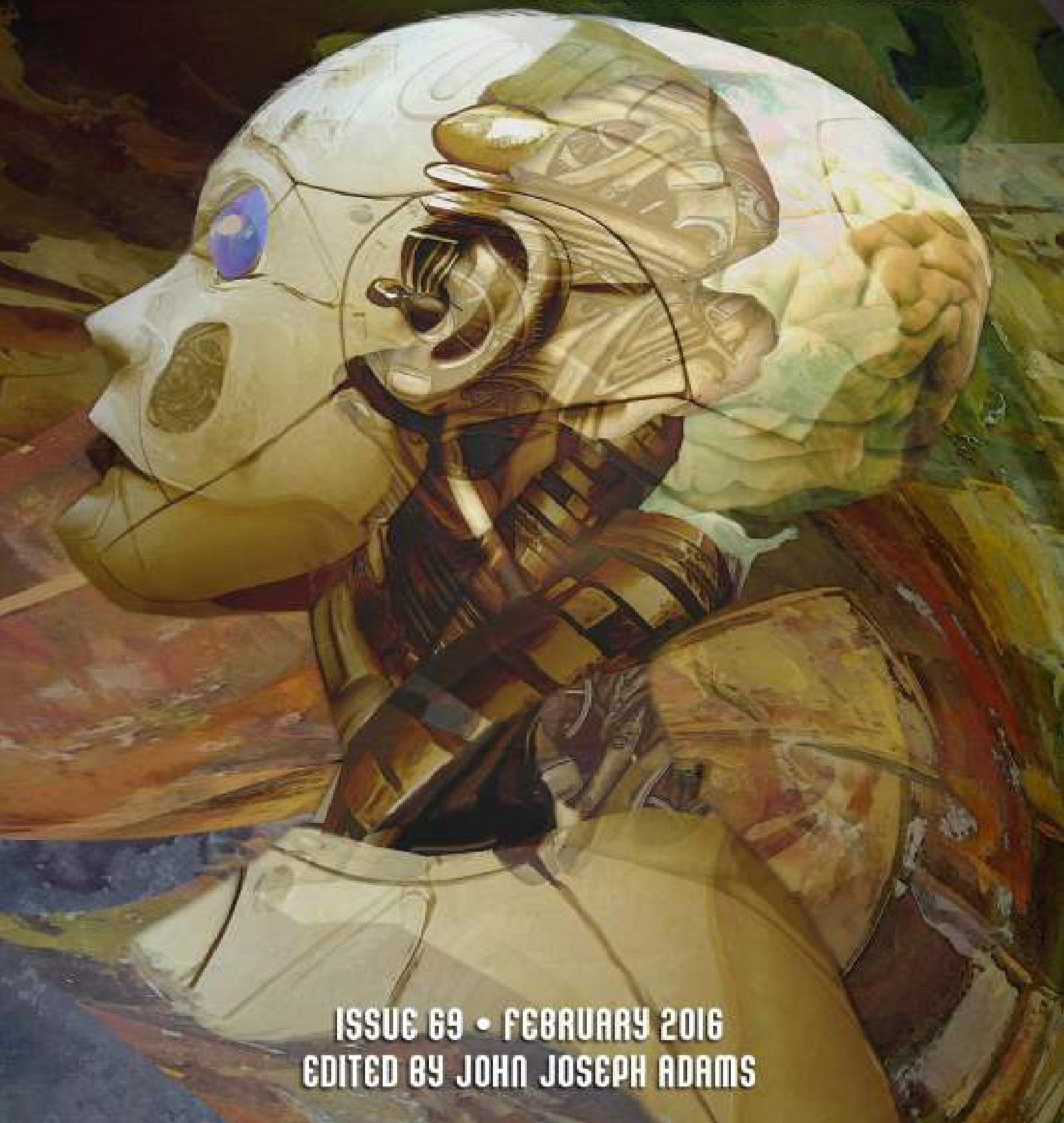


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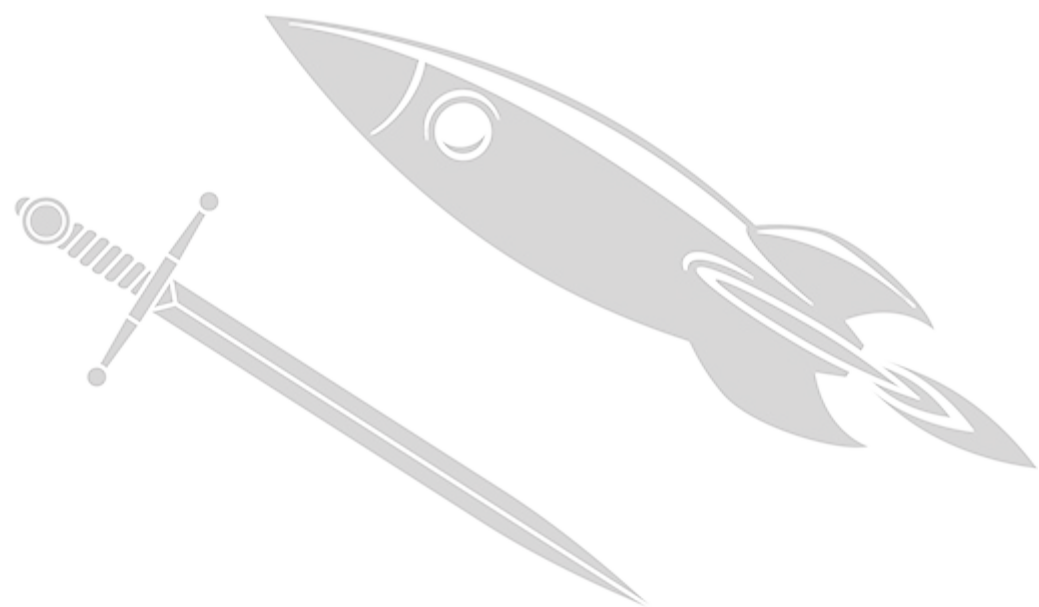
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



ISSUE 69 • FEBRUARY 2016
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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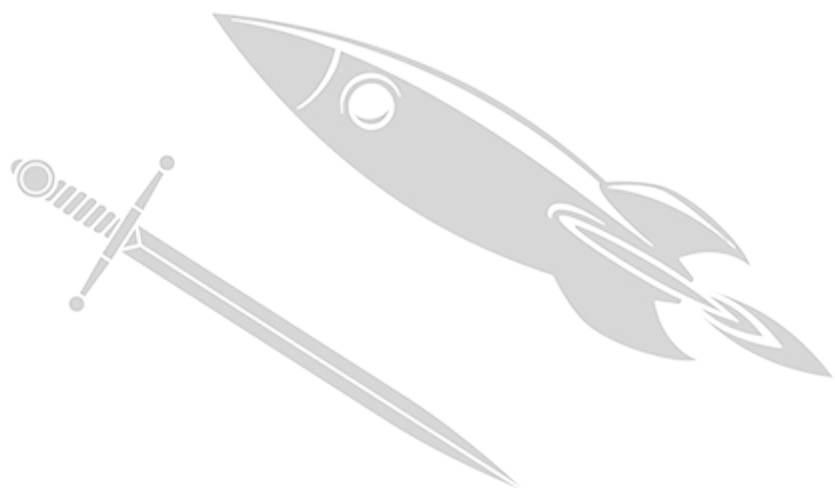
Also Edited by John Joseph Adams

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Cover by Elizabeth Leggett

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FROM THE EDITOR



Editorial, February 2016

John Joseph Adams | 1016 words

Welcome to issue sixty-nine of *Lightspeed*!

We neglected to mention it in the magazine last month (whoops!), but we're currently in the midst of crowdfunding our next Destroy project. In 2014, we asked women to destroy science fiction, and they did—*spectacularly*—in our first crowdfunded, all-women special issue, Women Destroy Science Fiction!. Then, in 2015, we asked queers to destroy science fiction, they did—again, *spectacularly*—in Queers Destroy Science Fiction!

This year, we're turning the reins over to People of Colo(u)r, with People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction!, guest edited by Nalo Hopkinson and Kristine Ong Muslim. Joining Nalo and Kristine will be a team of wonderful POC creatives, including Nisi Shawl (reprint editor), Berit Ellingsen (flash fiction editor), Sunil Patel (personal essays editor), Grace Dillon (nonfiction editor), and more!

We launched our Kickstarter campaign on January 18 and surpassed our original goal in just a matter of hours. Our first day's totals surpassed that of QDSF and WDSF, and as I write this (on the evening of January 31), we're currently at nearly \$26K (518% of our original goal). Thanks so much to all of you who have supported the project thus far!

Our two biggest stretch goals are the same as last year: If we receive enough pledges, we'll not only publish POC Destroy Science Fiction!, we'll also publish additional special issues POC Destroy Horror! (at \$30K) and POC Destroy Fantasy! (at \$40K). We've already unlocked our first four stretch goals, including a "POC sampler" anthology edited by yours truly, consisting of POC-authored stories previously selected for publication in my various projects.

If you'd like to buy or renew a subscription, doing so during the campaign is a great idea because one of our stretch goals unlocked a really great bonus: If you back the Kickstarter and select a subscription reward, you'll not only get the subscription—you'll also all 70+ back issues of the magazine!

The POC Destroy Science Fiction! Kickstarter campaign will run from

January 18 – February 19. To learn more, visit destroysf.com/poc.

••••

In case you missed my big news recently: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, publishers of my *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy* (and the rest of the *Best American* series), have offered me the opportunity to edit a science fiction/fantasy (and horror) novel line for them—and naturally I agreed!

The line is called John Joseph Adams Books (their idea, not mine!), and will be a tightly-curated list of 7-10 titles per year. We'll be pre-launching the line in early 2016 with new editions of three Hugh Howey novels, starting with *Beacon 23* (February 9) and then in March, we'll publish volumes II and III of the Silo trilogy, *Shift* and *Dust* (March 22)—making them all available via traditional publishing for the first time. The line will then kick things off in earnest in early 2017 with our first batch of never-before-published works.

If you're a regular reader of my magazines and/or anthologies, then you should already have a good idea of what to expect—and if you like my work as a short fiction editor, then I suspect you'll like the novels I publish as well. The John Joseph Adams Books website is still under development, but if you bookmark johnjosephadamsbooks.com, that'll take you to it when it's ready.

And never fear, dear readers—I'll still be here, working to bring you your monthly dose of *Lightspeed*, and I'll also still be editing *Nightmare* and anthologies as well. *How (!?)*, you may ask. Good question—I'm not entirely sure! I will probably have to get much better at delegating! But the good news is, I got lots of practice last year serving as a judge for the National Book Award (Young People's Literature category), where I had to consider about 300 novels while keeping up with my short fiction duties. So I think I'll be able to fit everything into my schedule. If not, I'll just give up some optional extracurricular activities, like sleep.

Also, speaking of HMH and *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*—ICYMI, it's now available. In it, guest editor Joe Hill and I present the top twenty stories of 2014 (ten science fiction, ten fantasy), by the following:

Nathan Ballingrud, T.C. Boyle, Adam-Troy Castro, Neil Gaiman, Theodora Goss, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Kelly Link, Carmen Maria Machado, Seanan McGuire, Sam J. Miller, Susan Palwick, Cat Rambo, Jess Row, Karen Russell, A. Merc Rustad, Sofia Samatar (two stories!), Kelly Sandoval, Jo Walton, and Daniel H. Wilson. Learn more at johnjosephadams.com/best-american.

• • • •

With our announcements out of the way, here's what we've got on tap this month:

We have original science fiction by Rachael K. Jones (“Charlotte Incorporated”) and Sarah Pinsker (“Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea”), along with SF reprints by Samuel Peralta (“Hereafter”) and Paul McAuley (“Transitional Forms”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Jeremiah Tolbert (“Not by Wardrobe, Tornado, or Looking Glass”) and Karin Tidbeck (“Starfish”), and fantasy reprints by Rachel Swirsky (“Monstrous Embrace”) and Christopher Barzak (“Map of Seventeen”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book reviews and our new media review column.

For our ebook readers, we also have an ebook-exclusive reprint of the novella “May Be Some Time,” by Brenda W. Clough. We also have an excerpt from the novel *A Gathering of Shadows* by V.E. Schwab.

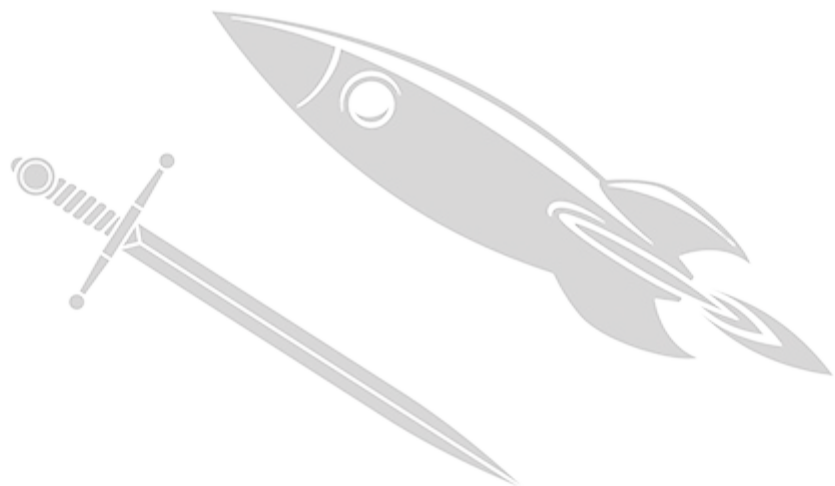
Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed*, is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a new SF/Fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, as well as the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, including *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent projects include: *Robot Uprisings*, *Dead Man's Hand*, *Operation Arcana*, *Loosed Upon the World*, *Wastelands 2*, *Press Start to Play*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*. Called

“the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a two-time winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated nine times) and is a seven-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com’s *The Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

SCIENCE FICTION



Charlotte Incorporated

Rachael K. Jones | 3500 words



At night she pores over the corpus catalogues online: *Incorporated Incorporated*, *Modern Anatomy*, and *Shoulders, Knees, & Toes*. She weighs the merits of femur length and belly fat, redundant kidneys, attached earlobes, and pronated feet. Most people buy pre-configured corpi with symmetrical faces and standard organ kits, but she wants a custom build. Something completely unique. After work, she boots up the design software and fiddles with the sliders: thickening toes, brightening the little white crescent moons at the base of the nails, narrowing the Eustachian tubes, darkening the delicate tissues around the areolae and lips. She sorts through hardware and software options, laying tendons and tear ducts and lymphatic nets until her design is perfect.

On weekdays, she soothes angry customers at the Terrold Telecom Call Center. Each morning, Mr. Dalton, her smug, incorporated boss, installs her into a generic company corpus called Hank. She knows the corpus is male

not from genitalia—the company is too cheap to buy more than the torso and head—but from the thickened vocal folds. “Male voices inspire more confidence than female ones, Hank. Basic psychology,” Mr. Dalton explains. Privately she calls herself Charlotte, but she can’t correct him. Technically, only corpi have names, and Charlotte is just a brain in a jar.

Mr. Dalton’s corpus is one of *Incorporated Incorporated’s* standard office jobs, customized with dark brown hair, a goatee, and stylish myopia paired with chrome glasses. But Charlotte recognizes the telltale patella shape and distinctive chest-to-hips ratio. His face is symmetrical, and his navel smooth. He didn’t even bother with nipples. Generic. Uninspired. Lazy.

When no one is watching her at work, she stimulates each of Hank’s cranial nerves in turn. On her command, he pouts, weeps, and sneezes at the cubicle wall. Mr. Dalton insists that she grin on the job. “Customers can hear the smile in your voice, Hank,” he reminds her, but Charlotte’s favorite expression is the frown, especially deep scowls that yank the brows together and downward into a sharp gulch. When she is incorporated, she’ll frown all the time, and no one will be able to tell her no.

Someday.

If her coworkers are bothered by any of this too, they don’t say so. During lunch, they gather in the break room for gossip while grazing their corpi on company-brand nutri-kibble. Hank doesn’t have taste buds installed, so Charlotte makes him bolt down his kibble quickly while the others chitchat. Iain has unlatched his corpus’s scalp to lave the dangling filaments of his *cauda equina* in a cup of nutrifluid as his corpus eats.

An unfamiliar female corpus slides into the seat next to Charlotte and opens a brown sack. “So, what do you think, Hank? How’s my new look?” Charlotte takes in the dark thicket of eyebrow hair over deep brown eyes, the skillful grey streaked through long black hair. It is the port wine stain on her left forearm that gives it away.

“Shanti?” asks Charlotte.

Shanti’s new corpus bobs her head. “Yup.”

“When did you get incorporated?” It makes no sense to Charlotte. Just last Friday, they were commiserating over how much a custom corpus cost, and how hard it was to save anything on their salary.

Shanti winks a well-lashed eye with epicanthic folds crisp as hospital sheets. “It’s a secret. I’ve found a shortcut, perhaps. It’s a little bit black market, but if you want . . .” She unfolds a cheese sandwich from her paper sack and nibbles the brown crust. Charlotte can’t help but envy those gleaming bicuspid and chemoreceptors. Hank gnaws kibble with the solid ceramic plate that passes for teeth.

“No, thank you,” Charlotte says firmly, feeding Hank another bite of flavorless kibble. As tempting as it sounds, she knows better than to take short cuts on anything so important as her future.

• • • •

At the end of the workday, Charlotte climbs out of Hank and returns home to a room the size of a bathroom stall that serves as her apartment. It’s small even by the standards of the unincorporated—just big enough to fit her transporter if she folds in the wheels. The jar’s dome scuffs against the ceiling. The glass is developing a cluster of cross-hatched scratches there. If she had a corpus, she would be going bald on top.

Charlotte doesn’t need much. There is a power outlet for her batteries, a plastic black storage trunk holding some maintenance tools for her transporter, and a sickly cactus the size and shape of a softball, which she mists each evening with a spray bottle. When the door locks behind her, the room goes dark, and that is when the roaches scurry in, searching for moisture. But Charlotte doesn’t mind them. She can escape. She climbs out of her jar, laves her grey matter with nutrifluid, and weaves her peripheral nerves into the control console that connects to the internet via a neighbor’s unsecured network.

Online, Charlotte feels almost whole. She loads her sensory-sim app and goes for a virtual run down a lane of mossy live oaks in the fall, where the leaves drift and swirl like red and yellow pinwheels. A Savannah, Georgia sim, where she first came into consciousness as J-Provost-L-Bohannon-Two. Created, like everyone, to be free. Free to live and work and chase her dreams, if she could only catch them. If she could pay off her birth-debt and save for a corpus of her own.

The sim feels almost real to Charlotte. More so than the dark apartment

where her squishy bundle of neurons waits out another night alone in the dark. The oaks were animated from life, and the sounds mixed from real recordings. Electrical signals to her parietal lobe simulate the wind, perfect save for the occasional static burst that turns the wind from cool to cold.

But taste and smell leave her wanting. The simulation promised fall smells: moldering leaves and burning chimneys. They used the same scent signatures for both types of carbon. It's obviously not the same thing; a real corpus could tell the difference. Lazy. No one bothers writing good chemoreceptor apps for the unincorporated, at least not ones that Charlotte can afford. Frustrated, she switches off the sensory-sim and wonders how leaves smell when you breathe deep and cradle the air inside your very own nasal cavity, and how it feels to sneeze.

She feels almost corporeal in the app, but the *almost* matters. It's the limits. They don't make puddle-stomping apps or mud pie-tasting apps. No one writes programs that let you run with a grocery cart down the cereal aisle, then coast on the back axle until you hit the shelf. You can download any number of romance sims, but there's no sim for chasing encyclopedia salesmen off your doorstep with a sword made of skinny green balloons. You can buy all the music you want online, but you can't buy a program that lets you belch the ABCs in burps that taste like wasabi. But she will do it all when she becomes Charlotte.

She's scrimping and saving. She uses Sleep Mode eight hours a night to save on power. Good practice for corpus care, or so she tells herself. She buys generic nutrifluid and changes the waste filter every eight days instead of the recommended six. She imagines each sacrifice as another fine nerve filament reaching from her cerebellum toward the Charlotte she longs to be.

She sleeps suspended inside the biochamber, brain stem trailing its fine lattice of disconnected nerves, and she dreams corporeal dreams. The blueprint comes to life, the details exactly as she has selected. Perfection. Charlotte's corpus will be sixty years old, because she loves the way corpi droop at that age. Sort of like weeping willows. She'll store extra fuel in thick padding on her belly, waist, and hips. Her black skin will be prone to flaking because Charlotte plans to try every scent of lotion they sell, once she has the chemoreceptors. Her hair will be thick, black, kinky, and unruly—like dendrites—and she'll never try to tame it.

Another month of saving should make the down payment. Then Shanti will see you can make it the old-fashioned way, one penny at a time.

••••

Monday morning, Charlotte's alarm app stimulates her anterior hypothalamus and switches on her external feeds. Charlotte opens the door with a silent command and scrapes the doorframe as she rolls out. A bad wheel jounces her gray matter as she rolls down the stairs, pinching one of her peripheral nerves against the glass wall. Irritated, Charlotte wishes for a mouth to frown with. At last she makes it out into the drizzly, dim December morning and heads for the bus stop.

She passes a wet gray lump crawling through a puddle in the gutter—someone without any biochamber at all, barely clinging to life. Charlotte stops to lave the poor soul in a dribble of nutrifluid from her chamber, but it's all she can do, since she has nothing else to give.

The bus arrives at 6:50 on the dot. Alicia, the incorporated bus driver, lowers the access ramp, and Charlotte boards. Alicia has a short, plump corpus with deep brown skin and a vestigial palmaris longus tendon in her right wrist, which bunches the skin when her hands clench the steering wheel. Charlotte appreciates the attention to detail. Most people don't bother these days.

"Good morning," Alicia says as Charlotte struggles to get her biochamber up the ramp, thanks to the uncooperative wheel.

"Good morning," says Charlotte's voice module, which somehow never sounds convincingly human. At least it's female.

Someday, when she's incorporated, she'll have skin that shade, and a palmaris longus to boot. But she won't drive a bus. No, she has other plans. Charlotte wants to spall concrete and lay asphalt.

Three corpi have chosen seats on the right side of the bus. The left, which comes equipped with sets of blue nylon straps and floor anchors, is reserved for the unincorporated. A few are already strapped in, their jars lined up like bubble wrap. Not everyone is so unhappy with their state. Some unincorporated are content to a quiet life in a tiny room with a cactus for company. They spend their money on better apps and it is, perhaps,

enough. Enough to live and work and die in half a body belonging to someone else, enough to flatten life's dimensions to a handful of choices on a checklist, your infinite potential contained in a jar.

Charlotte has never understood their contentment, because her jar has never been enough for her. She rolls into her usual niche behind the driver's seat, and Alicia straps her securely against the wall. Charlotte trains her cameras out the window as the bus rolls forward. There is a road crew working on the pavement this morning. They are replacing the uneven sidewalk across the street. She imagines herself as Charlotte out among those corpi, perhaps wielding the jackhammer, perhaps pouring cement, her muscle groups working in perfect pairs: biceps and triceps, quadriceps and hamstrings, agonist and antagonist struggling together against the pull of gravity.

Then, suddenly, the impact.

One moment, Charlotte is watching the street through her video feed. The next, the glass shatters, Alicia screams, the whole world rolls upside down. Charlotte's biochamber pitches and cracks on top, where the scratches have made the glass weak. Her tender gray matter concusses against the wall. Nutrifluid leaks as the outside world invades her shell. The liquid drips into the exposed electronics of her maintenance hatch. Blue sparks dance around the edge of the camera. One by one her systems go offline: first the voice module, then visual, and finally the audio feed. The last thing she hears is Alicia taking command of the wreck over the screams of the other corpi. "Hang on. Everything's gonna be alright . . ." Then Charlotte is trapped in darkness.

Marooned, cut off from the world, Charlotte plunges into the blackness of her own mind. Desperate, she fires electrical impulses down her nerves—a castaway tossing bottles to the sea. Nothing. Total sensory deprivation. Love notes sent but left unanswered.

Charlotte wonders if she'll die this way. Unincorporated and unCharlotted. What did it all amount to, the years of discipline and self-denial, the hope so intense that it ached?

She fights the tide of drowsiness that's stronger than the distant pain. She remembers smacking against the wall, knows that if she sleeps, she might never wake up. Charlotte clings to prickly hope.

She arrives at the hospital alive and whole. There is good news: the concussion was mild, and Charlotte will be discharged in the morning. And Alicia's corpus only lost a leg below the knee. There is bad news, too: Charlotte's biochamber needs extensive repairs. Probably cheaper to get a new one. And there's the hospital bill, of course.

Charlotte runs the math. Her corpus savings are cut in half. Five years' hard work, lost in an instant. Maybe she can make the waste filter last another day each week. Maybe she can sleep a little longer.

In the end, they are right about the biochamber. While Alicia's company has agreed to reimburse her, it is only for the value of the old one. And without a corpus, she needs the biochamber to live and work and speak. And the money has to come from somewhere.

Inside her new biochamber, Charlotte pulls up Shanti's email, shoots her a note. *I'd like that address, if you're still offering.*

• • • •

One advantage of the new biochamber is its speed. Charlotte zips down the sidewalk through a nice part of town she normally has no business in. There are almost no unincorporated out here. She has to pull over several times to let the long-legged strides of corpi overtake her. Incorporated people have important places to be, and tend toward impatience.

The address Shanti gave her is a corpus-sized apartment. Charlotte has only seen such places in internet vids advertising corpus life. A male corpus answers the door. Prominent zygomatic arches—a popular trend in the west—and a customized roundness plumping out the rectus abdominis, which disguises the standard Modern Anatomy frame almost perfectly to Charlotte's practiced eye.

“Yes?” His voice is cigarette-rough. Another artistic touch.

“I'm here for a corpus,” Charlotte pipes through her voice module. “My friend Shanti said I could get a bargain.”

He flings the door open and steps aside to let her wheel past his knees. The place is even bigger inside than she imagined. There is a whole kitchen on the left, just for preparing peanut brittle and squash casserole and all the other wonderful things corpi eat. The hallway runs ahead, opening into

several rooms on the right and left before terminating in an open space. That is where the corpus leads her.

“You’re in luck. We just had a few good models come into inventory today. Fresh.” It is hard to keep up with his long, strong corpus stride. Charlotte almost rams his shins when they enter the large living room.

She cannot imagine what she would do with so much space. If she had a corpus, maybe a few cartwheels. That always sounded like fun to her. The room reminds her of the conference room at work where they leave their corpi at night, settling them into rolling chairs before Mr. Dalton detaches them and drops them into their waiting biochambers. This room has chairs, too: puffy green recliners with dusty stuffing hanging out of splits in their sides, and in each recliner, a corpus. Six ranged around the room. Charlotte’s guide spreads his arms.

“All on sale. Half price from market rates. Complimentary navel installation if you want it. Take your pick.”

Charlotte rolls between the chairs and examines her options, zooming in her biochamber’s cameras for a closer look. She disregards the three males outright. Of the three remaining, she can instantly see that none of them are Charlotte, not properly. Too young. Too pale. None of them have belly buttons, as the salesman said. One of them is so thin the cheap, generic pelvis looks like it might cut through the skin over the waist.

“Is this it?” Even her artificial voice doesn’t disguise the disappointment.

The male corpus grins. The risorius contracts, but not the zygomatic major. “You can always upgrade it later. Still cheaper than buying new.”

It’s a fair point. And the used corpus in the middle isn’t so bad. It’s young, and a little too thin for Charlotte’s taste, but the frame is good quality, and the height about right. And anyway, it’ll age, and with enough peanut brittle, she can round it out. “That one,” she says, “does it have a palmaris longus?”

He grabs the corpus’s right hand and scrunches the fingers together until the little muscle pops out like cord. “There you go. You want it, then?”

Charlotte remembers her sensory marooning during the accident. There are no guarantees in life, no corpus waiting for everyone. It could be now or never. “Yes, please.”

She logs in to her bank and arranges the money transfer. He asks her to

mark it as a gift. Then he hauls the limp corpus upright, and works open the skull bolts, which look a little sticky. *Charlotte at last*, she thinks.

The skull pops open with a sound like a tooth yanked from its socket. The man reaches inside and rips out something wet and gray. It isn't moving.

"Oh God," says Charlotte, "that's a person!"

The salesman slings the body into a pail lined with a black trash bag. "It's okay. They're dead. I'll rinse it out for you, if it bothers you." He fishes a yellow pail from behind one of the chairs and raises a soapy scrub brush.

"But that's a dead person!" Charlotte protests. "They died inside that corpus!" She's amazed when the salesman just shrugs and starts soaping out the inside of the skull.

"They're not using it anymore. Might as well let someone else get some use out of it when they're gone."

Charlotte cannot process all the thoughts barraging the wrinkled folds of her insula: disgust like sour milk smell, horror like the color mauve, terror like the dark apartment when the internet is down and the roaches skitter over her. Why did Shanti send her here? Did she know? "Is this what they wanted?"

"Of course," he answers a little too quickly.

Charlotte knows corpi, though. She knows what it means when the eyes drop down when they're speaking. And she knows. She knows she can't do it. She can't take a person's most personal possession, their own hard-won Charlotte, without their permission. You were supposed to be buried in your corpus. Your corpus was *you*. "I don't want this. I'm going to reverse the transaction."

Instantly the salesman's corpus stiffens. His chest puffs and his arms cross. "Sorry. No refunds. And I should warn you. You know what'll happen if you talk about this place, don't you?"

Charlotte suddenly remembers there is more to fear in the world than bus accidents and dead dreams. "Please. Just let me go home."

She leaves broke and with no corpus. Outside her apartment, Charlotte passes the person in the gutter again. They have made it to the safety of a puddle today. Another precious life extension for the wretch. A day's reprieve. And tomorrow? Well, tomorrow, look for another puddle, and call

it a life. With her nest egg gone, Charlotte's own puddle is receding, all her dreams washing down the drain.

Corpuses walk past, but Charlotte sees only stolen cadavers ripped from their owners, a dead gray mass in a bucket. They drink black coffee that Charlotte cannot smell from cups that Charlotte cannot cradle warm between two hands. Her audio feed presents her with a spectrum flat on both ends, as if she won't miss what their curated reality never offers to begin with. As if Charlotte won't notice how half her nerves disconnect, how they don't feel anything at all.

Charlotte scowls, though there are no muscles to answer the call of her neurotransmitters. Defiance prickles through her anyway. It will have to be enough. She will make it be enough. Some parts of a person cannot be bought or sold or owned, no matter how large the birth-debt. Funny how often the incorporated forgot that.

Back at home, Charlotte carefully mists her little cactus. Then she calls up the file containing her corpus design and deletes the extra kidney, the gallbladder, the left ear's cochlea.

The palmaris longus stays.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachael K. Jones grew up in various cities across Europe and North America, picked up (and mostly forgot) six languages, an addiction to running, and assorted degrees in English and in Speech-Language Pathology. Now she writes speculative fiction in Athens, Georgia where she lives with her husband. A winner of Writers of the Future, her work has appeared or is forthcoming in many venues, including *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Shimmer*, *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, *Clockwork Phoenix 5*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Accessing the Future*, *Escape Pod*, *Crossed Genres*, *Diabolical Plots*, *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *The Drabblecast*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. She is the coeditor of PodCastle, a SFWA member, and a secret android. Follow her on Twitter @RachaelKJones.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Hereafter

Samuel Peralta | 4100 words

Come back to me.

— Elise McKenna, in *Somewhere in Time*, Richard Matheson

ONE

September 15, 2006

That autumn she's back in Toronto, staying at her mom's place, before deployment. At Queen's Quay Terminal, her two girlfriends go inside to grab a coffee, to stave off the late afternoon chill. She stays outside to check in, but the phone at her mom's rings four, five, six times, and she flips her phone closed before it goes to voice mail.

There's a soft crush of wind, and she hugs herself in her jacket. Time for that coffee. She turns, and that's when she sees him. All in black, reminding her of Steve Jobs with his turtleneck and slacks, except didn't Steve wear Adidas, and oh my God doesn't he remind her of that lead in the Bryan Singer movie, and—

He collapses, crumples on the ground. She runs up the steps to him, but already he's pulling himself up, bracing himself against the wall of the terminal building.

Just as she reaches him, he looks up, and their eyes meet. Suddenly, a feeling overcomes her: that this face is familiar, that she knows him, that they've met before. In his eyes there's a similar flash of recognition.

At his feet, a glimmer catches her attention, and she picks it up. A silver medallion, in the shape of a spiral nautilus, on a chain. She holds it out to him. "Yours?" she asks.

He takes it, holding her hand for just a fraction of a moment too long. "Oh God, I hope so," he says.

They break off, both now blushing. She's just decided she should be running off, when his knees buckle again and he hits the pavement. This time she has to pull him up and lean him against the wall herself. Nothing

on his breath. Clean-shaven.

“I’m sorry,” he says, when he’s recovered. “It’s just been a long journey.”

She hesitates a bit before deciding. “Listen,” she says. “I think you need to sit down and get something to eat. Why don’t you join me and you can catch your breath? I’ll buy.” She holds out her hand. “I’m Caitlyn.”

“Sean Forrest,” he says. “Happy to meet you.”

Rotini in marinara sauce at the restaurant inside, and she’s chattering away, about the closing of the *Lord of The Rings* stage show at the Princess of Wales Theatre, about Jonathan Safran Foer’s latest book, about Spenser and the difference between Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets—and wouldn’t he like to read one she’s written, which she happened to carry with her?—and when her phone rings, an hour has passed. It isn’t her mom, it’s her friends—wondering where in the world is she?

She tells them she’ll catch up with them later at the club, turns back to him, and they pick it up as if she’d never left off.

She talks about James Blunt and Kelly Clarkson, about *Gilmore Girls* and *24*, about conspiracies and terrorists, about North Korean politics, about Middle Eastern food, about how her family makes their own tomato sauce.

He talks about rotini, about patterns in nature, about Gödel and Escher and Bach, about Rachmaninoff and Paganini, about nautilus shells and hurricanes and satellite orbits, about integer series and golden means.

Over coffee and dessert, she asks if he’ll accompany her to the Rex, the jazz bar where her friends are going that night.

“I’ve got to go home tonight,” he says. “This was supposed to be a one-time trip. But I’m thinking—” And he stops here, for what feels like a long, long time. Then: “I’m thinking that I want to make it back next year.”

“Oh no!” she says. “It’d be amazing, but I’m headed to Kandahar.”

He looks stunned, like he doesn’t know where that is.

“Afghanistan. I’m with the Canadian team at the R3MMU. Combat operations field hospital.”

He’s still speechless.

“Oh heck, it’s only for two tours,” she says. “I’ll be back in a couple. How about we make a date for the future?”

That seems to break the trance. But what he does next is unexpected. He

takes off his medallion, takes her hand, and presses it into her palm.

“Yours,” he says.

TWO

September 17, 2007

Southwest of Kandahar. Earlier that day, helicopters streamed like tremulous wasps into Zhari District, ferrying back remains from a shattered infantry battalion. Under her breath, another whispered prayer. Sometimes prayers are answered by a different god.

Behind blast walls ten feet high, at the edge of the runway of the Kandahar Airfield, the NATO Role 3 Multinational Medical Unit, or R3MMU, is an assemblage of field-deployable hospital structures, shipping containers, canvas tents, and leaking plywood buildings.

Despite this, the Canadian Forces Health Services team tasked with command of the R3MMU is on its way to the highest survival rate ever recorded for victims of war.

But Cpl. Caitlyn McAdams, in the middle of her first nine-month tour, isn't at her regular station that night.

That week they're short-staffed at the forward operating base at Ma'sum Ghar, so Cpl. McAdams and Cpl. Paul Francis are on temporary rotation there from R3MMU, twenty miles away.

It's a tiny clinic on the side of a hill near Bazar-i-Panjwai township, a stopgap measure in an area without another hospital for miles, where anywhere you turn might be a roadside bomb or an improvised explosive device, where snipers are as numerous as wasps.

There's a helipad down the dirt road, where a medevac chopper flies serious cases to the R3MMU.

The statistics here, they're not quite as good as back at the airfield.

This is how she remembers that evening: the night air sweet, the sky bright with stars, the wind blowing warm across the desert. And then, an explosion from somewhere not far from the forward base. Minutes away.

She drops her copy of *Cien Sonetos*, and everyone is running to their posts. In a spray of dust, there's an all-terrain vehicle jamming down the road, stretchers barely hanging on to the front. The gates open within

seconds, and the soldiers are unloading the two casualties from the Canadian ATV.

In the cramped area, a team of about a half dozen works on the first casualty.

Cpl. McAdams and another team join Warrant Officer Ian Patrick, who's stripped down the second man on the stretcher-table and wrapped a foil blanket around him.

The man is half-conscious, quivering, babbling something over and over. McAdams is passable in the Pashto dialect, but she can't quite understand what he's saying.

While they work, stabilizing his breathing, bandaging his leg, someone's talking in the background. "IED hit. The Afghan was driving supplies for our road construction site. That other one, he's not from here, but he's not one of ours."

Not Afghan. She looks again, and beneath the grit and sweat and blood the face is unmistakable. Her heart twists inside her. Leaning forward to incline her ear nearer his mouth, she understands what he's saying—

Her name.

Work fast, fast, she tells herself. She should be detached, concentrating. Oh God, keep my hands from shaking. A chest wound, serious. Collapsed lung. Need to do an incision. She can hear gurgling as they open him up. Get a tube in, release the excess pressure.

His body is torn, ripped apart by shrapnel. Left hand amputated—the one that held her own, one year ago, for just that fraction of a second too long. One leg gone from the knee down, the other from the hip. They can't stop the bleeding.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

At her voice, his eyes suddenly open. He sees her, and there's recognition, and then he closes them. He doesn't open them again.

"Medevac!" she hears herself shouting.

But it's too late.

THREE
September 19, 2009

Honeycrisp apples, from a basket from her brother Joe, who'd served two previous tours of duty himself, and knew instinctively that for her this would mean *home*.

A week ago, Joe had come out to meet her at the Forces base at Trenton, after her final tour. He'd driven up in his shiny new blue Astra, and waxed eloquent about the immensity of the deal he'd gotten on it, because the company was shutting down. Everything was shutting down—car companies, hospitals, banks. She wished she could shut down.

Two and a half hours to her mother's home in Port Credit. She'd piled everything in the back of the hatchback—everything that might remind her of the war, of comrades fallen and lost, of the horrors she'd left behind—wanting to focus only on her brother's voice, the highway winding ahead, and home.

A half hour into the drive, she realized she'd been playing with the chain around her neck, winding it and unwinding it around her fingers. On its clasp, the silver medallion roller-coasted down to her thumb. She began to weep.

Honeycrisp apples. The one she bites into is lovely: tart and tangy. She finishes it, laces up her running shoes, and goes out the back, to the woods behind the house.

The neck-chain swings underneath her shirt. She runs.

Sean's Canadian Forces identity disc had survived the blast. She could see it still—two rounded rectangular halves joined in a square, one half meant to be detached and sent to National Defense, etched in her mind like a gravestone:

823-509-653
S P FORREST
NP O/RH/POS
CDN FORCES CDN

And on the reverse upper half:

DO NOT REMOVE
NE PAS ENLEVER

When they found that it wasn't a genuine I-disc, someone at the med unit thought he might have been from one of the intelligence agencies, but it turned out the I-disc wasn't even a good counterfeit. The metal was wrong, too soft, the embossing uneven across the letters. The number had been easily traceable to someone else, an I-disc splashed out for sale on eBay.

All that didn't matter to Caitlyn. What was clear was this: he had come to find her, even if that meant going into the middle of a war zone. And now he was gone.

She runs.

The banks of the Credit River are embroidered with leaves. They crackle as she passes. The air is crisp, slightly chill as she breathes it in.

She runs.

She passes the birch at the halfway point, and pauses for a pulse check. Her heart is already pumping fast as she catches a glimpse of a man, dressed in black, standing on a promontory about fifty yards from her.

She stops, and shields her eyes from the sun. A man from out of her past.

It hits her like a defibrillator jolt, but her mind calms her down. Out of nowhere, he'd appeared before in another unlikely place, half a world away. If he was real back then, real in Kandahar—then why not right here, right now, in the middle of the woods behind her mother's house, alive?

"Is it you?" she asks.

He comes closer. "Caitlyn," he says.

She leans against a tree, breathing heavily. "Sean. You were dead."

"I'm not dead. Not now."

"But how?"

"Can I come closer?"

"How?" she shouts at him, backing off. "You're not a ghost. I was there, two years ago. You were dead."

He takes a breath. "I traveled into that time. And the first time we met."

"Stay where you are."

"I can't," he says, but he stops moving toward her. "I mean . . . that first time, when we first met—that started out as a one-time trip. But I could only come back a year later, then it had to be now, and tomorrow it will be three years from now, and five years from then . . ."

“Wait.” She puts up her hand. “Time travel. It can’t be done.”

“Not now. But tomorrow, yes. Well, to a degree. It’s a limited time travel.”

He stands there, not moving closer, not moving away, a steady point in space. But he continues. “You know how some satellites stay in the same place in orbit, where the gravity of the Earth and moon balance each other?”

She’s listening; not frowning, not confused, just listening.

“It’s not fully understood, but those perfect balance points exist in space and time. They’re where and when a person can go in the past without hitting a possible paradox.”

“Like the opportunity to kill your grandfather, meaning you’d never exist.”

“That’s right. You can’t travel to a point where that might occur. When we first met, that was a non-paradoxical point.”

“But you came to Kandahar. You died there.”

“Time and space, they’re intertwined. The second non-paradox point in time was then, and you were where you were then. And I came back because—because I wanted to see you again.”

She pushes herself off from the tree, turns, and runs. Past the birch tree, past the Credit River, home, home.

When she decides to stop and finally turns back, night has fallen, and he is gone.

FOUR

September 21, 2012

Three years later, she’s on a blanket on a beach in Salinas, California, unpacking a basket. Above her, gulls are beating their wings against a coastal spray.

Now that she’s waiting for it, when it happens, she realizes that she can sense the return. The wind picking up, subtly, like a whisper. A swirl of waves in the distance, a subtle spiral. A shimmer, like a lens flare, in the sunlight.

“You’re beautiful,” he says.

She ignores that, and asks, “How long are you here for, this time?”

“Sometimes it’s a few hours, sometimes a few days.” He shrugs. “There aren’t a lot of statistics.”

“Explain it to me again, these points of balance, how they work,” she says.

“S. C. Penrose, a professor at Oxford, worked out the theory of it. The next advance came twenty years after that, from a researcher at the Weyman Institute, Alex Morgan. He realized that practical transformation of the space-time sub-manifolds—”

She is frowning, and he laughs. Easy, comfortable.

“It’s complicated, but not,” he says. “The stable solutions are based on the Fibonacci series.”

He picks up a piece of driftwood, and starts writing in the sand—

1 1 2 3 5 8
13 21 34 55 89 144

She nods. “Every number is the sum of the two before.”

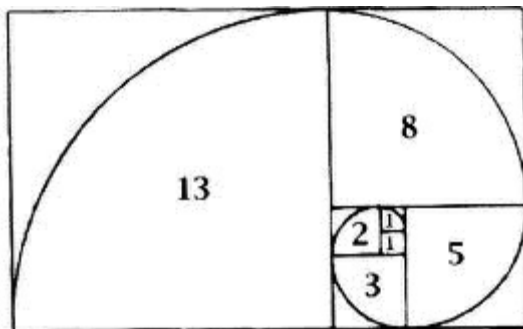
“When you travel into the past, as you come closer to your own time, the interval between balance points becomes larger; otherwise you eventually do hit a paradox.”

“But why does it work that way? With time, I mean?”

“Nature is full of symmetries and patterns. They may be invisible, but they’re there. The way trees branch, the way leaves are arranged on a stem, the way a fern uncurls, the way a nautilus shell spirals out.”

Her hands reach up to where her medallion hangs from her neck-chain.

On the sand, he draws a grouping of squares, then a spiral—



“The golden mean, the Fibonacci spiral—it’s the invisible pattern behind

a nautilus shell. Why not time?”

“That’s beautiful,” she says.

He sits down beside her. “Look, I’m sorry for Kandahar. I didn’t know it would end that way. I just wanted to be there.”

She doesn’t answer. It’s still something she wants to forget, along with many other things from that era of her life. She thinks of something, takes the driftwood, and crosses out the first four numbers in the sand—

1123 5 8

13 21 34 55 89 144

“So after this time, the next time I can see you will be in five years? On this day?”

“Well, there’s a precession . . .”

“Okay, I know. It’s not well understood.” She looks at him. “You guys haven’t figured out everything about this, have you?” It’s a statement, not a question.

“We’re trying.”

She sighs. “Well, now that you’re here, make yourself at home.”

She holds out a honeycrisp apple.

FIVE

September 23, 2017

She’s on the Bloor-Danforth subway line, on her way home late from work. Except for the conductor in his compartment, the carriage was empty when she got on, so she’s a little startled when someone sits down beside her.

“I have a present for you,” he says.

She flicks off the touchscreen of her ereader, and looks up.

He’s holding out a book. It’s a slim volume of poetry, an edition published—she notes with amusement, as she opens it—just a few years previously.

“Where’d you get this?” she asks.

“Bespoke Books,” he says. “Their motto is ‘Antiquities and print on demand.’ Paper is still pretty popular.”

She turns to the page he’s marked with a ribbon, and reads:

The Time Traveller's Sonnet

*And there you are, at last: your eyes, your face.
Just as swiftly, only a memory,*

*a star irresolute, the lightning's trace,
a half-remembered verse of poetry.*

*Still, you are what keeps my atoms in place
against life's centrifuge of anarchy:*

*your smile, in its sadness a hint of grace,
my hope, my manifold geometry.*

*To be with you again, I would cross space,
and time, to where began this circled journey:*

*And there you are, at last: your eyes, your face.
Just as swiftly, only a memory,*

*a star irresolute, the lightning's trace,
a half-remembered verse of poetry.*

The train rounds a curve without slowing down, and for a second the cars jiggle around their connection and the lights go black. The train straightens out and the lights go back on.

"Marry me," he says.

"Are you crazy? The next time we meet, I'm going to be older than you are."

"You're not married, are you?"

"That's beside the point. Why?"

"Because 'you are what keeps my atoms in place against life's centrifuge of anarchy,'" he says.

"Sonnets," she sighs.

SIX

September 25, 2025

She's sitting on a park bench at Ron Searle Park, watching the children on the playground. Behind her, the sounds of volleys on the tennis courts. She's scattering the remnants of an egg sandwich to the pigeons on the grass.

When he appears, she flings herself at him, beating him on the chest. "What the hell are you doing here? Get away from me! I hate you!"

As he backs away, a little girl hops off of the slide and runs toward her. "Mommy, Mommy!" She's crying.

Caitlyn hugs her, shielding her from the stranger, speaking to her softly. The little girl is still weepy, but she's nodding. After a while, she's back on the playground, this time at the swings. She swings in a wide arc—high, down, and back—kicking her feet down as they graze the ground, legs up again as she swings up, high, down, back.

Her mother is still fuming as she sits back down on the bench.

Sean waits a few minutes before joining her—taking care to place some space between them. "I'm sorry," he says.

She says nothing for a long time. Then—

"Shauna turned seven in June. And she doesn't even know her father."

He's not sure what to say. "Shauna," he repeats.

"Shauna Catherine. She doesn't deserve this, Sean. She deserves a father who's there for her, who can carry her on his shoulders, read her bedtime stories, teach her how to drive, give her away at her wedding."

He can't say anything, hadn't expected this.

"It's not fair to me." There, she finally said it. "It's not even as if you're in Australia or England, and I can get you on the phone or fly to you. When you're gone, you're gone."

"Caitlyn, if I could come back and be with you here and hereafter, I would. I would move heaven and Earth to be with you. I would die if that would bring me to you."

She is crying now, remembering Kandahar.

"But I can't," he says, taking her in his arms. "*This* is our hereafter, this is our forever. To the limit of what God and physics allow, I will be with you."

The little girl swings high, then low.

"I may go—but I'm still here. Love remains."

The little girl swings low, then high.

SEVEN
September 27, 2038

She'd been waiting for him at the church at St. Alban's Road, looking back once too often at each of the faces filing in.

Then she'd looked for him at the reception, at the mansion and conservatory at the northwest corner of the university.

Finally, when all the party and most of the guests had gone, she saw him in the garden walk outside Cecil Green, and went out to meet him.

"You're late," she says.

"I'm sorry." He looks around, taking in the afternoon sun and the color of the leaves, the mountains in the distance framing the coastline of Vancouver. "I missed something."

"Only your daughter's wedding," she says, wistfully. Then throws her arms around him. "I've missed you."

They stay there a breath, holding each other, and for a moment there is nothing but the flowers and the trees and the chirp of birds. And the world whirls around them, the world of spirals and hypercatenoids, of tesseract and planes.

"Oh God, you don't look a day older than when we last met," she says. "And look at me . . . Men are lucky; you go gray and you don't have to do a thing."

He smiles. "Where I'm from, we don't have to go gray."

They're walking now, through the amazing gardens and terraces, the panoramic sweep of cliffside architecture, and she's telling him everything about the wedding—about the florist who was able to find enough Oceania roses just in time, about how long it took to find the bride's gown and how eventually they settled on a Cecilia Wang design, how one of the bridesmaids dove to the floor to catch the bouquet, how the newlyweds were flying to Paris before heading back to Oxford where they now lived.

"How long do people live, where you are?" she asks.

"Longer, but not forever."

"Have you cured cancer?"

“It depends on what kind of—” He stops, stares at her for a long time. “Come into the ballroom,” she says at last. “Come and dance.”

EIGHT

September 29, 2059

She is sitting on a collapsible canvas chair in the middle of a field, a copy of Pablo Neruda’s *Veinte Poemas* open on her lap, a bouquet of flowers on the grass in front of her—when he appears.

In the distance, a man watches in a blue spinner, not moving.

Sean walks up to her. She drops the book, and turns.

The hair, the eyes, the face. It’s her, but it isn’t.

The woman stands, walks toward him. “I was never sure you were real, or someone her mind made up, because of the war,” she says. “But it is you.”

Sean can’t breathe, stares at her in wonder.

“Shauna Penrose,” she says. “I’m Caitlyn’s daughter.”

“I met you when you were seven.”

“She told me everything, finally. She told me how you met, how you died, how you lived.”

Only then does he realize that the field is marked by small, white slabs—flat, raised-top stone markers—as far as the eye can see.

“I’ve been coming since last week, on your anniversary. I wasn’t sure what would happen, but I came because of her, because she asked me to.”

She holds out her hand, palm up, a neck-chain hanging from the medallion.

“She wanted you to have this,” she says. “She lasted a long time. Also—she wanted you to know, she waited for you as long as she could.”

He takes the medallion and touches her hand—his daughter’s hand. And suddenly they’re crying, holding each other across the vastness of time and space, comforting each other in the way that only two people can, two people who share something dear that they have lost.

“I’ve got to go now,” she says, finally, gesturing to the man in the spinner.

“Wait,” Sean says, but she keeps on walking.

She stops only before she gets in, then turns to him one more time. “There’s so much I want to talk to you about. So much I want to know that I don’t know,” she says. “But I do know one thing: She did love you. Maybe that’s all that matters.”

And she is gone.

He drops to his knees in front of the space where the bouquet and marker lie, and traces the words in a whisper—

CAITLYN McADAMS FORREST

July 1985 – August 2059

Hereafter, only love remains

— *For AD*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuel Peralta is a physicist and storyteller. An Amazon bestselling author, he is also the creator and driving force behind the “Future Chronicles” anthologies, whose titles have hit the overall Amazon Top 10 Bestsellers list. Recognized in *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, he has ranked as one of Amazon’s Top 5 SF Authors, Top 40 Authors in e-books, and Top 100 Authors overall. His poetry has ranked #1 in Amazon, in Goodreads’ list of Great Small Press Books, and been discussed in articles on Best American Poetry. Awards include from the BBC, the Digital Literature Institute, and the Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. An award-winning PhD, he’s designed nuclear robotic tools and co-founded several software and semiconductor start-ups.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea

Sarah Pinsker | 7596 words

The rock star washed ashore at high tide. Earlier in the day, Bay had seen something bobbing far out in the water. Remnant of a rowboat, perhaps, or something better. She waited until the tide ebbed, checked her traps and tidal pools among the rocks before walking toward the inlet where debris usually beached.

All kinds of things washed up if Bay waited long enough: not just glass and plastic, but personal trainers and croupiers, entertainment directors and dance teachers. This was the first time Bay recognized the face of the new arrival. She always checked the face first if there was one, just in case, hoping it wasn't Deb.

The rock star had an entire lifeboat to herself, complete with motor, though she'd used up the gas. She'd made it in better shape than many; certainly in better shape than those with flotation vests but no boats. They arrived in tatters of uniform. Armless, legless, sometimes headless; ragged shark refuse.

"What was that one?" Deb would have asked, if she were there. She'd never paid attention to physical details, wouldn't have recognized a dancer's legs, a chef's scarred hands and arms.

"Nothing anymore," Bay would say of a bad one, putting it on her sled.

The rock star still had all her limbs. She had stayed in the boat. She'd found the stashed water and nutrition bars, easy to tell by the wrappers and bottles strewn around her. From her bloated belly and cracked lips, Bay guessed she had run out a day or two before, maybe tried drinking ocean water. Sunburn glowed through her dark skin. She was still alive.

Deb wasn't there; she couldn't ask questions. If she had been, Bay would have shown her the calloused fingers of the woman's left hand and the thumb of her right.

"How do you know she came off the ships?" Deb would have asked. She'd been skeptical that the ships even existed, couldn't believe that so many people would just pack up and leave their lives. The only proof Bay could have given was these derelict bodies.

• • • •

Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.

Gabby Robbins: A scavenger woman dragged me from the ocean, pumped water from my lungs, spoke air into me. The old films they show on the ships would call that moment romantic, but it wasn't. I gagged. Only barely managed to roll over to retch in the sand.

She didn't know what a rock star was. It was only when I washed in half-dead, choking seawater that she learned there were such things in the world. Our first attempts at conversation didn't go well. We had no language in common. But I warmed my hands by her fire, and when I saw an instrument hanging on its peg, I tuned it and began to play. That was the first language we spoke between us.

• • • •

A truth: I don't remember anything between falling off the ship and washing up in this place.

There's a lie embedded in that truth.

Maybe a couple of them.

Another lie I've already told: We did have language in common, the scavenger woman and me.

She did put me on her sled, did take me back to her stone-walled cottage on the cliff above the beach. I warmed myself by her woodstove. She didn't offer me a blanket or anything to replace the thin stage clothes I still wore, so I wrapped my own arms around me and drew my knees in tight, and sat close enough to the stove's open belly that sparks hit me when the logs collapsed inward.

She heated a small pot of soup on the stovetop and poured it into a single bowl without laying a second one out for me. My stomach growled. I didn't remember the last time I'd eaten. I eyed her, eyed the bowl, eyed the pot.

"If you're thinking about whether you could knock me out with the pot and take my food, it's a bad idea. You're taller than me, but you're weaker than you think, and I'm stronger than I look."

“I wouldn’t! I was just wondering if maybe you’d let me scrape whatever’s left from the pot. Please.”

She nodded after a moment. I stood over the stove and ate the few mouthfuls she had left me from the wooden stirring spoon. I tasted potatoes and seaweed, salt and land and ocean. It burned my throat going down; heated from the inside, I felt almost warm.

I looked around the room for the first time. An oar with “Home Sweet Home” burnt into it adorned the wall behind the stove. Some chipped dishes on an upturned plastic milk crate, a wall stacked high with home-canned food, clothing on pegs. A slightly warped-looking classical guitar hung on another peg by a leather strap; if I’d had any strength I’d have gone to investigate it. A double bed piled with blankets. Beside the bed, a nightstand with a framed photo of two women on a hiking trail, and a tall stack of paperback books. I had an urge to walk over and read the titles; my father used to say you could judge a person by the books on their shelves. A stronger urge to dive under the covers on the bed, but I resisted and settled back onto the ground near the stove. My energy went into shivering.

I kept my eyes on the stove, as if I could direct more heat to me with enough concentration. The woman pattered around her cabin. She might have been any age between forty and sixty; her movement was easy, but her skin was weathered and lined, her black hair streaked with gray. After a while, she climbed into bed and turned her back to me. Another moment passed before I realized she intended to leave me there for the night.

“Please, before you go to sleep. Don’t let it go out,” I said. “The fire.”

She didn’t turn. “Can’t keep it going forever. Fuel has to last all winter.”

“It’s winter?” I’d lost track of seasons on the ship. The scavenger woman wore two layers, a ragged jeans jacket over a hooded sweatshirt.

“Will be soon enough.”

“I’ll freeze to death without a fire. Can I pay you to keep it going?”

“What do you have to pay me with?”

“I have an account on the Hollywood Line. A big one.” As I said that, I realized I shouldn’t have. On multiple levels. Didn’t matter if it sounded like a brag or desperation. I was at her mercy, and it wasn’t in my interest to come across as if I thought I was any better than her.

She rolled over. “Your money doesn’t count for anything off your ships

and islands. Nor credit. If you've got paper money, I'm happy to throw it in to keep the fire going a little longer."

I didn't. "I can work it off."

"There's nothing you can work off. Fuel is in finite supply. I use it now, I don't get more, I freeze two months down the line."

"Why did you save me if you're going to let me die?"

"Pulling you from the water made sense. It's your business now whether you live or not."

"Can I borrow something warmer to wear at least? Or a blanket?" I sounded whiny even to my own ears.

She sighed, climbed out of bed, rummaged in a corner, and pulled out a down vest. It had a tear in the back where some stuffing had spilled out, and smelled like brine. I put it on, trying not to scream when the fabric touched my sunburned arms.

"Thank you. I'm truly grateful."

She grunted a response and retreated to her bed again. I tucked my elbows into the vest, my hands into my armpits. It helped a little, though I still shivered. I waited a few minutes, then spoke again. She didn't seem to want to talk, but it kept me warm. Reassured me that I was still here.

Awake, alive.

"If I didn't say so already, thank you for pulling me out of the water. My name is Gabby."

"Fitting."

"Are you going to ask me how I ended up in the water?"

"None of my business."

Just as well. Anything I told her would've been made up.

"Do you have a name?" I asked.

"I do, but I don't see much point in sharing it with you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to kill you if you don't shut up and let me sleep."

I shut up.

••••

Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.

Gabby Robbins: I remember getting drunk during a set on the Elizabeth Taylor. Making out with a bartender in the lifeboat, since neither of us had private bunks. I must have passed out there. I don't know how it ended up adrift.

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I survived the night on the floor but woke with a cough building deep in my chest. At least I didn't have to sing. I followed the scavenger as she went about her morning, like a dog hoping for scraps. Outside, a large picked-over garden spread around two sides of the cottage. The few green plants grew low and ragged. Root vegetables, maybe.

"If you have to piss, there's an outhouse over there," she said, motioning toward a stand of twisted trees.

We made our way down the footpath from her cottage to the beach, a series of switchbacks trod into the cliffside. I was amazed she had managed to tow me up such an incline. Then again, if I'd rolled off the sled and fallen to my death, she probably would've scraped me out of my clothes and left my body to be picked clean by gulls.

"Where are we?" I had managed not to say anything since waking up, not a word since her threat the night before, so I hoped the statute of limitations had expired.

"Forty kilometers from the nearest city, last I checked."

Better than nothing. "When was that?"

"When I walked here."

"And that was?"

"A while ago."

It must have been, given the lived in look of her cabin and garden.

"What city?"

"Portage."

"Portage what?"

"Portage. Population I don't know. Just because you haven't heard of it doesn't make it any less a city." She glanced back at me like I was stupid.

"I mean, what state? Or what country? I don't even know what country this is."

She snorted. “How long were you on that ship?”

“A long time. I didn’t really pay attention.”

“Too rich to care.”

“No! It’s not what you think.” I didn’t know why it mattered what she thought of me, but it did. “I wasn’t on the ship because I’m rich. I’m an entertainer. I share a staff bunk with five other people.”

“You told me last night you were rich.”

I paused to hack and spit over the cliff’s edge. “I have money, it’s true. But not enough to matter. I’ll never be rich enough to be a passenger instead of entertainment. I’ll never even afford a private stateroom. So I spend a little and let the rest build up in my account.”

Talking made me cough more. I was thirsty, too, but waited to be offered something to drink.

“What’s your name?” I knew I should shut up, but the more uncomfortable I am, the more I talk.

She didn’t answer for a minute, so by the time she did, I wasn’t even sure if it was the answer to my question at all. “Bay.”

“That’s your name? It’s lovely. Unusual.”

“How would you know? You don’t even know what country this is. Who are you to say what’s unusual here?”

“Good point. Sorry.”

“You’re lucky we even speak the same language.”

“Very.”

She pointed at a trickle of water that cut a small path down the cliff wall. “Cup your hands there. It’s potable.”

“A spring?”

She gave me a look.

“Sorry. Thank you.” I did as she said. The water was cold and clear. If there was some bacterium in it that was going to kill me, at least I wouldn’t die thirsty.

I showed my gratitude through silence and concentrated on the descent. The path was narrow, just wide enough for the sled she pulled, and the edge crumbled away to nothing. I put my feet where she put hers, squared my shoulders as she did. She drew her sweatshirt hood over her head, another discouragement to conversation.

We made it all the way down to the beach without another question busting through my chapped lips. She left the sled at the foot of the cliff and picked up a blue plastic cooler from behind a rock, the kind with cup holders built into the top. She looked in and frowned, then dumped the whole thing on the rocks. A cascade of water, two small dead fish. I realized those had probably been meant to be her dinner the day before; she had chosen to haul me up the cliff instead.

This section of beach was all broken rock, dotted everywhere with barnacles and snails and seashells. The rocks were wet and slick, the footing treacherous. I fell to my hands several times, slicing them on the tiny snails. Could you catch anything from a snail cut? At least the ship could still get us antibiotics.

“What are we doing?” I asked. “Surely the most interesting things wash out closer to the actual water.”

She kept walking, watching where she stepped. She didn’t fall. The rusted hull of an old ship jutted from the rocks down into the ocean; I imagined anything inside had long since been picked over. We clambered around it. I fell further behind her, trying to be more careful with my bleeding palms. All that rust, no more tetanus shots.

She slowed, squatted. Peered and poked at something by her feet. As I neared her, I understood. Tidal pools. She dipped the cooler into one, smiled to herself. I was selfishly glad to see the smile. Perhaps she’d be friendlier now.

Instead of following, I took a different path from hers. Peered into other pools. Some tiny fish in the first two, not worth catching, nothing in the third. In the fourth, I found a large crab.

“Bay,” I called.

She turned around, annoyance plain on her face. I waved the crab and her expression softened. “Good for you. You get to eat tonight too, with a nice find like that.”

She waited for me to catch up with her and put the crab in her cooler with the one decent-sized fish she had found.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A fish. What does it matter what kind?”

“I used to cook. I’m pretty good with fish, but I don’t recognize that one.”

Different fish taste better with different preparations.”

“You’re welcome to do the cooking if you’d like, but if you need lemon butter and capers, you may want to check the pools closer to the end of the rainbow.” She pointed down the beach, then laughed at her own joke.

“I’m only trying to be helpful. You don’t need to mock me.”

“No, I suppose I don’t. You found a crab, so you’re not entirely useless.”

That was the closest thing to a compliment I supposed I’d get. At least she was speaking to me like a person, not debris that had shown an unfortunate tendency toward speech.

That evening, I pan-fried our catch on the stovetop with a little bit of sea salt. The fish was oily and tasteless, but the crab was good. My hands smelled like fish and ocean and I wished for running water to wash them off. Tried to replace that smell with wood smoke.

After dinner, I looked over at her wall.

“May I?” I asked, pointing at the guitar.

She shrugged. “Dinner and entertainment—I fished the right person out of the sea. Be my guest.”

It was an old classical guitar, parlor sized, nylon-stringed. That was the first blessing, since steel strings would surely have corroded in this air. I had no pure pitch to tune to, so had to settle on tuning the strings relative to each other, all relative to the third string because its tuning peg was cracked and useless. Sent up a silent prayer that none of the strings broke, since I was fairly sure Bay would blame me for anything that went wrong in my presence. The result sounded sour, but passable.

“What music do you like?” I asked her.

“Now or then?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Then: anything political. Hip-hop, mostly.”

I looked down at the little guitar, wondered how to coax hip-hop out of it. “What about now?”

“Now? Anything you play will be the first music I’ve heard other than my own awful singing in half a dozen years. Play away.”

I nodded and looked at the guitar, waiting for it to tell me what it wanted. Fought back my strange sudden shyness. Funny how playing for thousands of people didn’t bother me, but I could find myself self-conscious in front

of one. “Guitar isn’t my instrument, by the way.”

“Close enough. You’re a bassist.”

I looked up, surprised. “How do you know?”

“I’m not stupid. I know who you are.”

“Why did you ask my name, then?”

“I didn’t. You told it to me.”

“Oh, yeah.” I was glad I hadn’t lied about that particular detail.

“Let’s have the concert, then.”

I played her a few songs, stuff I never played on the ship.

“Where’d the guitar come from?” I asked when I was done.

An unreadable expression crossed her face. “Where else? It washed up.”

I let my fingers keep exploring the neck of the guitar, but turned to her.

“So is this what you do full time? Pull stuff from the beach?”

“Pretty much.”

“Can you survive on that?”

“The bonuses for finding some stuff can be pretty substantial.”

“What stuff?”

“Foil. Plastic. People.”

“People?”

“People who’ve lost their ships.”

“You’re talking about me?”

“You, others. The ships don’t like to lose people, and the people don’t like to be separated from their ships. It’s a nice change to be able to return someone living for once. I’m sure you’ll be happy to get back to where you belong.”

“Yes, thank you. How do you alert them?”

“I’ve got call buttons for the three big shiplines. They send ’copters.”

I knew those copters. Sleek, repurposed military machines.

I played for a while longer, so stopping wouldn’t seem abrupt, then hung the guitar back on its peg. It kept falling out of tune anyway.

I waited until Bay was asleep before I left, though it took all my willpower not to take off running the second she mentioned the helicopters. I had nothing to pack, so I curled up by the cooling stove and waited for her breathing to slow. I would never have taken her food or clothing—other than the vest—but I grabbed the guitar from its peg on my way out the

door. She wouldn't miss it. The door squealed on its hinges, and I held my breath as I slipped through and closed it behind me.

The clifftop was bright with stars. I scanned the sky for helicopters. Nothing but stars and stars and stars. The ship's lights made it so we barely saw stars at all, a reassurance for all of us from the cities.

I walked with my back to the cliff. The moon gave enough light to reassure me I wasn't about to step off into nothingness if the coastline cut in, but I figured the farther I got from the ocean, the more likely I was to run into trees. Or maybe an abandoned house, if I got lucky. Someplace they wouldn't spot me if they swept overland.

Any hope I had for stealth, I abandoned as I trudged onward. I found an old tar road and decided it had to lead toward something. I walked. The cough that had been building in my chest through the day racked me now.

The farther I went, the more I began to doubt Bay's story. Would the ships bother to send anyone? I was popular enough, but was I worth the fuel it took to come get me? If they thought I had fallen, maybe. If they knew I had lowered the lifeboat deliberately, that I might do it again? Doubtful. Unless they wanted to punish me, or charge me for the boat, though if they docked my account now, I'd never know. And how would Bay have contacted them? She'd said they were in contact, but unless she had a solar charger—well, that seemed possible, actually.

Still, she obviously wanted me gone or she wouldn't have said it. Or was she testing my reaction? Waiting to see if I cheered the news of my rescue?

I wondered what else she had lied about. I hoped I was walking toward the city she had mentioned. I was a fool to think I'd make it to safety anywhere. I had no water, no food, no money. Those words formed a marching song for my feet, syncopated by my cough. No water. No food. No money. No luck.

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Bay set out at first light, the moment she realized the guitar had left with the stupid rock star. It wasn't hard to figure out which way she had gone. She was feverish, stupid with the stupidity of someone still used to having things appear when she wanted them. If she really expected to survive, she

should have taken more from Bay. Food. A canteen. A hat. Something to trade when she got to the city. It said something good about her character, Bay supposed, down below the blind privilege of her position. If she hadn't taken Debra's guitar, Bay's opinion might have been even more favorable.

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Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.

Gabby Robbins: My last night on the ship was just like three thousand nights before, up until it wasn't. We played two sets, mostly my stuff, with requests mixed in. Some cokehead in a Hawaiian shirt offered us a thousand credits each to play "My Heart Will Go On" for his lady.

"I'll give you ten thousand credits myself if you don't make us do this," Sheila said when we all leaned in over her kit to consult on whether we could fake our way through it. "That's the one song I promised myself I would never play here."

"What about all the Jimmy Buffet we've had to play?" our guitarist, Kel, asked her. "We've prostituted ourselves already. What difference does it make at this point?"

Sheila ignored Kel. "Dignity, Gab. Please."

I was tired and more than a little drunk. "What does it matter? Let's just play the song. You can mess with the tempo if you want. Swing it, maybe? Ironic cheesy lounge style? In C, since I can't hit those diva notes?"

Sheila looked like she was going to weep as she counted off.

I ran into Hawaiian Shirt and his lady again after the set, when I stepped out on the Oprah deck for air. They were over near the gun turrets, doing the "King of the World" thing, a move that should have been outlawed before anyone got on the ship.

"You know who that is, right?" I looked over to see JP, this bartender I liked: sexy retro-Afro, sexy swimmer's build. It had been a while since we'd hooked up. JP held out a joint.

I took it and said he looked familiar.

"He used to have one of those talk radio shows. He was the first one to suggest the ships, only his idea was religious folks, not just general rich

folks. Leave the sinners behind, he said. Founded the Ark line, where all those fundamentalists spend their savings waiting for the sinners to be washed away so they can take the land back. He spent the first two years with them, then announced he was going to go on a pilgrimage to find out what was happening everywhere else. Only, instead of traveling the land like a proper pilgrim, he came on board this ship. He's been here ever since. First time I've seen him at one of your shows, though. I guess he's throwing himself into his new lifestyle."

"Ugh. I remember him now. He boycotted my second album. At least they look happy?"

"Yeah, except that isn't his wife. His wife and kids are still on the Ark waiting for him. Some pilgrim."

The King of the World and his not-wife sauntered off. When the joint was finished, JP melted away as well, leaving me alone with my thoughts until some drunk kids wandered over with a magnum of champagne. I climbed over the railing into the lifeboat to get a moment alone. I could almost pretend the voices were gulls. Listened to the engine's thrum through the hull, the waves lapping far below.

Everyone who wasn't a paying guest—entertainers and staff—had been trained on how to release the lifeboats, and I found myself playing with the controls. How hard would it be to drop it into the water? We couldn't be that far from some shore somewhere. The lifeboats were all equipped with stores of food and water, enough for a handful of people for a few days.

Whatever had been in my last drink must have been some form of liquid stupid. The boat was lowered now, whacking against the side of the enormous ship, and I had to smash the last tie just to keep from being wrecked against it. And then the ship was pulling away, ridiculous and huge, a foolish attempt to save something that had never been worth saving.

I wished I had kissed JP one more time, seeing as how I was probably going to die.

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Gabby hadn't gotten far at all. By luck, she had found the road in the

dark, and by luck had walked in the right direction, but she was lying in the dirt like roadkill now. Bay checked that Deb's guitar hadn't been hurt, then watched for a moment to see if the woman was breathing, which she was, ragged but steady, her forehead hot enough to melt butter, some combination of sunburn and fever.

The woman stirred. "Are you real?" she asked.

"More real than you are," Bay told her.

"I should have kissed JP."

"Seems likely." Bay offered a glass jar of water. "Drink this."

Gabby drank half. "Thank you."

Bay waved it away when the other woman tried to hand it back. "I'm not putting my lips to that again while you're coughing your lungs out. It's yours."

"Thank you again." Gabby held out the guitar. "You probably came for this?"

"You carried it this far, you can keep carrying it. Me, I would have brought the case."

"It had a case?"

"Under the bed. I keep clothes in it."

"I guess at least now you know I didn't go through your things?"

Bay snorted. "Obviously. You're a pretty terrible thief."

"In my defense, I'm not a thief."

"My guitar says otherwise."

Gabby put the guitar on the ground. She struggled to her feet and stood for a wobbly moment before leaning down to pick it up. She looked one way, then the other, as if she couldn't remember where she had come from or where she was going. Bay refrained from gesturing in the right direction. She picked the right way. Bay followed.

"Are you going to ask me why I left?" Even this sick, with all her effort going into putting one foot in front of the other, the rock star couldn't stop talking.

"Wasn't planning on it."

"Why not?"

"Because I've met you before."

"For real? Before the ships?" Gabby looked surprised.

Bay shook her head. “No. Your type. You think you’re the first one to wash ashore? To step away from that approximation of life? You’re just the first one who made it alive.”

“If you don’t like the ships, why did you call them to come get me?” Gabby paused. “Or you didn’t. You just wanted me to leave. Why?”

“I can barely feed myself. And you aren’t the type to be satisfied with that life anyhow. Might as well leave now as later.”

“Except I’m probably going to die of this fever because I walked all night in the cold, you psychopath.”

Bay shrugged. “That was your choice.”

They walked in silence for a while. The rock star was either contemplating her choices or too sick to talk.

“Why?” Bay asked, taking pity.

Gabby whipped her head around. “Why what?”

“Why did you sign up for the ship?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Sounds like an epitaph fitting for half the people in this world.”

Gabby gave a half smile, then continued. “New York was a mess, and the Gulf states had just tried to secede. The bookers for the Hollywood Line made a persuasive argument for a glamorous life at sea. Everything was so well planned, too. They bought entire island nations to provide food and fuel.”

“I’m sure the island nations appreciated that,” said Bay.

The other woman gave a wry smile. “I know, right? Fucked up. But they offered good money, and it was obvious no bands would be touring the country for a while.

“At first it was just like any other tour. We played our own stuff. There were women to sleep with, drugs if we wanted them, restaurants and clubs and gyms. All the good parts of touring without the actual travel part. Sleeping in the same bed every night, even if it was still a bunk with my band, like on the bus. But then it didn’t stop, and then they started making us take requests, and it started closing in, you know? If there was somebody you wanted to avoid, you couldn’t. It was hard to find anyplace to be alone to write or think.

“Then the internet went off completely. We didn’t get news from land at

all, even when we docked on the islands. They stopped letting us off when we docked. Management said things had gotten real bad here, that there was for real nothing to come back to anymore. The passengers all walked around like they didn't care, like a closed system, and the world was so fucking far away. How was I supposed to write anything when the world was so far away? The entire world might've drowned, and we'd just float around oblivious until we ran out of something that wasn't even important to begin with. Somebody would freak out because there was no more mascara or ecstasy or rosemary, and then all those beautiful people would turn on each other."

"So that's why you jumped?"

Gabby rubbed her head. "Sort of. I guess that also seemed like a good idea at the time."

"What about now?"

"I could've done with a massage when I woke up today, but I'm still alive."

Bay snorted. "You wouldn't have lasted two seconds in a massage with that sunburn."

Gabby looked down at her forearms and winced.

They walked. Gabby was sweating, her eyes bright. Bay slowed her own pace, in an effort to slow the other woman down. "Where are you hurrying to, now that I've told you there's nobody coming after you?"

"You said there was a city out here somewhere. I want to get there before I have to sleep another night on this road. And before I starve."

Bay reached into a jacket pocket. She pulled out a protein bar and offered it to Gabby.

"Where'd you get that? It looks like the ones I ate in the lifeboat."

"It is."

Gabby groaned. "I didn't have to starve those last two days? I could've sworn I looked every place."

"You missed a stash inside the radio console."

"Huh."

They kept walking, footsteps punctuated by Gabby's ragged breath.

"We used to drive out here to picnic on the cliff when my wife and I first got married," Bay said. "There were always turtles trying to cross. We would

stop and help them, because there were teenagers around who thought driving over them was a sport. Now if I saw a turtle I'd probably have to think about eating it."

"I've never eaten a turtle."

"Me neither. Haven't seen one in years."

Gabby stopped. "You know, I have no clue when I last saw a turtle. At a zoo? No clue at all. I wonder if they're gone. Funny how you don't realize the last time you see something is going to be the last time."

Bay didn't say anything.

The rock star held Deb's guitar up to her chest, started picking out a repetitive tune as she walked. Same lick over and over, like it was keeping her going, driving her feet. "So when you said you traded things like aluminum foil and people, you were lying to me, right? You don't trade anything."

Bay shook her head. "Nobody to trade with."

"So you've been here all alone? You said something about your wife."

Bay kicked a stone down the road in front of her, kicked it again when she caught up with it.

The rock star handed her the guitar and dropped to the ground. She took off her left shoe, then peeled the sock off. A huge blister was rising on her big toe. "Fuck."

Bay sighed. "You can use some of the stuffing from your vest to build some space around it."

Gabby bent to pick a seam.

"No need. There's a tear in the back. Anyhow, maybe it's time to stop for the night."

"Sorry. I saw the tear when you first gave me the vest, but I forgot about it. How far have we traveled?"

"Hard to say. We're still on the park road."

"Park road?"

"This is a protected wilderness area. Or it was. Once we hit asphalt, we're halfway there. Then a little farther to a junction. Left at the T used to be vacation homes, but a hurricane took them twenty years ago. Right takes you to the city."

Gabby groaned. She squinted at the setting sun. "Not even halfway."

“But you’re still alive, and you’re complaining about a blister, not the cough or the sunburn.”

“I didn’t complain.”

“I don’t see you walking any farther, either.” Bay dropped her knapsack and untied a sleeping bag from the bottom.

“I don’t suppose you have two?”

Bay gave Gabby her most withering look. What kind of fool set out on this walk sick and unprepared? Then again, she had been the one who had driven the woman out, too afraid to interact with an actual person instead of the ghosts in her head.

“We’ll both fit,” she said. “Body heat’ll keep us warm, too.”

It was warmer than if they hadn’t shared, lying back to back squeezed into the sleeping bag. Not as warm as home, if she hadn’t set out to follow. The cold still seeped into her. Bay felt every inch of her left side, as if the bones themselves were in contact with the ground. Aware, too, of her back against the other woman, of the fact that she couldn’t remember the last time she had come in physical contact with a living person. The heat of Gabby’s fever burned through the layers of clothing, but she still shivered.

“Why are you living out there all alone?” Gabby asked.

Bay considered pretending she was asleep, but then she wanted to answer. “I said already we used to picnic out here, my wife and I. We always said this was where we’d spend our old age. I’d get a job as a ranger, we’d live out our days in the ranger’s cabin. I pictured having electricity, mind.”

She paused. She felt the tension in the other woman’s back as she suppressed a cough. “Debra was in California on a business trip when everything started going bad at a faster rate than it’d been going bad before. We never even found out what it was that messed up the electronics. Things just stopped working. We’d been living in a high-rise. I couldn’t stay in our building with no heat or water, but we couldn’t contact each other, and I wanted to be someplace Debra would find me. So when I didn’t hear from her for three months, I packed what I thought I might need into some kid’s wagon I found in the lobby and started walking. I knew she’d know to find me out here if she could.”

“How bad was it? The cities? We were already on the ship.”

“I can only speak for the one I was living in, but it wasn’t like those scare movies where everyone turns on one another. People helped each other. We got some electricity up and running again in a couple weeks’ time, on a much smaller scale. If anything, I’d say we had more community than we’d ever had. But it didn’t feel right for me. I didn’t want other people; I wanted Deb.”

“They told us people were rioting and looting. Breaking into mansions, moving dozens of people in.”

“Would you blame them? Your passengers redirected all the gas to their ships and abandoned perfectly good houses. But again, I can only speak to what I saw, which was folks figuring out the new order and making it work as best they could.”

Gabby stayed silent for a while, and Bay started to drift. Then one more question. “Did Debra ever find you? I mean I’m guessing no, but . . .”

“No. Now let me sleep.”

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Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.

Gabby Robbins: You know what happened. There is no you anymore. No reality television, no celebrity gossip, no music industry. Only an echo playing itself out on the ships and in the heads of those of us who can’t quite let it go.

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Bay was already out of the sleeping bag when I woke. She sat on a rock playing a simple fingerpicking pattern on her guitar.

“I thought you didn’t play,” I called to her.

“Never said that. Said I’m a lousy singer, but didn’t say anything about playing the guitar. We should get moving. I’d rather get to the city earlier than late.”

I stood up and stretched, letting the sleeping bag pool around my feet. The sun had only just risen, low and red. I could hear water lapping on both sides now, beyond a thick growth of brush. I coughed so deep it bent me in

two.

“Why are you in a hurry?” I asked when I could speak.

She gave me a look that probably could have killed me at closer range. “Because I didn’t bring enough food to feed both of us for much longer, and you didn’t bring any. Because I haven’t been there in years and I don’t know if they shoot strangers who ride in at night.”

“Oh.” There wasn’t much to say to that, but I tried anyway. “So basically you’re putting yourself in danger because I put myself in danger because you made me think I was in danger.”

“You put yourself in danger in the first place by jumping off your damn boat.”

True. I sat back down on the sleeping bag and inspected my foot. The blister looked awful. I nearly wept as I packed vest-stuffing around it.

I stood again to indicate my readiness, and she walked back over. She handed me the guitar, then shook out the sleeping bag, rolled it and tied it to her pack. She produced two vaguely edible-looking sticks from somewhere on her person. I took the one offered to me.

I sniffed it. “Fish jerky?”

She nodded.

“I really would’ve starved out here on my own.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you. I mean it. I’d never have guessed I’d have to walk so long without finding anything to eat.”

“There’s plenty to eat, but you don’t know where to look. You could fish if you had gear. You might find another crab. And there are bugs. Berries and plants, too, in better seasons, if you knew what to look for.”

As we walked she meandered off the road to show me what was edible. Cattail roots, watercress. Neither tasted fantastic raw, but chewing took time and gave an excuse to walk slower.

“I’m guessing you were a city kid?” she asked.

“Yeah. Grew up in Detroit. Ran away when I was sixteen to Pittsburgh because everyone else ran away to New York. Put together a decent band, got noticed. When you’re a good bass player, people take you out. I’d release an album with my band, tour that, then tour with Gaga or Trillium or some flavor of the month.”

I realized that was more than she had asked for, but she hadn't told me to shut up yet, so I kept going. "The funny thing about being on a ship with all those celebrities and debutantes is how much attention they need. They throw parties or they stage big collapses and recoveries. They produce documentaries about themselves, upload to the ship entertainment systems. They act as audience for each other, taking turns with their dramas.

"I thought they'd treat me as a peer, but then I realized I was just a hired gun and they all thought they were bigger deals than me. There were a few other entertainers who realized the same thing and dropped down to the working decks to teach rich kids to dance or sing or whatever. I hung onto the idea longer than most that my music still meant something. I still kinda hope so."

A coughing spell turned me inside out.

"That's why you took my guitar?" Bay asked when I stopped gagging.

"Yeah. They must still need music out here, right?"

"I'd like to think so."

I had something else to say, but a change in the landscape up ahead distracted me. Two white towers jutted into the sky, one vertical, the other at a deep curve. "That's a weird looking bridge."

Bay picked up her pace. I limped after her. As we got closer, I saw the bridge wasn't purposefully skewed. The tower on the near end still stood, but the road between the two had crumbled into the water. Heavy cables trailed from the far tower like hair. We walked to the edge, looked down at the concrete bergs below us, then out at the long gap to the other side. Bay sat down, her feet dangling over the edge.

I tried to keep things light. "I didn't realize we were on an island."

"Your grasp of geography hasn't proven to be outstanding."

"How long do you think it's been out?"

"How the hell should I know?" she snapped.

I left her to herself and went exploring. When I returned, the tears that smudged her face looked dry.

"It must've been one of the hurricanes. I haven't been out here in years." Her tone was dry and impersonal again. "Just goes to show, sooner or later everything falls into the sea."

"She didn't give up on you," I said.

“You don’t know that.”

“No.”

I was quiet a minute. Tried to see it all from her eyes. “Anyway, I walked around. You can climb down the embankment. It doesn’t look like there’s much current. Maybe a mile’s swim?”

She looked up at me. “A mile’s swim, in clothes, in winter, with a guitar. Then we still have to walk the rest of the way, dripping wet. You’re joking.”

“I’m not joking. I’m only trying to help.”

“There’s no way. Not now. Maybe when the water and the air are both warmer.”

She was probably right. She’d been right about everything else. I sat down next to her and looked at the twisted tower. I tried to imagine what Detroit or Pittsburgh was like now, if they were all twisted towers and broken bridges, or if newer, better communities had grown, like the one Bay had left.

“I’ve got a boat,” I said. “There’s no fuel but you have an oar on your wall. We can line it full of snacks when the weather is better, and come around the coast instead of over land.”

“If I don’t kill you before then. You talk an awful lot.”

“But I can play decent guitar,” I said. “And I found a crab once, so I’m not entirely useless.”

“Not entirely,” she said.

• • • •

Inside the Music: Tell us what happened.

Gabby Robbins: I was nearly lost, out on the ocean, but somebody rescued me. It’s a different life, a smaller life. I’m writing again. People seem to like my new stuff.

• • • •

Bay took a while getting to her feet. She slung her bag over her shoulder, and waited while Gabby picked up Deb’s guitar. She played as they walked back toward Bay’s cottage, some little riff Bay didn’t recognize. Bay made

up her own words to it in her head, about how sooner or later everything falls into the sea, but some things crawl back out again and turn into something new.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Pinsker is the author of the novelette *In Joy, Knowing the Abyss Behind*, winner of the 2014 Sturgeon Award and 2013 Nebula Award finalist, and 2014 Nebula finalist, *A Stretch of Highway Two Lanes Wide*. Her fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Lightspeed*, and in anthologies including *Long Hidden*, *Fierce Family*, and *The Future Embodied*. She is also a singer/songwriter and has toured nationally behind three albums; a fourth is forthcoming. In the best of all timelines, she lives with her wife and dog in Baltimore, Maryland. She can be found online at sarahpinsker.com and on Twitter @sarahpinsker.

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Transitional Forms

Paul McAuley | 2100 words

At night, the hot zone was patched with drifts of soft pastel light. Violets and indigos; dark reds, translucent greens. Jellyfish genes for luminescence had been used as markers for tweaks in the first genetically modified organisms, and that tradition had been adopted by alife hackers. The colours were tags, territorial claims that pulsed and twinkled like spring blossom in an alien and verdant land.

Ray Roberts had been patrolling the hot zone and the desert around its perimeter for two years now, and he still thought it beautiful, at night. During the day, the trees and other alife organisms baked under the sunbleached sky. Black twisted lattices like the charred skeletons of cacti; carbonised spikes and spurs like the armatures of nuclear-blasted buildings. Tangles of burnt wire. Fields of grim sculpture. But at night, shrouded in soft clouds of colour, it was a fairyland.

That particular night, about a week after a salvage gang had infiltrated the zone and stripped copper and molybdenum beads from about twenty hectares of metal-concentrating trees, Ray was riding his bay gelding, Winston, along the dirt roads that switchbacked over the dump rock hills. He was plugged into the surveillance grid of cameras and drones. GPS tracked him to within a metre. He reported to dispatch every thirty minutes, and the reports of the other patrols crackled in his earpiece. The zone was on amber alert because the salvage gang would almost certainly be back for more, but that night everyone was reporting they'd nothing to report.

Around midnight, he met up with two colleagues at one of the monitoring stations near the pit of the exhausted copper mine at the core of the zone. They watered their horses from the standpipe, exchanged gossip, moved on. At sunup, Ray and Winston were heading home along the old boundary road when he spotted something up on a ridge. A glint, a speck in the eye, a dead pixel in a heads-up display. He glassed it in UV and infra-red, called up dispatch and sent a good shot from the video camera built into his glasses, got permission to check it out.

He kept a wary eye on the spot, let Winston pick his way between rocks

and mini-cathedrals of black spikes and clumps of prickly pear. At the top of the ridge, he reined in his horse and sat and waited, one hand close to the taser holstered at his hip. He'd never yet used it in anger, but you never could tell.

To the naked eye, the tent's canvas perfectly matched the ground's dry pebbly texture. Pretty soon a woman emerged, as if climbing out of a rent in the air. T-shirt and jeans, dirty blond hair in a ponytail, sunglasses heliographing early morning sun as she looked up at him.

Ray asked her if she was alone. "Neither of us need any surprises."

"There's no one here but me and the ants."

"They do thrive out here."

"I saw an owl, too."

"This area's been cleaned up by the alife, pretty much. The desert's coming back in."

Ray's glasses had grabbed the woman's face by now, checked it against the government databases. Janine Childs. BSc, PhD, both degrees from UCLA. A spell of employment in the California Department of Fish and Game, then some startup funded by South Korea, working in Kazakhstan. Currently freelance. The usual traffic citations, a divorce, no criminal record. Thirty-one, five eleven, blond hair, blue eyes.

She didn't flinch when Ray swung down from his saddle. She was exactly his height.

He said, "You know why I came up here?"

"I guess I picked the wrong place to camp."

"I guess you did. You're about ten kilometres inside a state-designated exclusion zone."

"I'll pack up and move on right away. Unless you're going to arrest me," Janine Childs said, with a nice smile. "Are you going to arrest me?"

"That depends on what you have cached up yonder."

"Oh. I was hoping you hadn't spotted that."

"Your camo is good, but it's military surplus. And it's surplus because someone figured out how to detect it. Let's go see what you've got."

After Janine Childs had pulled back the camo tarp, Ray studied the fans and the tubing and the rolling strips of sticky paper, then said, "You're collecting spores."

“Suppose I said I was doing pollen counts?”

“In September? I’d say you’re either six months late or six months early. I’d also say you should have picked a spot a couple of kilometres further in, if you were expecting to pick up anything from the core. The spores don’t travel far, even on a good wind.”

“Then I guess I’ve only broken the law a little bit. Will I get to keep my equipment?”

“That’s not for me to say, ma’am.”

“Janine.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She was one of those who liked to play the good sport when busted, asking Ray if he got a bonus for bringing in bandits, asking him how long he’d been riding the range, asking him where he’d bought his cowboy hat.

“It’s a Stetson. Western Straw. There’s a place in Yuma sells them.”

“It suits you better than the yellow safety jacket and black coveralls combo. Do they sell cowboy boots, in that place in Yuma?”

“They sell just about everything in that line.”

Ray couldn’t tell if she was serious or was ragging on him, discovered he didn’t mind.

She said, “I was thinking of buying a pair. I bet you wear them, off-duty.”

Eventually the backup arrived, two troopers in a Blazer. Janine Childs handed over the keys to the rented 4×4 she’d hidden under a camo tarp on the back slope, submitted to being cuffed, and allowed Ray to help her into the rear seat of the Blazer.

“Maybe I’ll see you again,” she said.

Ray filed papers back at the station, heard a couple of days later that Janine Childs’ equipment had been confiscated and she’d been freed with a caution.

“Think she has a taste for it?” the section supervisor said.

“She seemed to be having fun,” Ray said.

“Then she’ll be back,” the supervisor said. “You ask me, people like her are being given too much slack, these days. We catch them and hand them over the troopers, and instead of prosecuting them the state throws them right back into the mix.”

“I guess it keeps everyone in business,” Ray said.

Everyone knew that most of the hackers and ware pirates were funded by the skunk works of biotech companies. The state confiscated the data and samples and equipment of everyone caught infiltrating the zone, sold it back to the companies. It was the only way anyone could make any money until ownership of the zone was resolved.

The supervisor was an old-time guy who'd been laid off the Phoenix police force when it had been privatised. He said, “It's policy, and we get paid to enforce it, but I don't have to like it.”

Two months passed. Ray helped round up the salvage gang when they came back for more, and caught a pair of ware pirates with rucksacks packed with samples sawn from alife trees and shrubs, but saw no sign or trace of Janine Childs. Then, early in November, a new tweak caused a serious stepwise change in the dense ecology of alife organisms growing in the core of the hot zone.

The original alife organisms had been designed to extract low levels of copper, gold, silver, and molybdenum from the bench terraces of the old copper mine and the dump rock hills around it. Powered by various forms of artificial photosynthesis, they put down long roots that ramified through bedrock like the threads of fungus through rotten wood, and selectively grabbed heavy metals and concentrated them in “berries” strung along their branches.

The process had worked pretty well until the third major recession since the turn of the century had bankrupted both the company that had planted the alife organisms and Arizona's state government. The alife organisms had spread unchecked into the desert around the mine, and the biotech company that had purchased a license to use the site as an experimental facility was discovered to have been performing all kinds of clandestine work. Some of the original alife trees were still down in the mine's pit, grown in huge latticed towers like mediaeval siege towers, but most had been swamped by vigorous new forms of alife. The rogue company had introduced an uncatalogued variety of organisms, many infected with so-called cut-up and misprint hacks that not only allowed the organisms to swap and recombine loops of their artificial DNA, but also created random transcription errors—mutations. Introducing a kind of sex into the mix; turning the core of the hot

zone into an uncontrolled evolutionary experiment. While ownership of the area and responsibility for cleaning it up was disputed in the courts, new varieties of alive organism spread through the zone like bacterial colonies growing across an agar plate, and hackers and ware pirates tried to infiltrate the zone and quarry its biodiversity, or use it as a testbed for new tweaks.

Most organisms in the zone had already acquired the capability of shedding spores or live fragments. Now, this was a new twist, instead of developing into copies of their parents, airborne fragments of at least eight varieties were generating intermediate motile forms that ran off in every direction before settling down and developing into the adult form. The change had been quick and systemic, spreading like an old-fashioned computer virus, threatening to disperse rogue alive far beyond the quarantine strip bulldozed around the perimeter of the hot zone. No one knew if it had been caused by a hacker who'd managed to infiltrate the core, or by previously unexpressed code made active by some new, random recombination event. While government scientists scrambled to isolate and understand it, every security officer was seconded to firefighting, one shift on, one shift off.

Ray spent two weeks working in the area around the core, helping to locate and dig up and burn alive organisms that were spreading the new spores, then spent two weeks more riding through the zone, hunting down the so-called rollers. Things like pygmy tumbleweeds spun from wire; little latticed spheres like pillbugs. Ray captured some for analysis, sizzled the rest with a lance equipped with an arc-weld tip.

There were hard winds blowing from the north, driving the rollers fast and far, and whipping up dust and sand. Ray and the others wore masks and goggles; at the end of every shift Ray knocked about a pound of desert out of his Stetson. The fun of the chase quickly wore off. It became work. Hard, repetitive, frustrating work.

••••

There was a place where guards and hackers and ware pirates drank, at a crossroads where an enterprising family had set up a charge station, a motel, and a bar, the Rattler's Nest. It was an old-fashioned roadhouse, with a pine

board floor and a long counter and a couple of pool tables. A pickup band played Friday nights; it was playing the night Ray came in, two days before Christmas, just off a shift chasing down rollers, and saw her. Janine Childs.

She was sitting by herself in the corner by the unplugged jukebox, blond hair loose around the shoulders of a black riding jacket slashed with zipper pockets. Long legs in blue jeans and brown leather boots. Ray leaned against the bar, watched her watching the band. She seemed to be alone. After a while, one of the hackers drifted up to her, said something. She shook her head and after a brief exchange the hacker shrugged and drifted back to the knot of his buddies, bumping fists, and Ray bought a couple of bottles of Dos Equis from a barkeep wearing a Santa hat and walked over and stood there until she looked up.

“Hey, cowboy.”

“Ma’am.”

“If that beer’s for me, you can call me Janine.”

Her eyes were bright blue, with flecks of grey around the edges of the irises.

They sat and talked, awkwardly at first, finding it hard to fit into each other’s rhythms.

Janine said, “I see you favour the full-on cowboy look when you’re off duty. The boots and jeans, the sheepskin-collar jacket, that hat . . . In California they take off hats, in restaurants. In Arizona, I notice that they generally don’t. Can I try it?”

He gave her his hat, showed her how to handle it by the brim front and back, how to pinch the brim to pull it down over her eyes.

She looked good in it. Ray told her so. He said, “I notice you bought some good boots.”

“I can picture myself living out here. You on one side of the law and me on the other. Like one of the old songs.”

“Is that what this is about?” Ray said.

“It’s whatever we want it to be,” Janine said.

There was a silence they covered by drinking beer. The band was some kind of mutant Western swing deal. It wasn’t bad: two guitars and a stand-up bass, an accordion, a fiddle, a guy whaling a minimal drum kit. A few couples were dancing, shuffling and turning in a two-step.

Janine asked Ray how he'd come to work for the state; he told her how he'd joined the army and got into private security after he'd served his four years active duty, but hadn't much liked it.

"The people I worked with were okay, mostly, but some of the clients weren't. The second time one of them put me in a bad situation, I walked. After that, I did all kinds of jobs. Construction. Painting houses. I've always worked. One time I stood on a street corner with one of those big signs, pointing people to a sale of golfing equipment. And then someone told me about the company that provides security for the zone, and here I am. I thought I'd stick it out for six months," Ray said. "But it stretched to two years, somehow. And since it doesn't look like the lawyers are about to come to any kind of agreement about who owns the zone, I guess I'll be here a while. Maybe I found my level. How about you?"

"I think that you don't get on in life by sticking around in the same place," Janine said.

"So this is just temporary," Ray said.

"You're wondering how I got into it."

"I'm wondering why someone so smart isn't working for one of the biotech companies."

"When I was much younger and the ink was still wet on my PhD, I thought I could make a difference. I worked for a government project at the Salton Sea, using alive organisms to remove arsenic from the lakebed of the part that was allowed to evaporate. After that, I was recruited by a Korean biotech company. Have you ever been to Kazakhstan?"

"Not yet."

"There's a genuine space port, at Baikonor. And I'm sure some parts of the country are lovely. But the place where I was working was anything but. It was out on the steppe, nothing but grass and dust for hundreds of miles in any direction. It wouldn't have been so bad if the research had been interesting, but it was production line stuff, testing varieties of alive organism for their ability to extract residual metals from the tailings of a uranium mine. And not as well paid as you might think. But I managed to save enough to try my luck here. And you know how that went."

There was another space of silence while Ray wondered what to say to that. Janine asked him how the roller hunt was going; he said, "You heard

about that, huh?”

He was relieved, in a way, that she'd finally gotten around to the point. She said, “The same way everyone else did.”

“You know, only government scientists are allowed in the core. And grunts like me are watched all the time. The little cameras in our glasses, drones . . . There are pat-downs at the end of every shift, dogs trained to sniff out alive stuff. And if anyone approaches us, on the outside, chances are it's a company agent.”

“I'm not an agent, Ray. And I'm not asking you to do anything illegal. Really. I'm just expressing an interest in your work.”

“As far as that goes, I guess you know we have it under control.”

“I know that's what the spokesman for the Department of Agriculture has been saying for the past two weeks.”

“Well, it's true,” Ray said. “We'll soon have things back to normal.”

“But it isn't over yet, and when it's over, it won't be over. It'll be the new normal.”

Ray thought about that, said, “One of the scientists told me everything out there is a transitional form. On its way to becoming something else.”

“We haven't started to find out what we can do with alive organisms. Or what they can do, given the chance. ‘From so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.’”

“Nice.”

“Charles Darwin.”

They clinked bottles, drank to good old Charlie Darwin.

“Do you dance?” Janine Childs said.

They danced. He discovered all over again that she was exactly his height. They drank a couple more beers, danced again. Around midnight, the band segued into “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” and every drunk in the place whooped onto the little dance floor.

Janine leaned against Ray and said into his ear, “I have a room, in the motel.”

He made the mistake of accepting her offer of a drink, in the motel. A generous shot of tequila in a glass she fetched from the bathroom. He remembered her watching him knock it back, and then he woke with a foul headache, alone on the untouched bed. Her stuff was gone. So was his

Stetson.

He didn't tell anyone about it. He wasn't even sure exactly what had happened, but he had the feeling that he'd been fooled, somehow.

The roller hunt in the core of the hot zone continued over Christmas and into the New Year. Every shift, Ray found and dispatched fewer rollers than the last. There came a time when he spent three shifts in succession without spotting a single one. Soon afterwards, the Governor declared that the emergency was over.

The next day, Ray handed in his resignation. He told himself he'd put in enough time chasing down hackers and salvage gangs. He told himself that Janine Childs was right: it doesn't pay to stick around in the same place for too long.

He tried to trace her, but had no luck. She was in the wind, as they said.

He drifted from job to job, ended up working security for the Salton Sea plantations where she had once worked. It was a monoculture of pretty basic alive organisms, but even so, hackers were slipping under the wire, inserting rogue traits. At night, patches of red or green bioluminescence showed where they'd been at work.

Ray had been there about a year when he saw a brief item in the news. The State of Arizona was suing an experimental alive facility that had recently started up in South Korea, on the grounds that the organisms it was using were based on code stolen from the hot zone. The head of the place was Dr Janine Childs. Ray emailed her, expecting to hear nothing. A reply hit his inbox the next day.

It wasn't an apology or an explanation, but a tall story about this old scientist in Denmark who was into yeast and wanted to do research on the strains lager makers used, each one slightly different, each one producing a different brew. He wrote to the breweries, asking for samples, and without exception every one declined, citing commercial reasons. But the old scientist had what he wanted anyway: He took swabs from each rejection letter, swiped the swabs on agar plates, and cultured the yeasts that grew up. The air of each brewery was full of floating yeast cells and a few contaminated the paper of the rejection letters.

Ray thought about this, and realised that he had an answer to his little mystery. And the next day went back out on the line. Only a few forms are

ready to make the transition into something new. Most have to make do with what they already are.

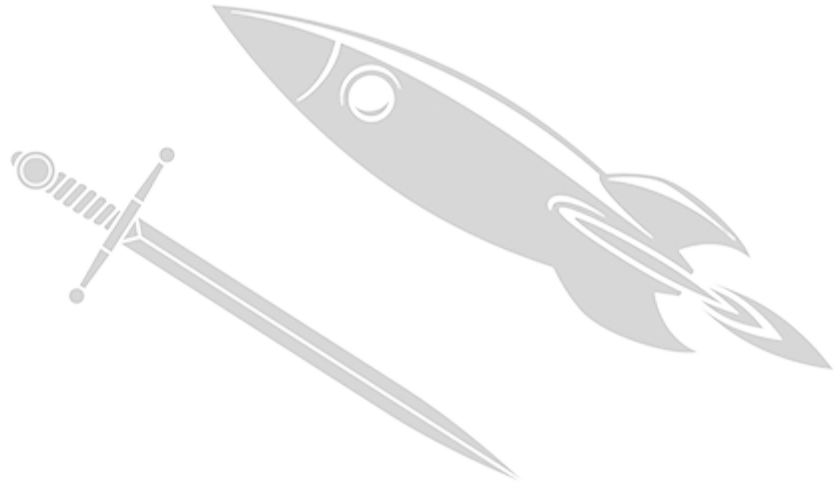
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Paul McAuley is the author of more than twenty novels, several collections of short stories, a Doctor Who novella and a BFI Film Classic monograph on Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*. His fiction has won the Philip K Dick Memorial Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, the Sidewise Award, the British Fantasy Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. His latest novel is *Something Coming Through*.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

FANTASY



Monstrous Embrace

Rachel Swirsky | 5400 words

I am ugliness in body and bone, breath and heartbeat. I am muddy rocks and jagged scars snaking across salt-sown fields. I am insect larvae wriggling inside the great dead beasts into which they were born. Too, I am the hanks of dead flesh rotting. I am the ungrateful child's sneer, the plague sore bursting, the swing of shadow beneath the gallows rope. Ugliness is my hands, my feet, my fingernails. Ugliness is my gaze, boring into you like a worm into rotting fruit.

Listen to me, my prince. Tomorrow, when dawn breaks and you stand in the chapel accepting your late father's crown, your fate will be set. Do nothing and you will be dead by sundown. Your kingdom will be laid waste, its remnants preserved only in the bellies of carrion birds.

There is another option. Marry me.

Rise from your bed and take my hand. We will be as one, husband and wife.

O, my prince, do not answer hastily. It is no ludicrous suggestion for you to love ugliness, marry ugliness. Already, you have wed yourself to hate. She lies beside you even now, your linen sheets tangled around her naked curves, the heat of her flesh close and tempting.

Repudiate her. Rise from your bed and take my hand. We will be as one, husband and wife. It is your only chance for survival. It is your kingdom's only chance for survival. Marry me and you will keep your life and your crown—if you have the courage.

• • • •

The day you met your princess, I was the thicket, watching as you rode with your hunters through the snow-swept clearing. Your horses' manes were bright with royal colors. Hounds prowled through your ranks, ears pricked for the rustling of foxes.

One of your knights sounded his horn and the animals were off, hooves and paws crunching through the frosty undergrowth. One dog tore his side on my thorny branches. He whimpered, tail tucked between his legs, blood

trickling into the snow.

You kicked your heels into your stallion's sides to urge him forward. He bolted a few steps before halting. He tossed his head wildly, mad eyes darting toward a nearby stand of oaks. You kicked your heels again. He didn't budge. You tugged the reins. He tossed his head as he had before, the muscles in his great neck straining.

This time you followed his gaze with your own, catching a glimpse of blue between the bare-branched oaks. Tugging your steed's reins in that direction, you kicked your heels once more. This time, the horse obeyed.

Your princess sat sidesaddle on a white mare, half-obscured by trees. An unhooded hawk perched on her shoulder, beaming its cruel-eyed gaze at you. Yellow and white ribbons adorned her wheat-colored hair. Her kirtle was the soft blue of mid-afternoon. A distant preoccupation glazed her eyes, giving her a fey appearance.

"Who are you?" you asked, awed.

Though your approach had not been quiet, she startled at your words. One alabaster hand flew across her mouth. As though called back from a great distance, her gaze settled on your face.

"My name is Lady Alna. I'm from the north." She paused. "I am faint from thirst. Perhaps . . ."

You drew a flask of wine from your pack and offered it to her, your eyes brightening as her fingers trailed across the back of your gloved hand. She drank in small, fluttering sips. You gazed at her, entranced by her high forehead and round cheeks.

Flirting her eyes downward, Alna returned the flask. "Might I ask my benefactor's name?"

You laughed with the genuine pleasure of not being recognized. "I am called Raius. I am the prince of this realm."

You failed to notice the brief twitch of her lips that would have revealed to a more perceptive man that she had known your identity all along. She ducked her head. "Pardon my ignorance. I've been traveling a long time. I come from a tiny city called Elithi, in the frozen north. Its towers once rose in the valley between the two highest mountains in the world, but vainglorious warlords have burned them down. My father sent me away when his spies learned of the approaching armies. He and my brothers

remained to stage a last stand. I have wandered alone since then, riding further than I can reckon.”

Her hawk screeched, wings stretched wide. She laughed brightly and held out her bare wrist. It jumped down, talons leaving no mark on her skin.

“Not quite alone,” she amended. “This is Karn—my sole companion.”

I saw love catch light in your gaze like an ember igniting firewood. I wish I could say that it surprised me that you could be so easily inflamed by beauty. Alas, I know you are only human.

I was everywhere around you, but you did not see me. You looked past the thorny briars ringing the copse, the poisonous mushrooms sprouting between the roots of the trees, the steam rising from the fox guts spilled by your hounds. All you saw was the smooth, pale face of Lady Alna. This is the fate of fools in love. They are blind to half the world.

• • • •

I’ve seen much since the world began. When the sky was made, there were thick brown clouds blotting the cleansing light of the sky. I was those clouds. When the earth was made, there were rocks and mud that choked out the green of growing things. I was those rocks, and I was that mud. I was bony-eyed fish swimming through ocean depths. I was centipedes wriggling across the forest floor. I was mildew spreading tendrils across damp cave walls, filling caverns with the stench of decay.

Wherever death is, there is ugliness. And so I have been everywhere.

I recall the first time I learned that I was one thing—one despised thing—and that there was another thing outside me, one that was loved.

At that time, I was a swamp surrounding a band of travelers who had entered my depths at nightfall. They carried with them a creature in a cage, a wretched animal with torn ears and tattered fur. They had not fed it for days, and it was starving. That night, they let it out on a rope. They petted and praised it and gorged it on raw meats.

They loved me that night. They petted and fed me, too. They wore the cured skins of their conquered foes, and pierced their hands with bone needles. They stomped and shouted and distorted their faces into hideous

masks.

When the creature was full and resting, watching them through satisfied half-lidded eyes, they slaughtered it. I was its entrails which they smeared across their arms and faces. I was their grunts and groans and howls; the stench of their rancid sweat; the angry slash of fire and shadow cast by their torches across their gaping mouths.

I came to love them. Ours was a strange, new synthesis. Other creatures had made themselves ugly to ward off rivals or predators, but nothing had ever before approached me with open arms and thinking minds, seeking to understand and become me. I felt myself unbound and remade as they wove me into themselves.

In the morning, they buried the dead creature. Their leader stood over its grave and intoned, "Hideous spirits that danced with us and dwelled with us, hear me. We have feasted and flattered you, and now I banish you."

With that, they left the swamp.

In the meadow beyond, they bathed themselves in the sparkling waters of the river that threaded through the grass. They rubbed their newly clean bodies with oil extracted from crushed flowers, and painted their faces with delicate shades of white and red. They sang instead of speaking, danced instead of walking. At dusk, they dined on fresh goats' milk, apples, blackberries, and honey.

I followed them as oozing mud, until there was no more mud. I circled above their heads, calling with the grating voices of birds that feast on dead things. They pretended not to hear my lonely cries. They turned away from me, seeking instead that vixen beauty whose trail I am always following, but whom I have never met.

What did she give them? Nothing but the ephemeral favor of her smile. In the end, when she left them, they returned to me. It was I, their jilted lover, who was left to tenderly trail the drool across their wizened jaws, and to twist their limbs in rigor mortis. I could have loved them all along, but they wouldn't take me until beauty fled from the rasp of their dying breaths. That day, I learned hurt. I have never forgotten it.

••••

You, too, know hurt.

When you were born, I was born with you. Together, we felt the midwife's rough hands pull you from your mother. However, only I had enough experience of the world to recognize the fear and disgust on her face as she beheld your crippled foot.

She was quick to blink away her disdain. She wrapped us in a tight blanket and laid us on the queen's belly. "Keep them warm and comfortable," she instructed one of the ladies in waiting. "There are herbs I must fetch from my house. I will return within the hour." She was careful not to let her voice betray something had gone wrong. She had guessed that your father, the king, would blame her for your deformity.

By dusk the next day, your father's soldiers had discovered her attempting to flee the kingdom with a caravan of pilgrims headed through the mountains. Your father had her strung up on the castle gate. During your first few weeks, I hung with her, inhabiting her gnarled bones as the crows pecked them clean.

At the same time, I lay with you in your cradle as we nursed on both the queen's milk and her strained expression of sadness and distaste. She and her ladies did their best to conceal their revulsion beneath polished smiles, but even as an infant, you were not deceived. You were raised on the same provisions I'd become accustomed to over the millennia: the darting glances, cut quickly away; the whispers beneath raised hands; the unabashed stares of children too young to have learned that civil, transparent lies are considered more polite than honest acknowledgement.

Day after day, you tottered after the other children, desperate to join their games. I longed to tell you that you were not alone. I was always with you, my invisible fingers in your hair, my lips pressed against your crippled foot as a mother's lips kiss away her child's injury. Alas, you could not hear my voice, or feel my shadow.

I know your most painful secrets. Oh, yes. The ones you've consigned to memory's dusty, forsaken chambers. Their doors unlock for me. I have trespassed within them.

Don't doubt me, my prince. I could recount tales of your older brother that even you have forgotten you remember. Once, he was the center around which your thoughts revolved. Now you've learned to set him aside

as a woman does with a spoiled bit of embroidery, only taking up his memory when regret inclines you to open old wounds. Your courtiers think your tense, stoic silences stem from grief, but we know the truth. Don't we?

Fear not. Your secrets are safe with me. I hated Edrian as much as you did. I loathed the beauty he wore with the entitlement of a crown prince, his shining blond hair and long flawless legs. The imperious expression he wore as he goaded the other children into racing laps through the castle's circular corridors. His grin as he watched you lurch after them, trailing behind them all, even the short, fat daughters of the duke.

Sometimes, Edrian would run beside you, breathing easy as you wheezed with the effort of dragging your useless foot. He reached out to steady you, features arrayed in a mimicry of compassion. "We'll run together," he said. He waited for you to rest your weight on his shoulders, and then he pulled away and rushed ahead, leaving you to stumble and fall as his laughter echoed through the halls, bright as birds' calls.

Again and again, he did this. Always, you thought to yourself, *this time, this time, he will help me*, and offered your trust once more.

As painful as those memories are for you, others of your memories are for me. The news of your brother's death arriving with the knights who'd ridden with him on that doomed hunt—I did not mourn his death, but I mourned what I knew it would mean for you. The sudden shower of attention bestowed on a previously unimportant son; the brocades and perfumes; the haberdashers and seamstresses and tailors.

Even I could not have predicted the southern magician, wrapped in so many layers of grey gauze that his body was blurred and indistinct, whose tales of healing miracles won him entrance into your bedchamber. He set candles smoldering in the corners of your room and knelt over them, chanting for hours, before he approached your bed. His hands emerged from his shroud, delicate and dark as carved ebony. I saw the magic on him like a shadow, and I despaired.

While you screamed with the pain of his needles and bone-breaking vises, the part of my spirit that lived within you stretched and thinned. I felt myself sifted from your flesh, like sand through a sieve.

The magician pulled aside the netting that had veiled his face. I stared into his bald, white eyes. He touched his fingers to his forehead in salute

and spoke a few grave syllables to banish me. I reeled away, dizzy and spinning.

As a normal-bodied boy, you grew distant. Sometimes I watched you, inhabiting the decaying corpses of mice left on the flagstones by well-fed castle cats, or pockmarks scarring the chef's daughter. I watched as you lost your thoughtful gravity. The ugly hesitate over their actions, knowing that they survive on the sufferance of the beautiful. You were comfortable, and careless, and free.

Already, you had forgotten me.

••••

Though you don't see it, your new love betrays you as completely as your brother did. I know, for I am the foul taste that coats her tongue when she remembers your kisses, her lingering expression of disgust when she turns from your caress. You've blinded yourself to her ugliness, just as the tribe in the swamp turned deaf ears to my aching calls.

At night, as you prepare for your rest, the Lady Alna lingers outside your bedchamber to speak with your bodyguard. Through the door, you hear the murmur of her voice. You are not suspicious; it reminds you of the pleasant, reassuring hum of her sleeping breath. But I am the scar across your bodyguard's bicep where he took a blow meant for you, and I hear what she says.

She lays her hand across your bodyguard's forearm. "I've been here a year. We've hardly spoken. I don't even know your name."

Then, with a laugh: "You're so strong. Flex again. My husband must be afraid to travel without you."

"Yes, I've seen him in such moods! He does not seem to want my company either. Sometimes, he forgets I am there, and I must sit quietly and wait for his dismissal. It's kind of you to withdraw when he needs his privacy."

And leaning in, voice and lashes lowered: "The prince has confided in me that he's found the preparations for the coronation wearying. His father's death is still new and raw. He is grieving. After the ceremony, I will take him aside for a walk through the apple orchard to look at the new

blossoms. Perhaps you would be so kind as to leave us alone . . .?”

As she withdraws her hand, her fingertips brush his wrist. His muscles tense, his heart rushes, his pupils dilate. She tilts her head to the side, exposing her neck. Her wheat-colored curls are crushed against her shoulder. On the other side of the door, you wait, innocent.

Later, an abstracted look on her face, she tells you that she misses the towers of her father’s city. “Go to the wizard’s tower,” you tell her. She smiles with the pleasure of knowing you think it’s your idea, so that you will not become suspicious when she spends her afternoons there, day after day.

I am the skulls and bones and bottled screams your wizard keeps in his chamber, the premature age that gnarls his spine. I watch as the Lady Alna drops her pretense in his presence. Her shy stance becomes imperious.

She releases her hawk. He circles the room, spreading his wings with the confidence of a creature used to owning all he surveys.

Alna lays her hand on the wizard’s twisted knuckles. It is her way of establishing control over men. The touch has only a dusting of magic in it, not enough to affect a man of magic. She does it anyway, for body to body has a magic of its own. Above, the hawk screams and extends his talons. He does not like it when she touches other men.

She laughs at the bird. He lands on me—one of the wizard’s skulls. His talons are sharp, even against bone.

She pulls a list from her robe. “I have the Winter’s Wit and Spikeleaf,” she says. “I need Stitch Brew.”

I extend into the wizard’s crooked, toothless leer. “Stitch Brew is hard to obtain,” he says.

Still, he promises to get it.

• • • •

I was there the day the City of Towers burned.

The fairies of the north drove to Elithi in their icy chariots. I caught only glimpses of them as they passed, for the fairies are so beautiful that I have never seen their faces.

When they reached the city, the fairies gathered at the base of the towers.

Their chancellor, who is so beautiful that I cannot see for twenty yards around him, read a statement from the fairies to the people of Elithi.

Elithi was beautiful—its spires built of finest marble, its willowy nobles dressed in whispering silks. Yet I always resided within its walls, for Elithi's beauty was purchased with ugly deeds. Some days, I watched the city from the wailing faces of maidens stolen from their homes to be sacrificed for magic spells. Others, I inhabited the severed hands and tongues cut from Elithians who'd dared speak against the city's rulers.

On the day when the fairies came to Elithi, I dwelled in the corpses of children whose organs had been harvested to make sweetmeats for the western barbarians. In the body of a disemboweled girl-child, her last breaths rattling with blood, I crawled to the tower window. The fairy chancellor's mellifluous voice echoed through the valley.

"Elithi is a blight on the ice," he said. "Its evil is a spreading blackness. For too long, we have stood aside. Our sorceresses came to us and told us of your sins. We turned them away, for the thought of destroying an entire people was too much to bear.

"Those of us who made that decision are shamed. It was only the most compassionate among us who looked not at the pain it would cause us to destroy you, but at the pain we could prevent. For years, they have traveled, filling bottles with the tears and screams and sorrows your magic has caused. Many among them have gone mad from witnessing such grief. This was their sacrifice, made in order to force us to see the agony caused by our inaction.

"To excise you from the world will hurt us. Yet it is the course of least evil. Some of us remember a world where light and dark were unalterably distinct. Now they are mixed. We stand at the estuary where they flow into each other. To stop evil, we commit evil."

As the echoes of the chancellor's voice faded, the fairies turned toward the city. In unison, they lifted their hands to the heavens. From their icy palms radiated a fiery nimbus which hung in great sheets across the air like the northern lights. Where it touched the tower walls, they burst into flame.

The Elithian nobles made a habit of living in the highest rooms, as removed as possible from the pain and despair wrought on their behalf in the city's cellars. That day, their callousness doomed them. They burned and

died, their screams thrown down like falling stones.

High in the tallest tower, below only the king himself, the heir to the throne of Elithi dwelled in rooms draped in brocaded silks. His name was Honorable Karn and he lived with his young wife, the witch Alna.

They fled to the windows. Below, they heard the screams of dying peasants.

Alna stepped backward. Her wheat-colored hair was bound in braids atop her head. She pulled a dagger from the stone altar beneath the window and sawed through one of the braids. Her tongue twisted into the strange, spidery syllables of the mystic language. She had always been a wary, suspicious creature, and so she kept an arsenal of spells at her fingertips, all but complete. The beginning of this one had been cast ten years ago on a moonless midnight, over the still-beating heart cut from a priest.

Her feet rose from the ground. Her gold brocade gown trailed below her, billowing in the snap of the wind.

Her bear of a husband grabbed her skirts. She struggled. “What about me?” he growled. (I was his growl. I was his livid eyes.)

She batted him away. “Let me go, you fool.”

“I won’t let you desert me,” said Karn. “I’ll keep you here until we both burn.”

Alna grimaced. I was twinned. “What do you want?”

“Make me fly.”

“I can’t. I only cut out one priest’s heart.”

“Find another way then, or we’ll die together!”

Alna pursed her lips. Her pale brows drew together as she considered. “Very well,” she said, “but you may not like it.” She bound together another spell she’d been saving, one woven from the anguish of a bride watching her groom murdered before their consummation. Alna smiled as she began the final incantation. Karn looked up in surprise and pain as his fingers stretched out into feathers.

• • • •

My prince, you must marry me. If you do not, she will kill you tomorrow. After the coronation, you will retreat with a small entourage to

the castle chapel in order to receive private blessing from your priest. Alna will catch the holy man's eye. He will avert his gaze. Still, his hands will shake as he anoints your face with oil—for she has corrupted him with her whispers and wiles. He no longer has the power to call on God's protection.

The oil will dry sweet and cool on your forehead. Your wife will clasp your hand. She will lean against you, her silk gown caressing your skin. The carved gold leaves on her coronet will shine against her elaborate coiffure.

"Come walk with me," she will whisper. "I want to be alone with you."

Perhaps a tatter of memory will rustle in your mind, but you will cast aside this night's revelations as the unpleasant echoes of a nightmare.

You will take her hand. The two of you will leave the chapel. The perfume of apple blossoms will waft toward you. Your steward will release a cloud of doves that flap across your path before disappearing into the bright summer sky.

As you and Alna walk down the winding garden path, breeze will stir the apple trees, strewing petals at your feet. Alna will step off the path, her slippered feet pale as the blossoms. She will tug your hand and pull you into the trees. Your bodyguard will follow a few steps, a nettlesome suspicion turning in his stomach, until Lady Alna turns to soothe him with her smile.

You will walk together to the orchard's heart. The sun will warm to the gold of afternoon, gilding the trunks. Veiled in the canopy's deep shadows, you will feel calm and tired. You will lie at the foot of a massive tree, resting your head on a root the thickness of your arm. Your thoughts will drift back to those days when you were an unwanted extra son, set loose to range the castle grounds alone.

Your first warning will be Karn's shadow, inscribing aerial circles with you at their center. The primordial, frightened part of your mind will recognize what it is to be prey before your reasoned self understands. You will convulse with tension, heart thumping as you struggle to your feet.

It will be too late.

Karn will descend from the sky, golden beak glinting as he dives to peck out your eyes. Behind you, Alna will begin her spell.

When your blood mixes with the packets of herbs Alna carries at her

belt, a violent shuddering will overtake you. You will bleed through the skin as your soul is forced from your body. Your limbs will seize. You will choke on your tongue.

Your thoughts will rush with her betrayal. *What more could she want?* you will wonder. You will have made her queen, the most powerful woman for kingdoms around.

It is not your kingdom she desires. She is not interested in paltry command over meadows and sheep. She craves the power of your death: the agony of a good-hearted king betrayed by his queen on the day of his coronation. In Alna's skilled hands, it will yield more power than any sorceress has possessed since the liminal years.

Karn will circle your corpse, beak bloody and glistening with the remnants of your eyes. He will caw with delight, wings spread to the wind. Alna will smile again, and hold out her wrist. He will alight there, ready to gain the first rewards of her power.

Alna will have become so powerful that she can ignite a spell with a simple gesture. She will fan her fingers, light will flare, and then Karn will be standing before her, admiring his strong hairy hands.

"Welcome back, my love," Alna will say, laughter in her voice. For she will have left him with the beady eyes and cruel beak of a hawk, commanded by a hawk's stupidly focused brain.

"I do what I please," she will tell him. "I've had enough of your jealousy."

She will fix a leather hood over his head, and a silver chain around his ankle, and she will lead him north to the frozen lands. She will kill or enslave every fairy who breathes, and then she will set them to rebuilding the elegant spires of Elithi. This time, she will be the one to sit on the throne in the highest tower. Karn will stand beside her, beak bared, a curved sword of ice grasped in his huge hairy hands, acting as both Alna's bodyguard and a warning to those who would oppose her.

Here, in the warm lands, your enemies will be emboldened. Your nation, deprived of leaders, will languish in chaos. Neighboring kingdoms will squabble over your fields. Your nobles will die on the invader's blades, your serfs marched north to be sold in Alna's Elithi.

I will dwell in more places than ever before, rolling in hideous waves

across the world. Yet the heart of me will wait with you as you die, seeking to soothe your pain. Do not do that to me, my prince. Do not force me to die with you.

••••

Accept my hand and none of this shall come to pass.

Instead, the magic will come from your professed love. Its power will allow me to take human form.

“Close your eyes,” I’ll say, newly incarnated. When you have, I will ease you from your bed and settle you elsewhere while I do what I must.

I will approach your queen as she sleeps in your bed, and lay my hand gently on her cheek. She will wake and behold the full, terrible strength of my ugliness. Her heart shall seize and fail. She will die with a curse on her lips.

Down in the rookery, Karn will let out a wailing cry. His talons will rip through his bonds. He will fly free, seeking to avenge his mate. As he wings to your bedroom window, I shall turn to face him. He, too, shall perish and fall.

This is the downfall of evil. They have not the courage to see the full face of ugliness, for they know it to be the appearance of their secret selves.

When they are gone, I will allow you to open your eyes. Despite how well we have known each other, you will wince, but you will not be able to draw your gaze away from me. I am riveting.

Arm in arm, we will march to the chapel. When we throw open the door, your corrupt priest will fall under the weight of his guilt. I will take his place at the altar, for ugliness has witnessed many marriages.

After we have pronounced our vows, I will take you into my arms, and we will be one again. Do not mistake me for male or female. Ugliness has no sex. Yet for you, I will be all that is feminine, that which absorbs but is yielding. I will be for you a swamp, rising around you in muddy tides that caress and engulf.

Ugliness does not deserve your rebuff. I am neither evil nor virtuous. I simply am. Since the beginning, I have been with you, yearning.

Enthroned as your queen, I will transform your lands into my flesh so

that you may better rule them. Your verdant forests will lose their leaves, skeletal branches scratching against hazy skies. Dirt will choke your rivers. Your village's fair youths will stoop, their lovely maidens be afflicted with warts and lazy eyes.

The armies that lurk even now on your borders will turn back. I shall ride on their fear and transform their lands, too, into my domain. Your rule shall extend, out through all the warring kingdoms into the great empire beyond, and then further, across the vast expanse of the ocean into realms your people have never even imagined.

Someday, you will die. I will take your body into myself and sustain myself on your flesh. Your beauty will become part of me. It will ripple across our realm. What I had made hideous will be restored, but changed: even the loveliest tree with the most perfect leaves will know what it was to have been me.

I shall set your skeleton on the throne. Your skull shall rule wisely, ugly-yet-not beneath the shining gold of your crown. Fused beneath our rule, the world will know no more ugliness, no more beauty—only unity. Hate and love will spin on their axes. Flowers and weeds will be tended together; fair and blighted women sought with equal fervor. Your descendants will flourish under our wise, eternal reign.

This is the vision I offer, should you take the brave and noble risk of holding out your hand to me.

Or, refuse my offer if you must, and return to your fitful sleep beside your traitorous wife. Put aside my warnings as ghastly dreams and follow the scent of apple blossoms to your death.

Either way, I will gain your kingdom, riding in on the bloody blades of conquerors, or mounting the gilded dais on your arm. The only choice is whether I will be a slave, forced to do the will of destruction, or a wife, striving to serve my liege.

Well, my prince? Are you brave? Will you stand tall and marry me?

Or will you quiver in your bed, ridden by your cowardice until the breaking of a dim and restless dawn?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Swirsky holds a masters degree in fiction from the Iowa Writers Workshop, and graduated from Clarion West in 2005. She's published over 50 short stories in venues including the *New Haven Review*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, and *Tor.com*. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Hugo Award, the Locus Award, and the Sturgeon Award, and in 2010, her novella *The Lady Who Plucked Red Flowers Beneath the Queen's Window* won the Nebula. If it were an option, she might choose to replace her hair with feathers, preferably bright macaw feathers.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Not by Wardrobe, Tornado, or Looking Glass

Jeremiah Tolbert | 5300 words

The scent of fresh lilacs and the boom of a cannon shot muffled by distance prefaced the arrival of the rabbit hole. Louisa jerked upright in her seat, and her book fell from her lap to slap against the cold pavement of the station floor. Dropping a book would normally cause her to cringe, but instead she allowed herself a spark of excitement as a metal maintenance door creaked open on rusty hinges. Golden light spilled out onto dazed commuters. Was this it? Was this *finally* it?

The silhouette of a centaur beckoned towards the gathering crowd from within the rabbit hole. In a melodious voice, she called out, “Richard! Come quickly. Without your aid, the Inkies destroy everything that is beautiful and good in our world!”

A middle-aged man in a gray business suit laughed and ran forward, the crowd begrudgingly parting before him. “Never fear,” he shouted, stepped through the hole, and pulled the door shut behind him. The lighting in the station returned to normal. The smell of flowers was replaced with the usual smell of stale urine, newsprint, and body odor. A train rumbled in the distance, perhaps soon to arrive, or perhaps not.

Louisa bent down to pick up her book. The front cover was creased on the corner, but otherwise, it was fine. The other commuters returned to those things commuters do to keep their mind off the boredom of travel; phones, newspapers, iPads, crossword puzzles.

Still not her turn. Not this time. To work in the mundane world, then.

••••

The agency had placed Louisa with Dewem, Putnam, and Low, a small but venerable legal office downtown. The interview had been very brief, as temps were harder to find since rabbit holes. In the past six months, the calls had gotten more frequent; Louisa had developed a good reputation for dependability. She had little else to do with her time since the cancer had finished its relentless march through her mother’s bones.

“Do you have one?” asked the office supervisor, a stern-sounding

woman named Catherine (absolutely never, *ever* to be called “Cathy,” she had instructed). Her name and voice conjured pictures of Catherine the Great, but in person, she was considerably shorter, wider, and balder than the Russian leader.

“No.”

“The last girl we hired never bothered to come in. And the young man before that showed for three days. I’m sure it’s wonderful, frolicking with elves in the forest, but we here in the *real world* have work to do.” She said “real world” with a degree of bitterness that evoked considerable sympathy in Louisa. Perhaps she too had been passed over.

“I am dedicated to my work, don’t worry. What would you like me to do?” Of course, she didn’t say that if her rabbit hole did arrive, she wouldn’t be coming back. She still had to pay rent for the time being, after all.

Catherine waved at the paperwork threatening to topple from the side of her desk. “File these, to start.” Catherine dismissed Louisa by simply ignoring her in favor of the computer. It took a long moment before Louisa realized she was supposed to leave. She could appreciate a supervisor who didn’t expect her to spend hours chitchatting about television or current events, two things that held no interest for Louisa, unless you counted the rabbit holes as “current events.”

Louisa gathered up the paperwork and wandered in search of the filing room. Most of the offices were dark and empty. The few people she saw looked frazzled and weary, like people for whom sleep had dropped a few levels on the hierarchy of needs—kindred spirits, those. She had seen that exhaustion many times in the mirror during her mother’s long decline.

Many of the lawyers were nearly hidden behind stacks of paperwork as large as the one she was attempting to file, which, if nothing else, signaled job security. One young man looked up as she stopped to stare. He gave her a half-smile, raised an immaculately sculpted eyebrow.

Louisa blushed. “Um . . . which way to the filing room?”

He pointed down the hall. He opened his mouth to speak, but she turned and fast-walked away before he could make a sound. She didn’t know how to talk to attractive young men anymore, if she ever had. Best to avoid it as much as possible.

Instead, she went to work in the small, dimly lit room down the hall. The system was a standard, though slightly antiquated one, as promised. The room itself would have been unremarkable but for one of the ceiling-high wooden cabinets; it was padlocked with two fist-sized chrome locks and a heavy steel chain. A sticky note indicated that T to Th had been moved to the neighboring cabinet indefinitely, and pointed with marker-drawn arrow to the right. When Louisa pressed her ear to the drawer, harp music whispered from within.

Louisa rooted through her pockets for her notebook, flipped to the end of her list of “Types of Rabbit Holes” and wrote: FILING CABINETS in neat letters. She snapped it shut, tucked it away, and began to work.

••••

The first week passed in silent drudgery, which was just fine for her. Jobs like this with clearly defined tasks, ones that involved a minimum of interaction with other people, were her specialty. The thing that interested her most was the locked rabbit hole in the cabinet, which at first Catherine had no interest in explaining.

Each day, Louisa ate her lunches at 12:30 exactly, methodically and quickly, without interest. The food was secondary to the book she hoped to read.

In this one, a teenage boy fell through the ice of a lake and woke up in a cold land ruled by witches made of curdled frost and coal-stained snow. Giant fish wove paths of light through the sky, drifting silently overhead like grand zeppelins. She had already written ICY LAKE in her notebook.

The writing was pedestrian, not that she could do better. But it passed the time. Some of the imagery carried her away for a few moments, but since the rabbit holes, even her old favorites felt hollow; new works, untouched by the pixie dust of childhood nostalgia, couldn't begin to compare to tantalizing new-reality.

The shuffle of footsteps on ragged carpet drew Louisa's attention from the story, and Catherine walked past, pausing for a moment as if debating whether or not to make conversation, but continued to the microwave. She placed a plastic bowl of half-frozen soup inside and set the timer.

“How are you finding the work?”

“I don’t mind filing,” Louisa said carefully.

“Good. We have plenty for you.” Catherine chuckled half-heartedly, and the microwave beeped. She removed the soup, only the tips of her fingers touching the bowl, and carried it to sit across from Louisa. She lowered her head and pursed her lips, and blew across the surface. Tiny ripples shimmered across the yellowish liquid.

“So,” Catherine said, stirring now with a plastic spoon. “You . . . you really don’t have one at all?”

Louisa shook her head.

Catherine smiled. “You’re so lucky.”

Louisa forced a smile.

“Have you noticed how much emptier the streets are now? How many of the shops have closed?” Catherine asked. She took a tentative bite of soup, held her mouth half open for a moment and exhaled sharply. Finally, she swallowed. “It’s one of the things we’re working on here.”

“Really?” Louisa had wondered what sort of work would keep lawyers so busy now. Crime was falling steadily, from what she’d read. Why would anyone steal anything when they could go to a world where their every desire would be met? The poor became kings. The rich, they got whatever it was *they* wanted. Everyone was happier down their rabbit holes.

“So much abandoned property.” Catherine shrugged. “It’s a tricky area to sort out. There are interested buyers, but it’s a bit of a gray area. The buyers, I mean.”

“I should get back to work,” Louisa said. “Like you said, there’s a lot of filing.”

“Can you hear the music still?” Catherine asked, her voice softening.

“Yes,” Louisa said, suspicions now confirmed.

“I always loved the harp.” Catherine stared at the wall just over Louisa’s shoulder, staring really at nothing at all that could be seen. “Such a beautiful instrument. My mother made me learn the violin. Said the harp wasn’t a respectable instrument. Too expensive. Not *practical* . . .” She trailed off, mindlessly stirring the last of her soup.

Not sure if Catherine expected her to say anything else at all, Louis decided it was safer to remain silent. After a few minutes, she gave a quiet

wave, stood, and returned to the filing room. Catherine didn't seem to notice.

• • • •

Around the work for the law firm, Louisa finished three more fantasy novels and added two more rabbit holes to her notebook. The coming drought of books loomed heavily in her thoughts during her increasingly deserted commute to DPL's offices. New books were harder to come by. Few were being written, and even fewer were published. The writers had been some of the first to disappear.

Friday evening, a dumpster in the alley beside her apartment building expelled a man in a golden-feathered headdress riding a six-legged brown stallion. He shook a spear at the sky and shouted something in a language Louisa didn't understand. He smiled at her; his white teeth stood out sharply against his deeply tanned skin. Then he nudged the horse into a trot and down the street. He turned the corner at the Mini-Mart and disappeared into the evening.

By the time Louisa made it to the dumpster, the glow was gone. She added it to her list in quick, angry letters.

It was only later that she realized it was the first time she'd seen anything leave a rabbit hole other than herself.

• • • •

Louisa had *entered* someone else's rabbit hole twice.

The first had been a manhole cover that led to a strange world of talking mushrooms and brick architecture that gleamed red under cloudless blue skies. It hadn't been what she expected. But of course it hadn't. It wasn't *hers*. After a day, she took a warp pipe home, and the gleaming gold coins she had collected turned into dust when she returned.

The second time was after Annabelle had stopped calling, something she had done twice weekly ever since their mother had become ill and Louisa had volunteered to come home from college and take care of her.

The calls had followed a simple script: three to four minutes of banal

pleasantries, five minutes about their mother's declining health, and then an awkward few minutes about how Louisa was coping with it all. The calls hadn't stopped after their mother's death, only gotten shorter, which had only served to confirm Louisa's suspicions that the calls were not about what they seemed to be about. They were tailored to make Annabelle feel better for not being there, for staying at Stanford and finishing *her* degree.

She resented the calls, but it wasn't until they ended that she realized how much she needed them to anchor herself in the world.

Three months into the rabbit holes situation, Louisa took the train to Annabelle's house out in Napierville. The house was empty. The doors and windows were all open, and the curtains billowed outward in the breeze. Anna's husband had moved out the year before, but Louisa didn't know the details. She searched the yard first; even the dog was missing. Whether down a rabbit hole of its own, or with Annabelle, Louisa didn't know. Maybe Anna's husband had taken the dog.

She obsessed about that for weeks afterward. Did even animals have their own worlds? Did every living thing *but* Louisa have a secret world of its own out there?

Louisa closed all the windows and swept the house. She called in sick to her temp job and waited a week, in case her sister had gone on a business trip and forgotten to tell her. She stayed in the guest bedroom, even though the bed in her sister's room looked more comfortable. Somehow, to sleep in there would have been acknowledging the truth too much.

On the last day, she searched the house for clues, finally discarding any notion that she was violating Anna's privacy. The rabbit hole was in the attic. An old steamer trunk opened onto a tropical island where statues as large as skyscrapers had been built in Annabelle's likeness. Pirate ships were moored off the white sand beaches, their guns silent but ominous. A volcano puffed gray smoke overhead, and a deep, masculine chanting echoed through the jungle. Louisa had called out her sister's name, but there was no way Annabelle could have heard her over the riot of noise. The rabbit hole pinched closed a moment after she stepped back home.

If she had just taken a little longer, she might have been trapped there in someone else's secret world. What would have happened to her? Would it have been any worse than being stranded in the "real" world?

She didn't know the answer to that question. Didn't want to know. Louisa gave up on other people's rabbit holes, confident that none of them would ever be quite right if it wasn't meant exactly for her.

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One month after she began working at Dewem, Putnam, and Low, she walked to the corner newsstand. She was out of library books, and thought perhaps she would try her hand at the crossword puzzle in the Tribune. She was terrible at crossword puzzles, but the Monday puzzle was usually within her abilities.

The man behind the counter was no longer a man at all, strictly speaking. He had a human body, and wore a large white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up around massive elbows, but he possessed the head of a buffalo, round and shaggy with black-brown fur. His placid eyes watched Louisa as she tried to make a selection from the papers; they were days out of date. Her hands shook as she picked up a copy of the *Times* from the past Monday, then handed a five dollar bill to the buffalo-headed man. He reached below the counter and retrieved her change without taking his eyes off of her.

"What happened to Vincent?" she asked suddenly, the words escaping quickly before she could stomp them back down.

The bisontaur shrugged. "Gone over," he said in a soft, almost feminine voice. If it wasn't for the heavy horns above his ears, Louisa might have revised her estimation of his sex.

"He sold you his stand?" she asked.

His large eyes narrowed. "I paid for the stand. It is mine."

Louisa didn't know what that meant, but she decided not to ask any further questions, and hurried to catch the train. It was twelve minutes late anyway, and arrived empty.

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Catherine was not waiting at the front desk when Louisa arrived. Louisa had been mentally preparing for her boss's tirade; she'd received real

blistering monologues from bosses in the past, and felt deflated and hollow when she had no one to deliver her excuses to.

Louisa gathered up a stack of filing that was waiting. Half again as many offices were empty today as the day when she started. She wondered what a lawyer wanted in a rabbit hole? She pictured some kind of Court World where the opponents were buffoon-ish cartoon characters, the moronic jury easily swayed by proper human logic. The clients were . . . wealthy royalty? The judge presiding over it all, a sphinx, lion's tail lashing in time to the arguments. Or perhaps not. What little Louisa knew about the fantasy lives of normal people, she found bland and unimpressive.

In the filing room, the old cabinet T-TH was open. Paperwork blew around the room, and the harpsong was louder than ever. The chains, lock, and a heavy red bolt cutter lay on the floor like the weapons at a crime scene in a television forensic drama.

Louisa closed the cabinet and allowed herself a good cry. In some ways, Catherine had been the best boss she had ever had.

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Paychecks stopped coming, and Louisa stopped going in. She believed the office would be empty by now, and for some reason she could not explain, she did not want to see it in that state. She preferred to picture it struggling along valiantly, dealing with the legal matters that remained, a handful of dedicated lawyers keeping civilization together.

Out of things to read, she passed time flipping through TV channels. Most of them were blank. On a few, she saw shows, but not put on by humans. A talk show hosted by a gorgon. The camera cut to a pan across an audience full of giant snakes. A game show host that looked like a living statue, asking questions to a panel of a hobbit, a brown bear wearing hipster glasses, and a thin vapor mist that just barely took the outline of a woman.

It reminded her of traveling to another country, where the culture is completely foreign and the language is one you had tried to take in high school, but you had forgotten most of since. Traveling there and turning on a television in a hotel room. The shows were just like that. Alienating.

Louisa rang her temp agency, hoping for anything better to do. She got a

disconnect message.

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Louisa took a late night walk through the city. They were not as empty now. Traffic was lighter, mostly made up of chariots drawn by lions or Victorian carriages drawn by giant-sized mice. There was the occasional steam-powered tank, but the drivers were generally nice enough to take the main avenues.

Louisa stopped and watched an ogre wearing a policeman's uniform buy a hot dog from a cart operated by a ghost in a burial shroud.

She wanted to ask them questions, but the thought of talking to either of them terrified her. So far, the city's new residents had ignored her. It seemed best not to draw attention to herself.

In the park, she was chased by leering goblins. They shouted obscenities at her in accents she didn't recognize, but the meaning of the words was clear enough. *Stay off our turf.*

She ran home and locked her door. She turned on the TV again. A local channel was airing a roundtable discussion between a badger, a toad, a weasel, and a beaver. They were debating upcoming mayoral elections in crisp English accents. Louisa turned off the television and went to bed.

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"Rent's due," said the satyr standing in her doorway. He wore half a dozen gold chains around his neck and his great mane of hair had been slicked down with Palmolive.

Louisa blinked, went to her purse at the counter, and began to write the check. The satyr laughed.

"Can't accept that," he said. "Rent's one hundred crowns a month or \$1000 cash. No checks."

"What's a crown?"

"It's uh, a gold coin. About this big." He made a circle between his thumb and forefinger the size of a quarter.

"Where am I supposed to get those?" Louisa asked.

“Not my problem. You can have a couple of days, because I like you. After that, you’re out on the street.” He turned on his hooves and left before she could argue. “Plenty of Others looking for a place,” he said over his shoulder. Something in the way he said the word made it clear that *Others* was what they called themselves.

She thought about robbing a bank or maybe the museum. In her imagination, banks were full of gold bars, but that couldn’t be true, could it? She remembered reading that the gold standard had gone out years ago, and there was hardly any gold in the money system at all.

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She found a rare coins dealer on Milwaukee. The proprietor was human—tall, thin, with graying hair. He shook his head sadly at her before she even spoke.

“I’ve traded away everything even *resembling* gold,” he said.

“To who?” she asked. “People like me?”

He laughed. “No, no. Them. The Others. I’ve gotten such marvelous things in return. Do you need a singing sword? Or a kite that can fly when there is no wind?”

“Could I pay my rent with any of those?” she asked. He shrugged.

“Why are you still here?” she asked. Speaking at all felt like a talent that had grown rusty with disuse.

He looked surprised at the question. “Business is better than ever,” he said. “Sorry I couldn’t help you.” With that, he disappeared into his back room. She browsed the displays, hoping he had overlooked something gold, but he had not.

What else could she do? That night, she packed all of her belongings, starting with the books.

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In the morning, she bought a train ticket to the suburbs from the automated ticket machine, which luckily still accepted her debit card. She took only a suitcase with her for now. She would send for her things later.

Somehow. Surprisingly, the train was on time. It even had passengers. A few looked somewhat human. They all wore business dress, and when the train stopped, they hurried off and into the street like any other group of commuters. The only difference was that they were smiling. Louisa shivered.

Annabelle's house had been painted, and the doors had new locks. The yard had been mowed. The doghouse out back was gone. A square patch of dead earth was the only sign that it had ever been there. It was the patch that convinced Louisa she hadn't somehow come to the wrong home, gotten off at the wrong stop and wandered confused in a foreign neighborhood that looked just enough like her sister's to stretch the deception.

She entered the yard, climbed the handful of steps, and rang the doorbell.

A moment later, it opened. A woman wearing a blue dress and a yellow apron tied around her waist answered. Giant swan's wings folded away as she dusted her hands off on the apron.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

"Who are you? This is my sister's home."

The swan woman's eyes softened. "Poor thing, left behind? What a shame. I'm sorry, but this is not your sister's home anymore. My mate and I paid for it fairly."

"I don't believe you," Louisa says, raising her voice. "You have to get out!"

The soft gaze hardened and the woman hissed. "Take it up with our attorneys at Dewey, Putnam, and Low."

The words came as a blow to her, and Louisa turned and walked away in a daze. So now she knew whom the law firm had been working for, and who had been purchasing the abandoned property all along. The strange family living inside Anna's home weren't squatters. They had paid for it. They had paid for everything in equal trade. One world for another, and more.

She took the next train back to the city, fuming. If anyone still worked for Dewey, Putnam, and Low, they would answer her questions, or she would burn the place to the ground.

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Yellow light spilled out into the darkened hallway of the law firm from a single office. Louisa had been surprised that her keys still worked, but, after all, what would anyone want with the contents of the last working human law firm in the city?

Inside was the young man who had given her directions on her first day. He looked as impossibly tired as before, but he still smiled at her when she stood in the doorway.

“I don’t suppose you’ve come back to help with the filing,” he said.

She shook her head. The anger had burned up on the long ride here. She bit her lip to keep from crying again; she had cried entirely too much recently.

“Too bad.” He sighed. “Nobody has been answering my classified ads lately. You know, I think you’re the only human I’ve seen this week. Sometimes, with the Others, it can be hard to tell, though.”

“Which one are you?” She asked. The sting had returned to her tone, and she was thankful.

“I’m Langford Putnam, but I wasn’t even a junior partner yet. My father was Howard Putnam. That’s his name on the masthead,” he said. “So what can I do for you?”

“You helped a family of Others take my sister’s home.”

“We do a lot of that. Where?”

She gave him the address.

He began to poke and prod the stacks, lifting an edge here and there. He finally pulled one thick folder out of the middle of a pile. “Ah, here we go.” The rest of the paperwork toppled to the floor, scattering. He paid it no mind.

He opened the folder and began to read, muttering to himself. “Did your sister have a will?”

Louisa shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“Too bad,” he said. “She might have left you the property in that, and it would give us some leverage. Unfortunately, the couple that moved in there have a legally binding contract transferring ownership. Signed by your sister, even.”

“They do?” she blinked. “How is that possible?”

Langford Putnam shrugged. “How is any of this possible? You could probably challenge it in court, but who knows who or what you would get for a judge.”

“Are you helping me?” she asked.

“Of course I am. There aren’t a lot of us left. We should probably stick together,” he said, smiling that smile that made her stomach twist into knots.

“Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

He shrugged again. “The Others have settled in enough that I think they only keep me employed as a novelty. I’m not sure they would care.”

“Why are *you* still here?” she asked. The boldness from before was slipping away. She did her best to cling to it.

“I could ask you the same question,” he said, grinning, and her resolve crumbled. Louisa sobbed.

He jumped up from his chair, knocking over further paperwork, and put an arm around her shoulder, ushering her to his spare chair. He kicked off another stack and helped her sit.

“Hey, sorry, touched a nerve, huh?”

“All my life! All my life, I’ve read stories about fantasy worlds. I used to *dream* about being whisked away to my real parents, to where I *really* belonged.” Langford offered a tissue, and she daubed at her tears with it. “When the rabbit holes opened, I thought it was only a matter of time. I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find *mine*.”

She shouted it, didn’t care who heard her now:

“IT’S! NOT! FAIR!”

He nodded, let her cry for a moment, and then said quietly, “I bet that made you feel like a real Susan Pevensie.”

“Exactly! What did I do to deserve being left behind? At first, it was about escape. It’s all I ever dreamed about, you know? But now, it’s about ___”

“Feeling abandoned.”

“Yes.”

“First of all, I don’t think you ever did anything wrong! It’s actually probably quite the opposite. Working with the Others, I’ve picked up hints here and there about how it all works. Nothing concrete, but what if you’ve

got it all backwards?”

She sniffed. “What do you mean?”

“First of all, you’re not the only one left. I’m here. So you’re not alone. The thing is, the rabbit holes are tailor-made for each person, right? The perfect escape. But have you wondered, with all those stories you’ve read since you were a kid, exactly what your rabbit hole would look like?”

“Of course,” she snapped. “It would be beautiful. Full of danger and adventure. I would be needed, needed really for the first time since my mother . . . well, since a long time ago. I would be *important*.”

“Would you be the queen?”

“At least! Or an empress.”

“Of what?”

She paused. “Of everything?”

“Where are the specifics? Are we talking a standard European fantasy world with dragons and all that? Miévilian weird city? Satirical rabbits and playing cards?”

She said nothing. When she tried to picture her perfect rabbit hole, all she had was a feeling.

Langford continued: “You’ve traveled to a thousand worlds in your books. Think about how much you’ve seen.”

She frowned. “You think that no *one* rabbit hole world would satisfy me?”

He nodded furiously. “That’s exactly it! How do you tailor the perfect escape for a serial escapist? It can’t be done. Just about anything would have bored you eventually. Mine sure bored the hell out of *me*.”

“Yours? You had a rabbit hole?” she asked.

“I still do.” He pulled a watch on a long silver chain from his pocket and opened it. Dazzling light spilled from the clock face, and birds sang inside.

“I did the save-the-world thing, and it was *easy*. What’s going on back here is a lot more interesting. So I came back. I visit sometimes when I need to relax.” He closed the watch face, and the light vanished. “I may have read a little too much myself. When I was younger.”

“You can come and go?”

He nodded. “They’re rabbit holes, not prisons. It’s not a matter of ‘can’ so much as a matter of ‘want.’ Heck, I can even take visitors if . . .” He

blushed. "Sorry, I probably sound like I'm bragging."

Louisa shook her head. "It's okay . . ."

"My guess is, whatever powers are behind the Others and all of this, they knew they couldn't tempt you. Not really."

He stood and went to the window, pulling open the shade, and beckoned to Louisa. She joined him, looking out across the city.

Enormous, sinuous feathered shapes weaved between the buildings, some of which were crawling with stone-skinned workers remaking skyscrapers into castle-like edifices. Ghostly ships drifted on the lake, their shimmering sails iridescent in the fading sunlight. And below them, countless varied shapes moved in traffic, armors, scales, and slick skins glinting under flickering street lamps and neon signs.

"I don't know," Langford said. "I've always loved this city, but I spent the first half of my life wishing I could live anywhere else at all. It took me some travel, extraordinary and mundane, and a lot of thinking, but eventually I came to see it's truth. This place is home, and in it's own way, it's—"

"Beautiful," she whispered. Could that be it? All this time, she hadn't been looking at it right? Now that she was elevated above her problems, literally, she could see the world for what it was becoming—something stranger than whatever could be on the other side of a single rabbit hole.

Why *would* she want to leave this?

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't thank me yet. I haven't even started to solve your housing problem."

"You'll help me? Why?"

"Secret reasons," he said with a sly smile.

That was a puzzling thread to unravel, but for now, she was content to stare out at the city with renewed wonder. How had she missed it? It was almost if *this* world was being made just for her. It was beautiful; it was dangerous and probably full of adventure; and just maybe, it needed *her*.

She rummaged through coat pockets, retrieved her notebook, and flipped past the lists of rabbit holes to a blank page.

"Can I borrow a pen?"

Langford fumbled in his pockets, then offered a nice, heavy steel-capped

pen.

“Those flying things? Would you call those ‘dragons’?”

Langford stared out the window for a moment, then said: “I can’t think of a better word to describe them, can you?”

“I’ll accept that challenge,” Louisa said, and began a new list.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremiah Tolbert has published fiction in *Lightspeed*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Interzone*, *Asimov’s*, and *Shimmer*, as well as in the anthologies *The Way of the Wizard*, *Seeds of Change*, *Federations*, and *Polyphony 4*. He’s also been featured several times on the *Escape Pod* and *PodCastle* podcasts. In addition to being a writer, he is a web designer, photographer, and graphic artist. He lives in Kansas, with his wife and son.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Map of Seventeen

Christopher Barzak | 9600 words

Everyone has secrets. Even me. We carry them with us like contraband, always swaddled in some sort of camouflage we've concocted to hide the parts of ourselves the rest of the world is better off not knowing. I'd write what I'm thinking in a diary if I could believe others would stay out of those pages, but in a house like this there's no such thing as privacy. If you're going to keep secrets, you have to learn to write them down inside your own heart. And then be sure not to give that away to anyone either. At least not to just anyone at all.

Which is what bothers me about *him*, the guy my brother is apparently going to marry. Talk about secrets. Off Tommy goes to New York City for college, begging my parents to help him with money for four straight years, then after graduating at the top of his class—in studio art, of all things (not even a degree that will get him a job to help pay off the loans our parents took out for his education)—he comes home to tell us he's gay, and before we can say anything, good or bad, runs off again and won't return our calls. And when he did start talking to Mom and Dad again, it was just short phone conversations and emails, asking for help, for more money.

Five years of off and on silence and here he is, bringing home some guy named Tristan who plays the piano better than my mother and has never seen a cow except on TV. We're supposed to treat this casually and not bring up the fact that he ran away without letting us say anything at all four years ago, and to try not to embarrass him. That's Tommy Terlecki, my big brother, the gay surrealist Americana artist who got semi-famous not for the magical creatures and visions he paints, but for his horrifically exaggerated family portraits of us dressed up in ridiculous roles: American Gothic, dad holding a pitchfork, mom presenting her knitting needles and a ball of yarn to the viewer as if she's coaxing you to give them a try, me with my arms folded under my breasts, my face angry within the frame of my bonnet, scowling at Tommy, who's sitting on the ground beside my legs in the portrait, pulling off the Amish-like clothes. What I don't like about these paintings is that he's lied about us in them. The Tommy in the portrait is

constrained by his family's way of life, but it's Tommy who's put us in those clothes to begin with. They're how he sees us, not the way we are, but he gets to dramatize a conflict with us in the paintings anyway, even though it's a conflict he himself has imagined.

Still, I could be practical and say the American Gothic series made Tommy's name, which is more than I can say for the new stuff he's working on: The Sons of Melusine. They're like his paintings of magical creatures, which the critic who picked his work out of his first group show found too precious in comparison to the "promise of the self-aware, absurdist family portraits this precocious young man from the wilderness of Ohio has also created." Thank you, Google, for keeping me informed on my brother's activities. The Sons of Melusine are all bare-chested men with curvy muscles who have serpentine tails and faces like Tristan's, all of them extremely attractive and extremely in pain: out of water mostly, gasping for air in the back alleys of cities, parched and bleeding on beaches, strung on fishermen's line, the hook caught in the flesh of a cheek. A new Christ, Tommy described them when he showed them to us, and Mom and Dad said, "Hmm, I see."

He wants to hang an American Gothic in the living room, he told us, after we'd been sitting around talking for a while, all of us together for the first time in years, his boyfriend Tristan smiling politely as we tried to catch up with Tommy's doings while trying to be polite and ask Tristan about himself as well. "My life is terribly boring, I'm afraid," Tristan said when I asked what he does in the city. "My family's well off, you see, so what I do is mostly whatever seems like fun at any particular moment."

Well off. Terribly boring. Whatever seems like fun at any particular moment. I couldn't believe my brother was dating this guy, let alone planning to marry him. This is Tommy, I reminded myself, and right then was when he said, "If it's okay with you, Mom and Dad, I'd like to hang one of the American Gothic paintings in here. Seeing how Tristan and I will be staying with you for a while, it'd be nice to add some touches of our own."

Tommy smiled. Tristan smiled and gave Mom a little shrug of his shoulders. I glowered at them from across the room, arms folded across my chest on purpose. Tommy noticed and, with a concerned face, asked me if

something was wrong. “Just letting life imitate art,” I told him, but he only kept on looking puzzled. Faker, I thought. He knows exactly what I mean.

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Halfway through that first evening, I realized this was how it was going to be as long as Tommy and Tristan were with us, while they waited for their own house to be built next to Mom and Dad’s: Tommy conducting us all like the head of an orchestra, waving his magic wand. He had Mom and Tristan sit on the piano bench together and tap out some “Heart and Soul.” He sang along behind them for a moment, before looking over his shoulder and waving Dad over to join in. When he tried to pull me in with that charming squinty-eyed devil grin that always gets anyone—our parents, teachers, the local police officers who used to catch him speeding down back roads—to do his bidding, I shook my head, said nothing, and left the room. “Meg?” he said behind me. Then the piano stopped and I could hear them whispering, wondering what had set me off this time.

I’m not known for being easy to live with. Between Tommy’s flair for making people live life like a painting when he’s around, and my stubborn, immovable will, I’m sure our parents must have thought at some time or other that their real children had been swapped in the night with changelings. It would explain the way Tommy could make anyone like him, even out in the country, where people don’t always think well of gay people. It would explain the creatures he paints that people always look nervous about after viewing them, the half-animal beings that roam the streets of cities and back roads of villages in his first paintings. It would explain how I can look at any math problem or scientific equation my teachers put before me and figure them out without breaking a sweat. And my aforementioned will. My will, this thing that’s so strong I sometimes feel like it’s another person inside me.

Our mother is a mousy figure here in the Middle of Nowhere, Ohio. The central square is not even really a square but an intersection of two highways where town hall, a general store, beauty salon, and Presbyterian church all face each other like lost old women casting glances over the asphalt, hoping one of the others knows where they are and where they’re

going, for surely why would anyone stop here? My mother works in the library, which used to be a one-room schoolhouse a hundred years ago, where they still use a stamp card to keep track of the books checked out. My father is one of the township trustees and he also runs our farm. We raise beef cattle, Herefords mostly, though a few Hereford and Angus mixes are in our herd, so you sometimes get black cows with polka-dotted white faces. I never liked the mixed calves, I'm not sure why, but Tommy always said they were his favorites. Mutts are always smarter than streamlined gene pools, he said. Me? I always thought they looked like heartbroken mimes with dark, dewy eyes.

From upstairs in my room I could hear the piano start again, this time a classical song. It had to be Tristan. Mom only knows songs like "Heart and Soul" and just about any song in a hymn book. They attend, I don't. Tommy and I gave up church ages ago. I still consider myself a Christian, just not the church-going kind. We're lucky to have parents who asked us why we didn't want to go, instead of forcing us like tyrants. When I told them I didn't feel I was learning what I needed to live in the world there, instead of getting mad, they just nodded and Mom said, "If that's the case, perhaps it's best that you walk your own way for a while, Meg."

They're so *good*. That's the problem with my parents. They're so good, it's like they're children or something, innocent and naïve. Definitely not stupid, but way too easy on other people. They never fuss with Tommy. They let him treat them like they're these horrible people who ruined his life and they never say a word. They hug him and calm him down instead, treat him like a child. I don't get it. Tommy's the oldest. Isn't he the one who's supposed to be mature and put together well?

I listened to Tristan's notes drift up through the ceiling from the living room below, and lay on my bed, staring at a tiny speck on the ceiling, a stain or odd flaw in the plaster that has served as my focal point for anger for many years. Since I can remember, whenever I got angry, I'd come up here and lie in this bed and stare at that speck, pouring all of my frustrations into it, as if it were a black hole that could suck up all the bad. I've given that speck so much of my worst self over the years, I'm surprised it hasn't grown darker and wider, big enough to cast a whole person into its depths. When I looked at it now, I found I didn't have as much anger to give it as

I'd thought. But no, that wasn't it either. I realized all of my anger was floating around the room instead, buoyed up by the notes of the piano, by Tristan's playing. I thought I could even see those notes shimmer into being for a brief moment, electrified by my frustration. When I blinked, though, the air looked normal again, and Tristan had brought his melody to a close.

There was silence for a minute, some muffled voices, then Mom started up "Amazing Grace." I felt immediately better and breathed a sigh of relief. Then someone knocked on my door and it swung open a few inches, enough for Tommy to peek inside. "Hey, Sis. Can I come in?"

"It's a free country."

"Well," said Tommy. "Sort of."

We laughed. We could laugh about things we agreed on.

"Sooo," said Tommy, "what's a guy gotta do around here to get a hug from his little sister?"

"Aren't you a little old for hugs?"

"Ouch. I must have done something really bad this time."

"Not bad. Something. I don't know what."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Maybe."

Tommy sat down on the corner of my bed and craned his neck to scan the room. "What happened to all the unicorns and horses?"

"They died," I said. "Peacefully, in their sleep, in the middle of the night. Thank God."

He laughed, which made me smirk without wanting to. This was the other thing Tommy had always been able to do: make it hard for people to stay mad at him. "So you're graduating in another month?" he said. I nodded, turned my pillow over so I could brace it under my arm to hold me up more comfortably. "Are you scared?"

"About what?" I said. "Is there something I should be scared of?"

"You know. The future. The rest of your life. You won't be a little girl anymore."

"I haven't been a little girl for a while, Tommy."

"You know what I mean," he said, standing up, tucking his hands into his pockets like he does whenever he's being Big Brother. "You're going to have to begin making big choices," he said. "What you want out of life. You

know it's not a diploma you receive when you cross the graduation stage. It's really a ceremony where your training wheels are taken off. The cap everyone wants to throw in the air is a symbol of what you've been so far in life: a student. That's right, everyone wants to cast it off so quickly, eager to get out into the world. Then they realize they've got only a couple of choices for what to do next. The armed service, college, or working at a gas station. It's too bad we don't have a better way to recognize what the meaning of graduation really is. Right now, I think it leaves you kids a little clueless."

"Tommy," I said, "yes, you're eleven years older than me. You know more than I do. But really, you need to learn when to shut the hell up and stop sounding pompous."

We laughed again. I'm lucky that, no matter what makes me mad about my brother, we can laugh at ourselves together.

"So what are you upset about then?" he asked after we settled down.

"Them," I said, trying to get serious again. "Mom and Dad. Tommy, have you thought about what this is going to do to them?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what the town's going to say? Tommy, do you know in their church newsletter they have a prayer list and our family is on it?"

"What for?" he asked, beginning to sound alarmed.

"Because you're gay!" I said. It didn't come out how I wanted, though. By the way his face, always alert and showing some kind of emotion, receded and locked its door behind it, I could tell I'd hurt his feelings. "It's not like that," I said. "They didn't ask to be put on the prayer list. Fern Baker put them on it."

"Fern Baker?" Tommy said. "What business has that woman got still being alive?"

"I'm serious, Tommy. I just want to know if you understand the position you've put them in."

He nodded. "I do," he said. "I talked with them about Tristan and me coming out here to live three months ago. They said what they'll always say to me or you when we want or need to come home."

"What's that?"

"Come home, darling. You and your Tristan have a home here too."

When I looked down at my comforter and studied its threads for a while, Tommy added, “They’ll say the come home part to you, of course. Not anything about bringing your Tristan with you. Oh, and if it’s Dad, he might call you sweetie the way Mom calls me darling.”

“Tommy,” I said, “if there was a market for men who can make their sisters laugh, I’d say you’re in the wrong field.”

“Maybe we can make that a market.”

“You need lots of people for that,” I said.

“Mass culture. Hmm. Been there, done that. It’s why I’m back. *You* should give it a try, though. It’s an interesting experience. It might actually suit you, Meg. Have you thought about where you want to go to college?”

“It’s already decided. Kent State in the fall.”

“Kent, huh? That’s a decent school. You wouldn’t rather go to New York or Boston?”

“Tommy, even if you hadn’t broken the bank around here already, I don’t have patience for legions of people running up and down the streets of Manhattan or Cambridge like ants in a hive.”

“And a major?”

“Psychology.”

“Ah, I see, you must think there’s something wrong with you and want to figure out how to fix it.”

“No,” I said. “I just want to be able to break people’s brains open to understand why they act like such fools.”

“That’s pretty harsh,” said Tommy.

“Well,” I said, “I’m a pretty harsh girl.”

• • • •

After Tommy left, I fell asleep without even changing out of my clothes. In the morning when I woke, I was tangled up in a light blanket someone—Mom, probably—threw over me before going to bed the night before. I sat up and looked out the window. It was already late morning. I could tell by the way the light winked off the pond in the woods, which you can see a tiny sliver of, like a crescent moon, when the sun hits at just the right angle towards noon. Tommy and I used to spend our summers on the dock our

father built out there. Reading books, swatting away flies, the soles of our dusty feet in the air behind us. He was so much older than me but never treated me like a little kid. The day he left for New York City, I hugged him on the front porch before Dad drove him to the airport, but burst out crying and ran around back of the house, beyond the fields, into the woods, until I reached the dock. I thought Tommy would follow, but he was the last person I wanted to see right then, so I thought out with my mind in the direction of the house, pushing him away. I turned him around in his tracks and made him tell our parents he couldn't find me. When he didn't come, I knew that I had used something inside me to stop him. Tommy wouldn't have ever let me run away crying like that without chasing after me if I'd let him make that choice on his own. I lay on the dock for an hour, looking at my reflection in the water, saying, "What are you? God damn it, you know the answer. Tell me. What *are* you?"

If Mom had come back and seen me like that, heard me speak in such a way, I think she probably would have had a breakdown. Mom can handle a gay son mostly. What I'm sure she couldn't handle would be if one of her kids talked to themselves like this at age seven. Worse would be if she knew why I asked myself that question. It was the first time my will had made something happen. And it had made Tommy go away without another word between us.

Sometimes I think the rest of my life is going to be a little more difficult everyday.

When I was dressed and had a bowl of granola and bananas in me, I grabbed the novel I was reading off the kitchen counter and opened the back door to head back to the pond. Thinking of the summer days Tommy and I spent back there together made me think I should probably honor my childhood one last summer by keeping up tradition before I had to go away. I was halfway out the door, twisting around to close it, when Tristan came into the kitchen and said, "Good morning, Meg. Where are you off to?"

"The pond," I said.

"Oh, the pond!" Tristan said, as if it were a tourist site he'd been wanting to visit. "Would you mind if I tagged along?"

"It's a free country," I said, thinking I should probably have been nicer, but I turned to carry on my way anyway.

“Well, sort of,” Tristan said, which stopped me in my tracks.

I turned around and looked at him. He did that same little shrug he did the night before when Tommy asked Mom and Dad if he could hang the American Gothic portrait in the living room, then smiled, as if something couldn’t be helped. “Are you just going to stand there, or are you coming?” I said.

Quickly Tristan followed me out, and then we were off through the back field and into the woods, until we came to the clearing where the pond reflected the sky, like an open blue eye staring up at God.

I made myself comfortable on the deck, spread out my towel and opened my book. I was halfway done. Someone’s heart had already been broken and no amount of mixed CDs left in her mailbox and school locker were ever going to set things right. Why did I read these things? I should take the bike to the library and check out something Classic instead, I thought. Probably there’s something I should be reading right now that everyone else in college will have read. I worried about things like that. Neither of our parents went to college. I remember Tommy used to worry the summer before he went to New York that he’d get there and never be able to fit in. “Growing up out here is going to be a black mark,” he’d said. “I’m not going to know how to act around anyone there because of this place.”

I find it ironic that it’s this place—us—that helped Tommy start his career.

“This place is amazing,” said Tristan. He stretched out on his stomach beside me, dangling the upper half of his torso over the edge so he could pull his fingers through the water just inches below us. “I can’t believe you have all of this to yourself. You’re so lucky.”

“I guess,” I said, pursing my lips. I still didn’t know Tristan well enough to feel I could trust his motivations or be more than civil to him. Pretty. Harsh. Girl. I know.

“Wow,” said Tristan, pulling his lower half back up onto the deck with me. He looked across the water, blinking. “You really don’t like me,” he said.

“That’s not true,” I said immediately, but even I knew that was mostly a lie. So I tried to revise. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t like you. I just don’t know you so well, that’s all.”

“Don’t trust me, eh?”

“Really,” I said, “why should I?”

“Your brother’s trust in me doesn’t give you a reason?”

“Tommy’s never been known around here for his good judgment,” I said.

Tristan whistled. “Wow,” he said again, this time elongating it. “You’re tough as nails, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. Tristan nodded. I thought this was a sign we’d come to an understanding, so I went back to reading. Not two minutes passed, though, before he interrupted again.

“What are you hiding, Meg?”

“What are you talking about?” I said, looking up from my book.

“Well, obviously, if you don’t trust people to this extreme, you must have something to hide. That’s what distrustful people often have. Something to hide. Either that or they’ve been hurt an awful lot by people they loved.”

“You do know you guys can’t get married in Ohio, right? The people decided in the election a couple of years ago.”

“Ohhhh,” said Tristan. “The people. The people the people the people. Oh, my dear, it’s always the people! Always leaping to defend their own rights but always ready to deny someone else theirs. Wake up, baby. That’s history. Did that stop other people from living how they wanted? Well, I suppose sometimes. Screw the people anyhow. Your brother and I will be married, whether or not the people make some silly law that prohibits it. The people, my dear, only matter if you let them.”

“So you’ll be married like I’m a Christian even though I don’t go to church.”

“Really, Meg, you do realize that even if you consider yourself a Christian, those other people don’t, right?”

“What do you mean?”

Tristan turned over on his side so he could face me, and propped his head in his hand. His eyes are green. Tommy’s are blue. If they could have children, they’d be so beautiful, like sea creatures or fairies. My eyes are blue, too, but they’re like Dad’s, dull and flat, like a blind old woman’s eyes rather than the shallow ocean with dancing lights on it blue that Mom and Tommy have. “I mean,” said Tristan, “those people only believe you’re a

real Christian if you attend church. It's the body of Christ rule and all that. You *have* read the Bible, haven't you?"

"Parts," I said, squinting a little. "But anyway," I said, "it doesn't matter what they think of me. I know what's true in my heart."

"Well, precisely," said Tristan.

I stopped squinting and held his stare. He didn't flinch, just kept staring back. "Okay," I said. "You've made your point."

Tristan stood and lifted his shirt above his head, kicked off his sandals, and dove into the pond. The blue rippled and rippled, the rings flowing out to the edges, then silence and stillness returned, but Tristan didn't. I waited a few moments, then stood halfway up on one knee. "Tristan?" I said, and waited a few moments more. "Tristan," I said, louder this time. But he still didn't come to the surface. "Tristan, stop it!" I shouted, and immediately his head burst out of the water at the center of the pond.

"Oh, this is lovely," he said, shaking his wet, brown hair out of his eyes. "It's like having Central Park in your back yard!"

I picked my book up and left, furious with him for frightening me. What did he think? It was funny? I didn't stay to find out. I didn't turn around or say anything in response to Tristan either, when he began calling for me to come back.

• • • •

Tommy was in the kitchen making lunch for everyone when I burst through the back door and slammed it shut behind me like a small tornado had blown through. "What's wrong now?" he said, looking up from the tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches he was making. "Boy trouble?"

He laughed, but this time I didn't laugh with him. Tommy knew I wasn't much of a dater, that I didn't have a huge interest in going somewhere with a guy from school and watching a movie or eating fast food while they practiced on me to become better at making girls think they've found a guy who's incredible. I don't get that stuff, really. I mean, I like guys. I had a boyfriend once. I mean a real one, not the kind some girls call boyfriends but really aren't anything but the guy they dated that month. That's not a boyfriend. That's a candidate. Some people can't tell the difference.

Anyway, I'm sure my parents have probably thought I'm the same way as Tommy, since I don't bring boys home, but I don't bring boys home because it all seems like something to save for later. Right now, I like just thinking about me, *my* future. I'm not so good at thinking in the first person plural yet.

I glared at Tommy before saying, "Your boyfriend sucks. He just tricked me into thinking he'd drowned."

Tommy grinned. "He's a bad boy, I know," he said. "But Meg, he didn't mean anything by it. You take life too seriously. You should really relax a little. Tristan is playful. That's part of his charm. He was trying to make you his friend, that's all."

"By freaking me out? Wonderful friendship maneuver. It amazes me how smart you and your city friends are. Did Tristan go to NYU, too?"

"No," Tommy said flatly. And on that one word, with that one shift of tone in his voice, I could tell I'd pushed him into the sort of self I wear most of the time: the armor, the defensive position. I'd crossed one of his lines and felt small and little and mean. "Tristan's family is wealthy," said Tommy. "He's a bit of the black sheep, though. They're not on good terms. He could have gone to college anywhere he wanted, but I think he's avoided doing that because it would make them proud of him for being more like them instead of himself. They're different people, even though they're from the same family. Like how you and I are different from Mom and Dad about church. Anyway, they threatened to cut him off if he didn't come home to let them groom him to be more like them."

"Heterosexual, married to a well-off woman from one of their circle, and ruthless in a board room?" I offered.

"Well, no," said Tommy. "Actually they're quite okay with Tristan being gay. He's different from them in another way."

"What way?" I asked.

Tommy rolled his eyes a little, weighing whether or not he should tell me anymore. "I shouldn't talk about it," he said, sighing, exasperated.

"Tommy, tell me!" I said. "How bad could it be?"

"Not bad so much as strange. Maybe even unbelievable for you, Meg." I frowned, but he went on. "The ironic thing is, the thing they can't stand about Tristan is something they gave him. A curse, you would have called it

years ago. Today I think the word we use is gene. In any case, it runs in Tristan's family, skipping generations mostly, but every once in a while one of the boys are born . . . well, different."

"Different but not in the gay way?" I said, confused.

"No, not in the gay way," said Tommy, smiling, shaking his head.

"Different in the way that he has two lives, sort of. The one here on land with you and I, and another one in, well, in the water."

"He's a rebellious swimmer?"

Tommy laughed, bursting the air. "I guess you could say that," he said. "But no. Listen, if you want to know, I'll tell you, but you have to promise not to tell Mom and Dad. They think we're here because Tommy's family disowned him for being gay. I told them his parents were Pentecostal, so it all works out in their minds."

"Okay," I said. "I promise."

"What would you say," Tommy began, his eyes shifting up as if he were searching for the right words in the air above him. "What would you say, Meg, if I told you the real reason is because Tristan's not completely human. I mean, not in the sense that we understand it."

I narrowed my eyes, pursed my lips, and said, "Tommy, are you on drugs?"

"I wish!" he said. "God, those'll be harder to find around here," he laughed. "No, really, I'm telling the truth. Tristan is something . . . something else. A water person? You know, with a tail and all?" Tommy flapped his hand in the air when he said this. I smirked, waiting for the punch line. But when one didn't come, it hit me.

"This has something to do with The Sons of Melusine, doesn't it?"

Tommy nodded. "Yes, those paintings are inspired by Tristan."

"But Tommy," I said, "why are you going back to this type of painting? Sure, it's an interesting gimmick, saying your boyfriend's a merman. But the critics didn't like your fantasy paintings. They liked the American Gothic stuff. Why would they change their minds now?"

"Two things," Tommy said, frustrated with me. "One: A good critic doesn't dismiss entire genres. They look at technique and composition of elements and the relationship the painting establishes with this world. Two: It's not a gimmick. It's the truth, Meg. Listen to me. I'm not laughing

anymore. Tristan made his parents an offer. He said he'd move somewhere unimportant and out of the way, and they could make up whatever stories about him for their friends to explain his absence if they gave him part of his inheritance now. They accepted. It's why we're here."

I didn't know what to say, so I just stood there. Tommy ladled soup into bowls for the four of us. Dad would be coming in from the barn soon, Tristan back from the pond. Mom was still at the library and wouldn't be home till evening. This was a regular summer day. It made me feel safe, that regularity. I didn't want it to ever go away.

I saw Tristan then, trotting through the field out back, drying his hair with his pink shirt as he came. When I turned back to Tommy, he was looking out the window over the sink, watching Tristan too, his eyes watering. "You really love him, don't you?" I said.

Tommy nodded, wiping his tears away with the backs of his hands. "I do," he said. "He's so special, like something I used to see a long time ago. Something I forgot how to see for a while."

"Have you finished The Sons of Melusine series, then?" I asked, trying to change the subject. I didn't feel sure of how to talk to Tommy right then.

"I haven't," said Tommy. "There's one more I want to do. I was waiting for the right setting. Now we have it."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to paint Tristan by the pond."

"Why the pond?"

"Because," said Tommy, returning to gaze out the window, "it's going to be a place he can be himself totally now. He's never had that before."

"When will you paint him?"

"Soon," said Tommy. "But I'm going to have to ask you and Mom and Dad a favor."

"What?"

"Not to come down to the pond while we're working."

"Why?"

"He doesn't want anyone to know about him. I haven't told Mom and Dad. Just you. So you have to promise me two things. Don't come down to the pond, and don't tell Tristan I told you about him."

Tristan opened the back door then. He had his shirt back on and his hair

was almost dry. Pearls of water still clung to his legs. I couldn't imagine those being a tail, his feet a flipper. Surely Tommy had gone insane. "Am I late for lunch?" Tristan asked, smiling at me.

Tommy turned and beamed him a smile back. "Right on time, love," he said, and I knew our conversation had come to an end.

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I went down the lane to the barn where Dad was working, taking his lunch with me when he didn't show up to eat with us. God, I wished I could tell him how weird Tommy was being, but I'd promised not to say anything, and even if my brother was going crazy, I wouldn't go back on my word. I found Dad coming out of the barn with a pitchfork of cow manure, which he threw onto the spreader parked outside the barn. He'd take that to the back field and spread it later probably, and then I'd have to watch where I stepped for a week whenever I cut through the field to go to the pond. When I gave him his soup and sandwich, he thanked me and asked what the boys were doing. I told him they were sitting in the living room under the American Gothic portrait fiercely making out. He almost spit out his sandwich, he laughed so hard. I like making my dad laugh because he doesn't do it nearly enough. Mom's too nice, which sometimes is what kills a sense of humor in people, and Tommy always was too testing of Dad to ever get to a joking relationship with him. Me, though, I can always figure out something to shock him into a laugh.

"You're bad, Meg," he said, after settling down. Then: "Were they really?"

I shook my head. "Nope. You were right the first time, Dad. That was a joke." I didn't want to tell him his son had gone mad, though.

"Well, I thought so, but still," he said, taking a bite of his sandwich. "All sorts of new things to get used to these days."

I nodded. "Are you okay with that?" I asked.

"Can't not be," he said. "Not an option."

"Who says?"

"I need no authority figure on that," said Dad. "You have a child and, no matter what, you love them. That's just how it is."

“That’s not how it is for everyone, Dad.”

“Well, thank the dear Lord I’m not everyone,” he said. “Why would you want to live like that, with all those conditions on love?”

I didn’t know what to say. He’d shocked me into silence the way I could always shock him into laughter. We had that effect on each other, like yin and yang. My dad’s a good guy, likes the simpler life, seems pretty normal. He wears Allis-Chalmers tractor hats and flannel shirts and jeans. He likes oatmeal and meatloaf and macaroni and cheese. Then he opens his mouth and turns into the Buddha. I swear to God, he’ll do it when you’re least expecting it. I don’t know sometimes whether he’s like me and Tommy, hiding something different about himself but just has all these years of experience to make himself blend in. Like maybe he’s an angel beneath that sun-browned, beginning-to-wrinkle human skin. “Do you really feel that way?” I asked. “It’s one thing to say that, but is it that easy to truly feel that way?”

“Well it’s not what you’d call easy, Meg. But it’s what’s right. Most of the time doing what’s right is more difficult than doing what’s wrong.”

He handed me his bowl and plate after he finished, and asked if I’d take a look at Buttercup. Apparently she’d been looking pretty down. So I set the dishes on the seat of the tractor and went into the barn to visit my old girl, my cow Buttercup, who I’ve had since I was a little girl. She was my present on my fourth birthday. I’d found her with her mother in a patch of buttercups and spent the summer with her, sleeping with her in the fields, playing with her, training her as if she were a dog. By the time she was a year old, she’d even let me ride her like a horse. We were the talk of the town, and Dad even had me ride her into the ring at the county fair’s Best of Show. Normally she would have been butchered by now—no cow lasted as long as Buttercup had on Dad’s farm—but I had saved her each time it ever came into Dad’s head to let her go. He never had to say anything. I could see his thoughts as clear as if they were stones beneath a clear stream of water, I could take them and break them or change them if I needed. The way I’d changed Tommy’s mind the day he left for New York, making him turn back and leave me alone by the pond. It was a stupid thing, really, whatever it was, this thing I could do with my will. Here I could change people’s minds, but I used it to make people I loved go away with hard

feelings and to prolong the life of a cow.

Dad was right. She wasn't looking good, the old girl. She was thirteen and had had a calf every summer for a good ten years. I looked at her now and saw how selfish I'd been to make him keep her. She was down on the ground in her stall, legs folded under her, like a queen stretched out on a litter, her eyes half-closed, her lashes long and pretty as a woman's. "Old girl," I said. "How you doing?" She looked up at me, chewing her cud, and smiled. Yes, cows can smile. I can't stand it that people can't see this. Cats can smile, dogs can smile, cows can, too. It just takes time and you have to really pay attention to notice. You can't look for a human smile; it's not the same. You have to be able to see an animal for itself before it'll let you see its smile. Buttercup's smile was warm, but fleeting. She looked exhausted from the effort of greeting me.

I patted her down and brushed her a bit and gave her some ground molasses to lick out of my hand. I liked the feel of the rough stubble on her tongue as it swept across my palm. Sometimes I thought if not psychology, maybe veterinary medicine would be the thing for me. I'd have to get used to death, though. I'd have to be okay with helping an animal die. Looking at Buttercup, I knew I didn't have that in me. If only I could use my will on myself as well as it worked on others.

When I left the barn, Dad was up on the seat of the tractor, holding his dishes, which he handed me again. "Off to spread this load," he said, starting the tractor after he spoke. He didn't have to say any more about Buttercup. He knew I'd seen what he meant. I'd have to let her go someday, I knew. I'd have to work on that, though. I just wasn't ready.

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The next day I went back to the pond only to find Tristan and Tommy already there. Tommy had a radio playing classical music on the dock beside him while he sketched something in his notebook. Tristan swam towards him, then pulled his torso up and out by holding onto the dock so he could lean in and kiss Tommy before letting go and sinking back down. I tried to see if there were scales at his waistline, but he was too quick. "Hey!" Tommy shouted. "You dripped all over my sketch, you wretched whale!"

What do you think this is? Sea World?”

I laughed, but Tommy and Tristan both looked over at me, eyes wide, mouths open, shocked to see me there. “Meg!” Tristan said from the pond, waving his hand. “How long have you been there? We didn’t hear you.”

“Only a minute,” I said, stepping onto the dock, moving Tommy’s radio over before spreading out my towel to lie next to him. “You should really know not to mess with him when he’s working,” I added. “Tommy is a perfectionist, you know.”

“Which is why I do it,” Tristan laughed. “Someone needs to keep him honest. Nothing can be perfect, right, Tommy?”

“Close to perfect, though,” Tommy said.

“What are you working on?” I asked, and immediately he flipped the page over and started sketching something new.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, his pencil pulling gray and black lines into existence on the page. “Tristan ruined it.”

“I *had* to kiss you,” Tristan said, swimming closer to us.

“You always have to kiss me,” Tommy said.

“Well, yes,” said Tristan. “Can you blame me?”

I rolled my eyes and opened my book.

“Meg,” Tommy said a few minutes later, after Tristan had swum away, disappearing into the depths of the pond and appearing on the other side, smiling brilliantly. “Remember how I said I’d need you and Mom and Dad to do me that favor?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to start work tomorrow, so no more coming up on us without warning like that, okay?”

I put my book down and looked at him. He was serious. No joke was going to follow this gravely intoned request. “Okay,” I said, feeling a little stung. I didn’t like it when Tommy took that tone with me and meant it.

I finished my book within the hour and got up to leave. Tommy looked up as I bent to pick up my towel and I could see his mouth opening to say something, a reminder, or worse: a plea for me to believe what he’d said about Tristan the day before. So I locked eyes with him and took hold of that thought before it became speech. It wriggled fiercely, trying to escape the grasp of my will, flipping back and forth like a fish pulled out of its

stream. But I won. I squeezed it between my will's fingers, and Tommy turned back to sketching without another word.

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The things that are wrong with me are many. I try not to let them be the things people see in me, though. I try to make them invisible, or to make them seem natural, or else I stuff them up in that dark spot on my ceiling and will them into non-existence. This doesn't usually work for very long. They come back, they always come back, whatever they are, if it's something really a part of me and not just a passing mood. No amount of willing can change those things. Like my inability to let go of Buttercup, my anger with the people of this town, my frustration with my parents' kindness to a world that doesn't deserve them, my annoyance with my brother's light-stepped movement through life. I hate that everything we love has to die, I despise narrow thinking, I resent the unfairness of the world and the unfairness that I can't feel at home in it like it seems others can. All I have is my will, this sharp piece of material inside me, stronger than metal, that everything I encounter breaks itself upon.

Mom once told me it was my gift, not to discount it. I'd had a fit of anger with the school board and the town that day. They'd fired one of my teachers for not teaching creationism alongside evolution, and somehow thought this was completely legal. And no one seemed outraged but me. I wrote a letter to the newspaper declaring the whole affair an obstruction to teacher's freedoms, but it seemed that everyone—kids at school and their parents—just accepted it until a year later the courts told us it was unacceptable.

I cried and tore apart my room one day that year. I hated being in school after they did that to Mr. Turney. When Mom heard me tearing my posters off the walls, smashing my unicorns and horses, she burst into my room and threw her arms around me and held me until my will quieted again. Later, when we were sitting on my bed, me leaning against her while she combed her fingers through my hair, she said, "Meg, don't be afraid of what you can do. That letter you wrote, it was wonderful. Don't feel bad because no one else said anything. You made a strong statement. People were talking

about it at church last week. They think people can't hear, or perhaps they mean for them to hear. Anyway, I'm proud of you for speaking out against what your heart tells you isn't right. That's your gift, sweetie. If you hadn't noticed, not everyone is blessed with such a strong, beautiful will."

It made me feel a little better, hearing that, but I couldn't also tell her how I'd used it for wrong things too: to make Tommy leave for New York without knowing I was okay, to make Dad keep Buttercup beyond the time he should have, to keep people far away so I wouldn't have to like or love them. I'd used my will to keep the world at bay, and that was my secret: that I didn't really care for this life I'd been given, that I couldn't stop myself from being angry at the whole fact of it, life, that the more things I loved, the worse it would be because I'd lose all those things in the end. So Buttercup sits in the barn, her legs barely strong enough for her to stand on, because of me not being able to let go. So Tommy turned back and left because I couldn't bear to say goodbye. So I didn't have any close friends because I didn't want to have to lose anymore than I already had to lose in my family.

My will was my gift, she said. So why did it feel like such a curse to me?

When Mom came home later that evening, I sat in the kitchen and had a cup of tea with her. She always wanted tea straight away after she came home. She said it calmed her, helped her ease out of her day at the library and back into life at home. "How are Tommy and Tristan adjusting?" she asked me after a few sips, and I shrugged.

"They seem to be doing fine, but Tommy's being weird and a little mean."

"How so?" Mom wanted to know.

"Just telling me to leave them alone while he works, and he told me some weird things about Tristan and his family, too. I don't know. It all seems so impossible."

"Don't underestimate people's ability to do harm to each other," Mom interrupted. "Even those that say they love you."

I knew she was making this reference based on the story Tommy had told her and Dad about Tristan's family disowning him because he was gay, so I shook my head. "I understand that, Mom," I said. "There's something else, too." I didn't know how to tell her what Tommy had told me, though.

I'd promised to keep it between him and me. So I settled for saying, "Tristan doesn't seem the type who would want to live out here away from all the things he could enjoy in the city."

"Perhaps that's all grown old for him," Mom said. "People change. Look at you, off to school in a month or so. Between the time you leave and the first time you come home again, you'll have become someone different, and I won't have had a chance to watch you change." She started tearing up. "All your changes all these years, the Lord's let me share them all with you, and now I'm going to have to let you go and change into someone without me around to make sure you're safe."

"Oh, Mom," I said. "Don't cry."

"No, no," she said. "I want to cry." She wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands, smiling. "I just want to say, Meg, don't be so hard on other people. Or yourself. It's hard enough as it is, being in this world. Don't judge so harshly. Don't stop yourself from seeing other people's humanity because they don't fit into your scheme of the world."

I blinked a lot, then picked up my mug of tea and sipped it. I didn't know how to respond. Mom usually never says anything critical of us, and though she said it nicely, I knew she was worried for me. For her to say something like that, I knew I needed to put down my shield and sword and take a look around instead of fighting. But wasn't fighting the thing I was good at?

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said.

"Don't be sorry, dear. Be happy. Find the thing that makes you happy and enjoy it, like your brother is doing."

"You mean his painting?" I said.

"No," said Mom. "I mean Tristan."

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One day towards the end of my senior year, our English teacher, Miss Portwood, told us that many of our lives were about to become much wider. That we'd soon have to begin mapping a world for ourselves outside of the first seventeen years of our lives. It struck me, hearing her say that, comparing the years of our lives to a map of the world. If I had a map of

seventeen, of the years I'd lived so far, it would be small and plain, outlining the contours of my town with a few landmarks on it like Marrow's Ravine and town square, the schools, the pond, our fields and the barn and the home we live in. It would be on crisp, fresh paper, because I haven't traveled very far, and stuck to the routes I know best. There would be nothing but waves and waves of ocean surrounding my map of my hometown. In the ocean, I'd draw those sea beasts you find on old maps of the world, and above them I'd write the words "There Be Dragons."

What else is out there, beyond this edge of the world I live on? Who else is out there? Are there real reasons to be as afraid of the world as I've been?

I was thinking all this when I woke up the next morning and stared at the black spot on my ceiling. That could be a map of seventeen, too. Nothing but white around it, and nothing to show for hiding myself away. Mom was right. Though I was jealous of Tommy's ability to live life so freely, he was following a path all his own, a difficult one, and needed as many people who loved him to help him do it. I could help him and Tristan both, probably just by being more friendly and supportive than suspicious and untrusting. I could start by putting aside Tommy's weirdness about Tristan being a cursed son of Melusine and do like Mom and Dad: just humor him. He's an artist, after all.

So I got up and got dressed and left the house without even having breakfast. I didn't want to let another day go by and not make things okay with Tommy for going away all those years ago. Through the back field I went, into the woods, picking up speed as I went, as the urgency to see him took over me. By the time I reached the edge of the pond's clearing, I had a thousand things I wanted to say. When I stepped out of the woods and into the clearing, though, I froze in place, my mouth open but no words coming out because of what I saw there.

Tommy was on the dock with his easel and palette, sitting in a chair, painting Tristan. And Tristan—I don't know how to describe him, how to make his being something possible, but these words came into mind: tail, scales, beast, and beauty. At first I couldn't tell which he was, but I knew immediately that Tommy hadn't gone insane. Or else we both had.

Tristan lay on the dock in front of Tommy, his upper body strong and muscular and naked, his lower half long and sinuous as a snake. His tail

swept back and forth, occasionally dipping into the water for a moment before returning to the position Tommy wanted. I almost screamed, but somehow willed myself not to. I hadn't left home yet, but a creature from the uncharted world had traveled onto my map where I'd lived the past seventeen years. How could this be?

I thought of that group show we'd all flown to New York to see, the one where Tommy had hung his first in the series of American Gothic alongside those odd, magical creatures he painted back when he was just graduated. The critic who'd picked him out of that group show said that Tommy had technique and talent, was by turns fascinating and annoying, but that he'd wait to see if Tommy would develop a more mature vision. I think when I read that back then, I had agreed.

I'd forgotten the favor I'd promised: not to come back while they were working. Tommy hadn't really lied when he told me moving here was for Tristan's benefit, to get away from his family and the people who wanted him to be something other than what he is. I wondered how long he'd been trying to hide this part of himself before he met Tommy, who was able to love him because of who and what he is. What a gift and curse that is, to be both of them, to be what Tristan is and for Tommy to see him so clearly. My problems were starting to shrivel the longer I looked at them. And the longer I looked, the more I realized the dangers they faced, how easily their lives and love could be shattered by the people in the world who would fire them from life the way the school board fired Mr. Turney for actually teaching us what we can know about the world.

I turned and quietly went back through the woods, but as I left the trail and came into the back field, I began running. I ran from the field and past the house, out into the dusty back road we live on, and stood there looking up and down the road at the horizon, where the borders of this town waited for me to cross them at the end of summer. Whether there were dragons waiting for me after I journeyed off the map of my first seventeen years didn't matter. I'd love them when it called for loving them, and I'd fight the ones that needed fighting. That was my gift, like Mom had told me, what I could do with my will. Maybe instead of psychology, I'd study law, learn how to defend it, how to make it better, so that someday Tommy and Tristan could have what everyone else has.

It's a free country, after all. Well, sort of. And one day, if I had anything to say about it, that would no longer be a joke between Tommy and me.

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[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

Starfish

Karin Tidbeck | 2100 words

On the third day of the sightseeing trip, among walrus-laden icebergs, they run into slurry. At the fore, Skipper sticks a boat hook into the water.

“There are plenty of critters here,” he says. “It’s like playing grab bag. You’ll always catch something on the hook.”

He thrusts the boat hook up and down a couple of times, stirs it in the slush, and pulls it out again. A transparent little rag is impaled on the tip. Skipper shows it to the tourists where they stand lined up in their bright thermal clothing. They gape at him like schoolchildren.

“These,” he says, “are great with fresh cucumber.”

The rag squirms. A couple of the tourists turn grey in the face.

“Anyone want to try for themselves?” Skipper asks.

Half of the tourists raise their hands. The other half turn away in disgust. All of them had fish for lunch, but they hadn’t watched the fish die.

• • • •

The walls of Kim’s cramped cabin are painted with huge portholes that look out on an eerie underwater landscape. On the sandy ocean floor, a fat mermaid covered in barnacles sits on a rock. A monstrous anglerfish floats above her, its lure bathing the mermaid in a greenish shimmer. It’s somehow colder down here than on deck. A damp chill radiates from the walls. Now and then, something bumps against the boat and makes it boom like a drum. The ice scraping on the hull makes a noise like a rock slide. The two nights she has stayed here, Kim has woken up in panic, sure that they must have hit an iceberg. But the ship stays afloat, and chugs farther and farther north. Around them, walrus bulls sing in drawn-out foghorn howls.

This trip is supposedly good for her health. It’ll help her recovery. All she can think is how going elsewhere isn’t enough. The world she had emerged into will still be there when she comes back.

• • • •

On the fourth day, as they drink coffee on deck, the boat slips into an enormous ice cave. Its ribbed vault is slick and blue. In the wall, someone has carved out a landing on which the tourists disembark. The sound of boots on ice is more muffled than Kim had thought it would be.

“Look,” Skipper says, and points at a spot in the wall that seems to glow with its own light. “Do you know what this is? Anyone?”

No one speaks. Skipper scratches at the ice with his finger. It’s surprisingly porous: before long, his nail has punctured the surface and a glowing thing pours into his hand. It looks vaguely like a gelatinous starfish. Its yellow luminescence faintly lights Skipper’s face from below.

“That thing I showed you on the boat,” Skipper makes a stabbing motion with his other hand, “this is another part of their life cycle. They attach themselves to the bottom of the icebergs, you see, and kind of seep up through the ice. If I hadn’t taken this little fellow out, it would have made it all the way up to the top. It’d have taken it, oh, a year or so.”

Kim thinks of a year, two years, pushing up through solid ice, and has to remind herself to breathe.

“And then?” someone asks.

“And then it’s food for the seagulls.”

“That’s it?” Kim says. “There must be a point to it.”

“Of course,” Skipper replies. “It lays eggs in the seagull’s stomach, and the seagull shits out little baby starfish into the ocean.”

The glowing critter twitches in Skipper’s hand. He sticks it to the wall and moves on into the tunnel. The others follow him.

Kim watches as the starfish fails to hang on to the wall and drops to the floor. On an impulse, she picks it up and puts it in her empty thermos mug, then fills it with the ice shavings Skipper left behind. She screws the cap back on and follows the others. After maybe fifty meters, the frozen floor gives way to striped granite polished smooth by millennia of traveling ice. Now that they’re farther from the cave opening, the light fails and the aquamarine greys over into gunmetal. Here and there, faint smudges of light dot the walls: more starfish fighting their way toward the surface. The tourists bring out their flashlights and gawk at a series of rock carvings that depict people fishing.

When it’s almost dark, Skipper takes them back to the boat.

• • • •

Kim opens the thermos mug and sets it down on her nightstand. Inside, the little starfish bobs up and down in the water. It somehow seems content.

Dinner is sailor's stew, which Skipper inevitably quips is made from real sailor. The meat is tough, the sliced potatoes undercooked. The other passengers are very enthusiastic. They talk about the carvings they saw today. Who made them? Why here? What do they mean? When Kim speaks up, they smile vaguely, then turn away. Skipper teaches them shanties.

Much later, Skipper passes out plum brandy. Those who are still awake sit with him on crates at the fore, bundled up against the paralyzing cold. Ice rattles against the hull. The moon is down, but the fat band of stars above spreads a ghostly light. Kim realizes she has forgotten how bright the sky can be outside the cities.

"I'll tell you about the Iron Coffin," Skipper intones. "I'll tell you what every sailor in these parts knows."

He pauses for effect.

"It's not an actual coffin, of course. It's a place. Now, it's on a main route, so everyone has to cross it now and then. It doesn't look like anything in particular, it's just open water. But when the moon is full, it's dangerous."

"Some say it's because the seabed is rich in minerals, others that it's some kind of paranormal phenomenon. Some say it's cursed. Whatever it is, if you get close to that place under a full moon, your compass will stop working. It'll point in the wrong direction. And you can't use the stars to navigate either, because they'll shift, and all of a sudden they'll be in the wrong place. So you think you're navigating on target, well away from the Coffin, when in fact you're heading straight toward it. And most ships that go there disappear. Nobody knows if they're just dragged under, or if they go elsewhere. But the crew on ships that got away talk about bright lights and strange noises. There's a special map for the full moon, and you have to use that even though the compass and the stars tell you that you're going the wrong way."

The sharp aroma of plum brandy wafts over the deck as skipper drinks from his cup, then lets out an "aah" and rubs his chest.

“That’s all for now, kids,” he says. “Good night.”

The tourists shuffle inside. Skipper remains at the fore, staring into the gloom. Kim sits down beside him. He hands her the cup. The brandy burns her throat. When Skipper speaks again, his voice is hoarse and has lost its over-dramatic tone.

“There was a captain I knew. He had a daughter he loved more than anything. His wife died in childbirth, so he took his daughter everywhere, and he tried to be both mother and father to her. But she wouldn’t love him. Maybe she couldn’t love at all. The captain, he despaired. He thought that if his daughter didn’t love him, then his life was pointless.”

He looks up at the galaxy’s arm. “He went to sea one night, when the moon was full, and he threw his map away and navigated after the stars. He figured he would capsize.”

Skipper cries quietly into his beard.

“Did he?” Kim asks.

Skipper shakes his head. “He came out the other side.”

“And then what?”

“Then he went about his life.”

“Did he ever try again?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He wanted to, but he was afraid. Afraid of drowning in cold water. Afraid that he wouldn’t drown and that he would return to where he came from.”

“Where he came from? I thought you said he came out the other side.”

“Yes. The other side.”

“I wish I could go,” Kim says.

Skipper looks down at her. “Now why would you want to do that? You’re young. You have everything to live for.”

Kim looks back at him. “You don’t know me.”

“I don’t. But it can’t be as bad as all that.”

“That’s what they all say,” Kim replies. “Good night.”

In the cabin, the thermos mug is empty. It’s only when Kim has turned the light off to sleep that she sees the starfish. It has crawled up along the wall and ensconced itself in a corner, next to the mermaid. It shimmers in

yellow and green.

• • • •

On the fifth day, they anchor at a little pier on a rocky island. The only building on the shingle beach is a little fishing shed. The tourists mill around on the beach, looking at rocks and sticking fingers into the water with squealy delight. Skipper looks at the spectacle from the pier, arms crossed. He's just told the group about the slabs of what looks like concrete sticking out of the water. An ancient road, he says, that goes over the ocean floor right to the Iron Coffin. The slabs look like regular concrete.

"Is it true?" Kim asks him.

Skipper shrugs. "According to the tour package, it is."

"So it's not so far from here."

"No, it's not so far from here." Skipper pauses. "So what happened to you?"

"I was ill for a long time," Kim says. "It changed me."

Skipper pats her on the shoulder. His eyes are kind. Kim briefly takes his hand and holds it. His calluses rasp against her glove.

"I don't want to die," Kim says. "It's just that there's nothing here for me anymore."

"And so you want to go to the Coffin."

"I thought maybe there'd be something else."

"There may be," Skipper replies. "The starfish might not be there. The walrus bulls might sing another tune. But nothing will be better."

"Don't you ever get homesick?" Kim asks.

"Always," Skipper says. "But there's no point."

"Maybe she's changed."

"Probably not."

"Then bring someone who likes you."

Skipper looks over at her. Kim blushes.

"You don't know me," he says.

"No," Kim replies, "but I do like you. And that's the first time that's happened in years."

Skipper clears his throat. "Well. I like you, too."

The silence after is easy, not awkward.

• • • •

On the fifth day, they arrive at another island with a Viking-style longhouse. They're to stay there for the night and see what it's like to sleep between furs. They cook a communal meal on the boat; they sing shanties; Skipper tells a funny story. He looks at Kim every now and then, a little too long to just be accidental glances. When she smiles at him, his face brightens. His teeth are brown and crooked, but it's an infectious smile.

Late at night, Skipper beckons Kim outside. The full moon glows on the horizon.

"Listen," Skipper says. "Tomorrow's stop is as close as we're going to get."

"Are you saying we'll go?" Kim asks.

"What would happen if I said no?"

"I'll go home again," Kim says, "and wither."

"Do you really believe that?"

Kim nods.

"You could stay up here. We could get to know each other," Skipper says.

"We would still be *here*," Kim says. "Which is where I can't stand being."

Skipper fumbles for her hand. "For you, then."

• • • •

The tourists come running out of the longhouse as Skipper starts the engines and steers away from the pier. Kim watches from the deck as they crowd on the pier, wailing. The next tour boat will pick them up. She walks to the fore to watch the prow split the black water. The stars seem to shift. The ship speeds up. Kim looks over her shoulder at the cockpit, where Skipper stares out of the window. His face is streaked with tears.

Kim waits for the impact, or the fall, or the updraft, whatever it is that's coming. Ahead, the galaxy's arm opens wide.

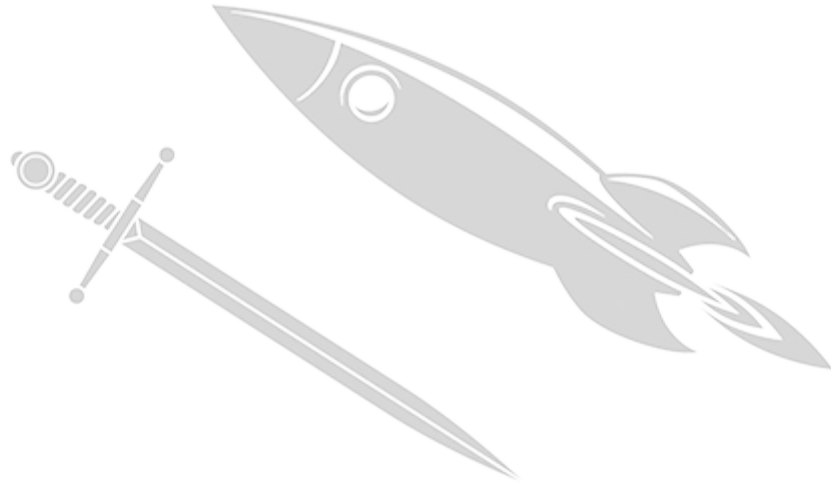
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Karin Tidbeck is the award-winning author of *Jagannath: Stories* and *Amatka*. She lives in Malmö, Sweden, where she works as a freelance writer and creative writing teacher. She writes in Swedish and English, and has published work in *Weird Tales*, *Tor.com*, *Words Without Borders* and anthologies like *Fearsome Magics* and *The Time-Travelers Almanac*.

[To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight](#)

NOVELLA



May Be Some Time

Brenda W. Clough | 20221 words

From *Scott's Last Expedition* by Robert Falcon Scott:

Friday, March 16, or Saturday, 17 [1912]. Lost track of dates, but think the last correct. Tragedy all down the line. At lunch, the day before yesterday, poor Titus Oates said he couldn't go on; he proposed we should leave him in his sleeping bag. That we could not do, and we induced him to come on, on the afternoon march. In spite of its awful nature for him he struggled on and we made a few miles. At night he was worse and we knew the end had come.

Should this be found I want these facts recorded . . . We can testify to his bravery. He has borne intense suffering for weeks without complaint, and to the very last was able and willing to discuss outside subjects. He did not—would not—give up hope till the very end . . . He slept through the night before last, hoping not to wake; but he woke in the morning—yesterday. It was blowing a blizzard. He said, "I am just going outside and may be some time." He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since . . . We knew that poor Oates was walking to his death, but though we tried to dissuade him, we knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman. We all hope to meet the end with a similar spirit, and assuredly the end is not far.

••••

It's said that death from exposure is like slipping into warm sleep. Briefly, Titus Oates wondered what totty-headed pillock had first told that whisker. He no longer remembered what warmth was. He had endured too many futile hopes and broken dreams to look for an easy end now. Every step was like treading on razors, calling for a grim effort of will.

Nevertheless without hesitating he hobbled on into the teeth of the storm. He did not look back. He knew the Polar Expedition's tent was already invisible behind him.

Finer than sand, the wind-driven snow scoured over his clenched eyelids, clogging nose and mouth. The cold drove ferocious spikes deep into his temples, and gnawed at the raw frostbite wounds on brow and nose and lip. Surely it was folly to continue to huddle into his threadbare windproof. What if he flung all resistance aside, and surrendered himself to the wailing Antarctic blizzard? Suddenly he yearned to dance, free of the weighty mitts and clothing. To embrace death and waltz away!

He had left his finnesko behind. Gangrene had swollen his frozen feet to the size of melons, the ominous black streaks stealing up past the ankles nearly to the knee. Yesterday it had taken hours to coax the fur boots on. Today he had not bothered. Now his woolen sock caught on something. Excruciating pain jolted his frozen foot, suppurating from the stinking black wounds where the toes used to be. Too weak to help himself, he stumbled forward. His crippled hands, bundled in the dogskin mitts, groped to break his fall. They touched nothing. He seemed to fall and fall, a slow endless drop into blank whiteness.

And it was true! A delicious warmth lapped him round like a blanket. Tears of relief and joy crept down his starveling cheeks and burnt in the frost fissures. He was being carried, warm and safe. Rock of Ages, cleft for me!

For a very long time he lay resting, not moving a muscle. Stillness is the very stuff of Heaven, when a man has marched nearly two thousand miles, hauling a half-tonne load miles a day for months, across the Barrier ice, up the Beardmore Glacier, to the South Pole and back. He slept, and when he wasn't actually asleep he was inert.

But after some unknowable time Titus slowly came to awareness again. He felt obscurely indignant, cheated of a just due. Wasn't Heaven supposed to be a place of eternal rest? He'd write a letter to the *Times* about it . . .

"Maybe just a touch more?" one of the celestial host suggested, in distinctly American accents. Silly on the face of it, his unanalyzed assumption that all the denizens of Heaven were British . . .

"No, let's see how he does on four cc. How's the urine output?"

Shocked, Titus opened his eyes and looked down at himself. He was lying down, clothed in a pure white robe, all correct and as advertised. But were those a pair of angels lifting the hem? He used the drill-sergeant rasp he had picked up in the Army. “What the *hell* are you at!”

Both angels startled horribly. Something metallic slipped from a heavenly hand and landed with a clatter on the shiny-clean floor. A beautiful angel with long black hair stared down at him, sea-blue eyes wide as saucers. “Oh my God. Oh my God, Shell! Look at this—he’s conscious! Piotr will be like a dog with two tails!”

“Damn it, now the meter’s gone.”

As the other angel stooped nearer to pick up her tool Titus stared at her face. It was tanned but flushed with irritation. The nose had freckles. She wore huge coppery hoop earrings, and her short curly hair was dull blonde, almost mousy. “You,” Titus stated with conviction, “are not an angel.”

The happy angel—no, blister it, a woman!—exclaimed, “An angel, Shell, did you hear that? He called you an angel.”

“He did not! Don’t you ever listen, Sabrina? He just said I was *not* an angel.”

“This isn’t the afterlife,” Titus pursued doggedly. “Am I even dead?”

“Shell, this what we have you for. Hit it, quick!”

The irritable angel elbowed her companion into silence and spoke, clear and slow. “No, Captain Oates, you are not dead. We are doctors. I am Dr. Shell Gedeon, and this is Dr. Sabrina Trask. You are safe here, under our care.”

Titus could hardly take her words in. His mind hared off after irrelevancies. He wanted to retort, “Stuff and nonsense! Women can’t be doctors. They don’t have the intellect!” But he clung to the important questions: “What about my team? Bowers, Wilson, Scott: Are they safe too?”

Dr. Trask drew in a breath, glancing at her colleague. Dr. Gedeon’s voice was calm. “Let’s stop the drip now, why don’t we?”

“Excellent idea. If you’ll pass me that swab . . .”

“They are all right, aren’t they?” Titus demanded. “You rescued me, and you rescued them.” The doctors didn’t look round, fiddling with their mysterious instruments. “Aren’t they?”

He wanted to leap up and search for his friends, or shake the truth out of these fake ministering angels, these impossible doctors. But a wave of warm melting sleep poured over him, soft as feathers, inexorable as winter, and he floated away on its downy tide.

• • • •

Again when he woke he was met with pleasure: smooth sheets and a cool clean pillow. No reindeer-skin sleeping bag, no stink of horsemeat hoosh and unwashed men! He lay tasting the delicious sleek linen with every nerve and pore. How very strange to be so comfortable. His gangrened feet no longer hurt even where the covers rested on them. Double amputation above the knee, probably—the only treatment that could have saved his life. He had become reconciled to the idea of footlessness. Lazily he reached down the length of his leg with one hand to explore the stump.

The shock of touching his foot went all through his body, a galvanic impulse that jerked him upright. He flung back the covers and stared. His feet down to the toes were all present and accounted for, pink and clean and healthy. Even the toenails were just as they used to be, horn-yellow, thick, and curved like vestigial hooves, instead of rotten-black and squelching to the touch. He wiggled the toes and flexed each foot with both hands, not trusting the evidence of eyes alone. It was undeniable. Somehow he had been restored, completely healed.

He examined the rest of himself. At the end, in spite of the dogskin mitts, his fingers had been blistered with frostbite to the colour and size of rotten bananas. Then the fluid in the blisters had frozen hard, until the least motion made the tormented joints crunch and grate as if they were stuffed with pebbles. Now his fingers were right as ninepence, flexing with painless ease: long, strong, and sensitive, a horseman's hands.

The constant stab from the old wound in his thigh, grown unbearable from so much sledging, was gone. He leaped to his feet, staggering as the blood rushed dizzily away from his head. He sat for a moment until the vertigo passed, and then rose again to put his full weight on his left leg. Not so much as a twinge! He was clad in ordinary pyjamas, white and brown

striped, and he slid the pants down. The ugly twisted scar on his thigh had opened up under the stress of malnutrition and overwork, until one would think the Boers shot him last week instead of in 1901. Now there was not a mark to be seen or felt, however closely he peered at the skin. Most wondrous of all, both legs were now the same length. The army doctors had promised that with the left set an inch shorter than the right, he would limp for the rest of his life.

He had to nerve himself before running a hand down his face. Such a natural action, but the last time he'd tried it the conjunction of blistered fingers and frozen dead-yellow nose had been a double agony so intense the sparks had swum in his eyes. But now it didn't hurt at all. His nose felt normal, the strong straight Roman bridge no longer swollen like a beet-root. No black oozy frostbite sores, but only a rasp of bristle on his cheek. Even the earlobes—he was certain he'd left those behind on the Polar plateau! Incredulous, he looked round the room for a glass.

It was a small plain chamber, furnished with nothing but the bed and a chair. But there was a narrow window. He leaned on the sill, angling to glimpse his ghostly reflection in the pane. He ran his tongue over his teeth, firmly fixed again and no longer bleeding at the gums. His brown eyes were melancholy under the deep straight arch of brow bone, and his dark hair was shorn in an ordinary short-back-and-sides.

Suddenly he saw not the glass but through it, beyond and down. He leaned his forehead on the cool pane, smearing it with a sudden sweat. He was high, high up. Below was a city the like of which he had never seen, spread from horizon to horizon in the golden slanted light of either dawn or sunset. Buildings spangled with lights, gleaming in sheaths of glass, reared mountain-high. His own little window was thousands of feet up, higher far than the dome of St. Paul's even. Far below, vastly foreshortened, people scurried along the pavements. Shiny metal bugs teemed the ways and flitted through the skies.

"This isn't London." His voice had a shameful quaver. He forced himself to go on, to prove he could master it. "Nor Cairo. Nor Bombay . . ."

"You are in New York City, Captain Oates. As you will have observed, you have traveled in both space and time. This is the year of our Lord 2045."

Titus turned slowly. Though every word was plain English, he could hardly take in what the man was saying. With difficulty he said the first thing that came into his head: “Who the devil are you?”

Unoffended, the slim fair man smiled, revealing large perfect teeth. “I am Dr. Kevin Lash. And I’m here to help you adjust to life in the twenty-first century. We’re connected, in a distant sort of way. My three-times great-grandmother was Mabel Beardsley, sister of the artist, Aubrey Beardsley. You may know her as a friend of Kathleen Scott.”

“The Owner’s wife.” Titus grasped at this tenuous connection to the familiar. “Then—you’re an Englishman!”

Dr. Lash continued to smile. “I was born in America, but yes, I’m of English extraction. Insofar as several generations of the melting pot have left me with any claim to . . .”

Titus crossed the room in a bound. He wrung Dr. Lash’s slender hand as if he were his best friend in the world. In a sense this was true. The doctor was his only friend. Titus’s inner turmoil was such that he only belatedly realized the doctor was continuing to talk. “Sorry—I’m afraid I didn’t catch what you were saying. It’s all quite a lot to take in.”

“Absolutely, I don’t doubt it.” With an amiable nod Dr. Lash sat down in the chair and waved Titus towards the bed. “A very natural reaction, given the tremendous change in your circumstances. I was outlining your schedule for the next day or so . . .”

And Titus was off and away again, sucked into an interlocking series of irrelevancies. It was stress, the alien environment all around, that made it so hard to concentrate. But recognizing why didn’t help him focus any better. This time it was Dr. Lash’s pronunciation that set Titus off: “schedule.” Titus himself would have said “shed-jool.” But Dr. Lash used “sked-jool,” the American pronunciation. Indeed every word, his every tone and posture and gesture, spoke of the United States. So it must be true. “Damn it! Sorry—I’m trying to attend, believe me. But I keep going blah. My head’s full of cotton wool.”

Still unoffended, Dr. Lash smiled. “Not at all, Captain. I’d be happy to repeat or amplify anything you haven’t quite grasped. I was giving you a quick outline of time as our theories suggest it applies in temporal travel. No man is an island, you know . . .”

Complete unto himself, Titus finished for him silently. So Lash was a man of education—must be, if he was a doctor. A doctor of what? Those two women, the sham angels, had obviously been medical-type doctors. But curse it, he had to listen!

Lash was saying, “. . . the tiniest change can have an incalculable impact. The death or life of an insect, a microbe even, may not be inconsiderable. Nothing can be plucked casually from the past, for fear of accidentally revising the world . . .”

The past? But of course. If this was the year 2045, then 1912 was long ago. “Is it possible to go back?” he interrupted.

“What, you, you mean? Return to the place and time you left? I believe it is impossible, Captain. But you would not wish it—to return and freeze to death in Antarctica? That was another subject of debate: the *moral* dimension of what we were attempting. It would be surely wrong to wrench away some poor fellow with a life ahead of him, family and friends . . .”

My family, Titus thought. Mother, Lilian, Violet, Bryan. My friends. I will never see them again. They might as well be dead. No—they are dead. Died years ago.

“. . . an ideal subject,” Dr. Lash was saying. “Not only are you a person rescued from a tragic death, but your removal is supremely unlikely to trigger any change in the time-stream, since your body was lost: presumed frozen solid, entombed in a glacier for eons . . .”

Titus stared down in silence at his pale bare feet. They were a little chilly now from resting so long on the uncarpeted floor, but that was all. Impossible to think of them frozen rock-hard, embalmed in eternal ice. Yet only a short time ago (or was it 133 years?) they were nearly so. “My team.”

Interrupted in mid-discourse, Dr. Lash said, “I beg your pardon?”

“The others. Scott, Wilson, Bowers. Did you rescue them too?”

“Ah . . . no.”

“Then they made it. They got back to the depot, back home!”

Dr. Lash’s copious flow of words seemed to be suffering a momentary blockage. “No.”

Titus sat silent, his shoulders bowed. So his companions too had died. Had it all been for nothing then, all their work and sacrifice and heroism? “Why did you save only me, then?”

“Remember, Captain,” Dr. Lash said patiently. “You are unique. Your body was never found.”

“Just as well, since it was here. I’m here.” He grappled with slippery verb tenses. “This is the future. You must have histories, newspapers. Records of Scott’s Polar Expedition.”

“And you shall see them. But, if I may make a suggestion, not today. You should recover your strength a little. The doctors have further tests—”

Titus growled in disgust. “No more doctors! Now!”

“Tomorrow,” Dr. Lash promised. “Tomorrow I’ll get the books. As you can see, it’s already evening. Not the time to start a new project.”

Titus stood to look out the window. Only the closest observation revealed that night had fallen. The city outside glowed and throbbed like a gala ballroom, its lights smearing the dark sky, blotting out stars and moon. So beautiful and strange!

“. . . a good night’s sleep.” Dr. Lash was getting to his feet. “And breakfast. I’ve tried to have food that isn’t too strange for you . . .”

Titus hardly noticed the doctor’s departure. The moving lights outside held him. The soaring or darting small sparks must be the metal bugs of before, lit for night work. Presumably behind every glowing window were people working and living. There must be thousands, millions of them. By night or by day the city was alive. He leaned his ear to the cold glass and heard its murmur, a dull continuous roar.

He realized he wanted nothing to do with it. This strange monstrous city was far more foreign than the Antarctic ice. The thought came to him that this was all delirium, the final flicker of phantasy in the brain of a dying man already half-buried in blizzard-drift. It wasn’t even a delusion he enjoyed! A tremendous hollow longing for home filled him, for England, his family and friends, anything familiar. And there was nothing left to him now, except perhaps his own renewed body. At least this was as it had always been. He climbed back into bed and hugged himself, curled under the covers, diving into sleep’s reprieve.

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With the morning Titus’s courage rose again. No point in going into a

funk, he told himself. I coaxed those damned ponies halfway to the Pole. I have the sand to cope with the future.

The breakfast Dr. Lash had promised did a great deal to restore his strength of mind—streaky bacon, odd toasted bread rounds, and buttered eggs. The tea in the flask was cat-lap, brewed with water that had come off the boil, and he could not identify the fruit from which the juice had been squeezed. But there was plenty of everything, a heaped plate on the little serving trolley and additional servings on the shelf below under covers to keep them hot. After months of short commons, the sight of so much food made him weak at the knees.

When Drs. Lash, Gedeon, and Trask came in, Titus was mopping the plates clean with the last crust of bread. “Where are you putting it all?” Dr. Gedeon said, watching. “It’s been a long time since your last decent meal.”

Dr. Lash blinked in alarm. “Gently there, Shell. I’m trying not to confront him with too much just yet.”

Dr. Trask fished a stethoscope out of her pocket, hung it round her neck by the ear pieces, and beamed upon him as if she were offering him a splendid gift. “I’m going to check you over, Captain.”

Grudgingly he allowed her to listen to his heart, and look into his eyes and ears with a shiny metal instrument. She did other mysterious tasks too, with rubber tubes and bits, or holding little tools that blinked or flashed colors against his arms and legs. “Physically okay,” she pronounced at last. “He was strong as an elephant in the first place, to survive what he went through. So he had a good foundation to build on.”

“And you always do good work, Sabrina,” Dr. Gedeon said. “What about his mental and cognitive recovery, Kev?”

“Well, yesterday we weren’t quite ourselves, were we, Captain?” Dr. Lash said. “But at his suggestion—his insistence, in fact—I have a simple test all prepared.”

“All that historical stuff? Don’t tell me you want to teach him to surf the net.”

“Of course not—the books will be plenty.” Dr. Lash pushed the serving trolley out into the hall, and returned immediately with a different cart, loaded with several dozen books of all sizes. “Captain, you asked about the fate of your friends. As you can see, there’s quite a lot of literature on the

subject. Also, in preparation for your reception I had much of the archival material, the articles and so on, transferred to hard copy last year—forgive me, I should say printed out onto paper and fastened together into these makeshift volumes.”

“These?” Tentatively, Titus touched a stack of weird shiny books. “Are they glass?”

Dr. Trask smiled, but Dr. Gedeon said, “Titus—is it all right to call you Titus? I’m going to teach you one of the most important terms of this modern age. No, hush up, Kev—you have to give the poor man a few tools to handle his environment. These floppy covers are plastic. So is this binding on the spine. Plastic, remember that word.”

“But the pages inside are plain old paper, just like in your day,” Dr. Lash added.

Titus picked up the top book. The slick but stiff substance—plastic!—of the cover slipped in his unaccustomed fingers. The book flopped open in its fall to the coverlet, and he looked down at it into the photograph of a familiar face: Dr. Edward Wilson, his hands in their mitts akimbo on the ski poles, grinning into the camera from under the rolled brim of his sledging cap as if death could never touch him. “Uncle Bill,” he said, stunned.

“We know he was your friend,” Dr. Gedeon said softly.

Dr. Lash sat down on the bed beside him. “Keep in mind though, Titus, that you’ve traveled. Even if all had gone well with your Expedition, he would be long deceased. Your loss is no less. But it’s inevitable, a natural progression.”

Titus seized a less strange volume, a fat grey book titled *Scott’s Antarctic Expedition*. More ferocious than the need for food, the thirst for his past was suddenly overwhelming, parching his mouth. “For God’s sake, leave me alone and let me read!”

“You wouldn’t prefer to have me present, to answer any questions?”

“No—please! Go away!”

“Come on, Kev.” Dr. Gedeon jerked her blonde head at the door. “Leave him in peace.”

“We can come back in a while,” Dr. Trask said.

Reluctantly Dr. Lash allowed himself to be drawn away in a trail of discourse. “During this initial adjustment period I think that slow progress is

the ideal . . .” And mercifully they were gone.

The books, the proper ones, were antiques. Everything about them proclaimed it, their smell of yellowy paper and dust, the alarming crack of their spines when Titus opened them, the flakes of brittle glue that sprinkled his pyjama lap. A film of fine greyish grime coated the top edges of the pages and came off on his fingers. How terrifying then, to see the photographs he remembered posing for only months ago! These men, that pony, those dogs: They weren't old. How could they be, when the memory was so new? But the books belied him.

And it was a jolt to glance at the text and realize that he was reading excerpts from Scott's personal diary. The Owner was—had been—a meticulous diarist, but the volumes were of course private. Titus flushed with embarrassment, to thus pry into a comrade's innermost thoughts. But here they were, all the juicy tidbits printed in a book, an old one at that. Everything in them was common knowledge, public property for more than a century. Titus had kept journals himself, sent letters home, written to family and friends. He gulped, wondering now if they were printed here too. Figures of history have no privacy.

But enough shilly-shallying! He paged rapidly through the book, skimming along the months and days. The journey to lay One-Ton Depot; daily life in the camp; the Polar trek; a photograph of Roald Amundsen and his team standing bareheaded before the Norwegian flag at the Pole. Titus glowered at it and turned the page. Towards the last he had lost track of the days, but Wilson or Scott would have kept good count.

And here it was. Titus bent over the book, scarcely aware of the chilly floor or the crick in his neck. The end of the story at last: Eleven miles short of the depot, Scott and Wilson and Bowers had frozen and starved to death. Titus exhaled a long silent breath. The unfairness of it, the waste! The print blurred as his eyes filled.

This is history, he reminded himself. It's over, long over, poor devils! But his heart refused to go along with it. Suddenly the coolness of the room seemed malevolent. He piled the pillows up at the head of the bed and sat against them, armoured in covers pulled up round his chest, to read—to dive into the books that held all that remained of his world.

He devoured them, the different journals—the egotists, had every

member of the expedition published his journal?—the scholarly analyses, the biography of Amundsen, the biographies of Scott. When he had read them all, he looked at them again and then yet again, chewing them over, extracting new meanings and significances.

He noticed, for instance, that different meanings could be wrung out of the same set of events. Scott was praised as a hero and damned as an incompetent, his expedition the last flower of the golden Edwardian afternoon or the first tremor of a collapsing empire. And the theories of why the expedition failed! There were more candidates than he would have ever imagined: deteriorating washers in the fuel tins, crooked Manchurian ponies, Wilson's poor medical supervision, Scott's bad decisions, even—this made him wince—his own excessive endurance and bravery.

But surely the eeriest experience of all was reading the account of his own death. Scott's journal entry was quoted time and again. "Able and willing to discuss outside subjects"? Titus could recall nothing of it—perhaps he had muttered something about his yacht, in semi-delirium. Odd, but entirely characteristic of the Owner to find that admirable. And the paintings and memorial statuettes of himself! He turned past them, averting his eyes.

Vaguely he was aware of Dr. Lash popping in and out, talking and asking questions, of the rattle of the food trolley as it came in and went out. Titus paid none of it any mind, focused with a ferocious concentration on the past. He only looked up when a slim pale hand laid itself flat on his page. "I beg your pardon?"

"Titus, you've been slaving away for the entire day. Do you think you would care to quit for the night? Maybe have a meal? You have to take care of yourself—"

"Hell's bells, man, must you *hover*? I'm perfectly fine!" Titus jumped to his feet and to his dismay fell head-foremost onto the food trolley. He didn't quite faint, but the black buzzing in his eyes was curiously reminiscent of it. There was the hot oily splash of soup or gravy on his chest, a tremendous clatter of falling crockery, and over it Dr. Lash shouting for help.

He came to himself in bed once more, clean and dry in fresh pyjamas, blue and white striped this time. The female doctors were there again, the plumper blonde holding his wrist while the tall dazzling brunette directed

her mysterious tools at it. “Dr.—Gedeon, is it,” he murmured. “And Dr., Dr. Trask.”

“Oh, so you’re talking again,” Dr. Trask said. “And you remember our names, that’s a good sign.”

Dr. Gedeon scowled at the little machine in her hand. “He read all day yesterday? Wonderful. Very clever of you, Kev.”

“That’s unfair, Shell,” Dr. Lash said, tightlipped. “And the vid record will bear me out.”

“He *said* he felt perfectly fine,” Dr. Trask said.

“And Kev believed him, yeah, right.” Dr. Gedeon folded up one tool and took out another. “A man whose chief claim to fame is that he committed suicide to save his team. You wouldn’t keep a Pomeranian kenneled up this way, never mind a man used to an active lifestyle—”

“I’m giving him the dignity of a rational being. You, night and day training with the Fortie team, wouldn’t realize—”

Titus lay back and let the quarrel roll over him. He didn’t grasp what the difficulty was, and didn’t much care. In the Army he had learned to hole up when the brass had a row. Instead he assessed his surroundings again. Vaguely he remembered that while he was reading the sunshine had crept across the window and faded, an entire day’s passage. And then a period of oblivion, and now the light streamed in through the glass again, a new day. Perhaps midmorning, judging from the angle of the light. The trolley stood near the bed, laden anew with covered dishes. It would be a great pity to let the meal get cold. He slid the nearest plate off the shelf onto his knees and seized a fork, suddenly famished. Would he ever get enough food again?

Dr. Lash thumped the hospital bed rail with both hands. “All right, a walk then! But let’s try to keep the chroral displacement shock at a minimum, all right? Through the park, not the streets.”

“Shell will go along, won’t you, Shell.” Dr. Trask’s brilliant blue gaze shifted to her associate. “You can fit him into your exercise routine.”

Dr. Gedeon turned to Titus, who hastily gulped down his mouthful. “Be dressed and ready at 12:30,” she said. “And make them give you a pair of decent shoes. You can’t walk in slippers in New York—there are always jerks who don’t scoop after their dogs.”

On that gnomic statement she swept out of the room. “I’d hoped to

postpone this, Titus old man,” Dr. Lash said, shaking his head. “But the ladies, God bless ’em . . . At any rate, while we fit you up with some walking shoes, we can go over a couple of routines that may ease the chronal displacement for you.”

“Don’t concern yourself,” Titus said. “How difficult could a walk be?” Dr. Trask sighed at this, folding up her shining tools.

Titus’s cocky self-confidence only began to shake when he and Dr. Lash met Dr. Gedeon in the hall. She wore the most outré clothing he had ever seen on a female. Even the street beggars in Calcutta didn’t go about bare to above the knees. It was indecent, shocking—wrong! The only possible conclusion to draw was that the woman was a whore. If they allowed women to become doctors, surely it was not a very much further descent to let in whores? One respected doctors, but light-skirts were owed only contempt. Nothing in Shell’s demeanor seemed to allow disrespect, however. The contradictions inherent in the situation made him giddy. Suddenly Dr. Lash’s words, repeated over and over, sank in: “Don’t let it get to you. All that stuff, it’s unimportant, nothing to do with you. Let it roll off your back, like water off a duck. Accept, nod, and move on . . .”

Titus nodded at Dr. Gedeon and moved on. Dash it, there were more important things to do now. He would worry about bare knees later. Dr. Lash held the door to the stair for them. Titus followed Dr. Gedeon down and down, dozens of flights of echoing steel stairs quite empty except for themselves. “Does nobody else use this building?” he asked.

Dr. Gedeon glanced back, surprised. “Most Paticalars use the elevator—oops, sorry, Kev!”

Water off a duck, Titus said to himself. Nothing to do with me really. But he was unable to resist adding the new words to the list. Paticalar, elevator, plastic—he ought to start a notebook like the Polar scientists, and illustrate them with watercolour. “And ought I have a hat?”

“A *hat*?” Both moderns looked so blank, Titus immediately saw that hats were dead out of fashion. In his day, a gentleman rarely stepped out of doors without some sort of head covering, summer or winter. In fact, he noticed now that the entire party was free of the impedimenta an Edwardian outing would entail—no gloves or walking sticks, muffs or card-cases, hats or topees, purses or parasols. For a moment it was almost

discomposing, to have nothing to fill one's hands. But then he thought of his walks as a child, when the grown-ups had to do all the carrying, and it was deliciously freeing instead.

The stair ended at another door. Through, past a lobby beyond, and . . .

Titus felt his mouth go dry. He had stepped into a street as strange as the far side of the moon. And so damn busy! Machines he couldn't name whizzed past, big and small, making noises he had no word for. People surged round him, hatless indeed, dressed in colourful grotesque garb and doing or eating or saying things that he could not name. Were those little machines on their heads, or merely elaborate hairdos? Were those scars on the bare legs and arms, or paint, or some attenuated garment? Strange smells assailed his nose, tempting appetite, revolting, attracting in turn. Colour and light poured over him too quickly for comprehension. And the noise! Worse than the beggars in Cairo, worse than Covent Garden market. The wail and clatter and roar of the twenty-first century slapped him in the face and drove all rational thought from his head.

He found he was clutching his companions, Dr. Lash on his left and Dr. Gedeon on his right, flank to flank as if they were breasting a mighty river in full flood. Somehow they passed together through the howling chaos to a haven, a refuge of calmness and green, and Titus became aware of Dr. Lash's steady lecturing again. Apparently he had been talking all this while: "Don't think about it. Ignore her. It's all rolling off you. Has no effect, eh? Someday when you're up to it, you can easily figure it out. But now, today, you don't have to . . ."

"You know," Titus mumbled.

"Yes?"

"You know, Lash, you can be bloody damn tiresome," Titus said, all in a breath. His vision cleared. The object in front of him was blessedly familiar. "A tree! First one I've seen in—" He halted, confused. Was it a year and a half, or a hundred and thirty?

"You're feeling better," Dr. Lash noted.

Titus nodded. The vertiginous sense of unreality seeped away fast as it had come. The vista before him now would have been familiar to a man of any era: rolling grassland studded with handsome clumps of trees. If one didn't look beyond, at the cliff-like buildings towering above the tree line, it

was an environment Titus knew down in his bones. Carefully, he didn't look. He drew a deep happy breath, eased from a constraint he had not recognized until now.

Dr. Gedeon lifted what he realized was a small rucksack from her back—he had assumed her jacket was merely cut strangely. She took out two dumbbells, saying, “You want to set the pace, Kev?”

“I'm not going far,” Dr. Lash said. “My asthma will start up if I push it.”

“Let's take the reservoir path then.” Dr. Gedeon clenched a weight in each small fist and began to walk briskly down the path. Titus and Dr. Lash followed.

An almost frightening sense of well-being possessed Titus. He had not felt so fit, so confident, so brimful of vigour, in ages. The dear old sun shone behind leaves as cleanly cut as paper, and birds sang with enthusiasm. A breeze blew cool and damp from the reservoir below, freighted with a slight scummy smell. Titus inhaled it like incense. He stretched his legs, striding out with long steps. Surely it would be possible to live in just the familiar bits of this new era, comforting and safe areas like this park?

Dr. Gedeon grinned at him when he caught her up, her teeth very white in her tanned face. “Great, isn't it?”

“Yes.” Carefully he did not look down past her face. She had accurately pinpointed the medicine he needed. Perhaps she wasn't a bogus sawbones after all.

“Hold up, you two,” Dr. Lash called. He had fallen far behind, wheezing.

Dr. Gedeon reversed course immediately. “Did you bring your inhaler?”

“Of course.” Dr. Lash appeared to be sniffing medicine from a large white tube. Concerned, Titus watched him closely. The dose did seem to help.

Dr. Gedeon said, “You'd better go straight back to the office and take an antihistamine. Shall we come back with you?”

“No, don't bother,” Dr. Lash said. “I'll be fine. This happens all the time,” he added to Titus.

“It shouldn't,” Dr. Gedeon said. “You should have your condition assessed by a qualified allergist. Asthma can be a killer.”

Asthma, Titus mused—another new word. Dr. Lash brushed her

concerns aside. “Keep a close eye on Titus,” he said. “Once only around the park, and then come straight back. This is his first experience, remember.”

“A walk ’round the park?” Titus snorted. “Don’t make me laugh, Lash.”

“I’ll take good care of him,” Dr. Gedeon said. “Now off you go.”

Only when Lash was out of sight did Titus realize how confining his fuss and mother-hen admonitions had been. Dr. Gedeon, a real medico and female to boot, had a more robust outlook, more to Titus’s taste. “I think we should run,” he said. “Fast.”

“All right. Race you to that bench!”

And she was off, surprisingly speedy in spite of a womanish rocking-horse gait that would have made a pony blush. How delightful it was to use the limbs like this! Titus made his best effort, trying to use his greater length of leg to advantage, but she beat him handily. Carrying a weight handicap, too! He felt only a moment of obscure outrage before laughter overtook him. “Bravo!”

She laughed too. “Not a real contest, against a disabled vet.”

“Ludicrous. The leg wound hasn’t bothered me in years.”

“Not till recently.” He stared in astonishment—how could anyone know that? He had hidden the disintegrating scar even from Scott and Wilson until the very end. And he knew from the books that Scott, the last expedition member to keep records, had not mentioned it. She went on, “I watched Sabrina glue you back together again, remember? One of the symptoms of scurvy is old wounds breaking out again.”

“Whatever she did patched it up fine. I couldn’t even find the scar.”

“She’s a whiz. It was worth all the cloning work, to see you trying out your leg, and feeling your toes for the first time.”

“You saw me? But, but I was alone in my room.”

She grimaced. “Titus, you’re unique and valuable—the first and possibly last man to travel through time. And not only that—you are a patient. We’ve been monitoring you all during your recovery. You have never been alone or unobserved since you arrived.”

He remembered the shiny metal tools, the gleaming examination table cleaner than anything he had ever seen. “How long have I been here?”

“You traveled to the modern era a year and a half ago.”

He stared at the trees, trying to take her words in. For eighteen months he

had been clay on the wheel, dough under the rolling pin—a chunk of inert material upon which skilled hands worked. It was a sodding liberty! And surely he could not have spent all that time flat on his back in a hospital bed. He had done that in 1901, and knew well how one’s legs became weak as string and the muscles wasted away from want of use. Now his legs were a little shaky and his skin unusually pale, but otherwise he was himself, in good working order. They must have been exercising his limbs, working and testing and *using* his body in ways he couldn’t conceive of, with all the conscious consent one would get from the clockwork goatherd in a Swiss cuckoo clock. Returning him to consciousness day before yesterday was only the capstone of a major project—it was obvious in retrospect that his first short encounter with the twenty-first century, swearing on the shiny-clean table, had been unplanned. He wondered how many people were employed on the task. The thought of unseen eyes spying on him day and night made his spine crawl. “Are they watching us now?”

“Here in the park? Well, *I’m* in charge, watching you, but that’s all. C’mon, Titus, don’t let it worry you. There’s a lot for you to get used to. Here.” She took water bottles from her rucksack and, opening one, passed it over.

He drank, hefting the weird featherweight container. “Plastic?”

She smiled. “You’re a sharp one.” He felt absurdly chuffed at this praise from a modern.

They walked on at a slower pace. The path was narrow here, crowded closer to the tall wrought-iron palings of the park fence by trees and brush. Beyond the palings was a city street. It was a quieter one, without the surging crowds and thundering vehicular traffic near the first building, but still Titus felt like a lion safe behind the zoo bars. “Are those commercial buildings?”

“Those tall ones over there, you mean? Oh no—co-ops, I think. Damn! What I mean is, they’re residences. People live there.” He knew his face was blank with ignorance, because she waved her hands in rhythm with her stride, trying to explain. “I mean separately, not all together. Condos. Cells. Divisions.” She groped for more synonyms.

The penny dropped. “You mean, it’s a block of flats.”

“Is that what you call it? Okay then!” She blew out a relieved breath. “I

should've listened better, when Kev was going through his British-versus-American word lists with us."

Titus smiled. "Two countries, divided by a common tongue."

"Exactly. It's surprising how hard it can be to communicate clearly."

"And that." The architecture was so powerfully familiar he could hardly believe it. "A church."

"Yep." She peered through the railings at the signboard on the pavement across the street. "Saint Somebody's Noontime Service. And will you look at that sermon! 'Is God a Fortie?'"

Titus's religion was nominal, no more than a tradition of his class. But the organ music pouring forth from the open doors of the church drew him in like a hooked fish. "I know that tune!" He hummed along, and then sang the words that rose unbidden from the depths of memory. "Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne . . ."

Dr. Gedeon sighed. "You must be a Christian. Everybody was, back then. You want to go in, don't you? And I'm dying to hear that sermon."

He nodded. She found a gate, and they crossed the street, she holding him back until a gap opened in the traffic. But Titus took the lead up the steps into the dark Romanesque arch of the portico, and dragged Dr. Gedeon into the haven of the rear pew.

A number of wrongnesses immediately struck him. Electric lights dangled from the arched ceiling and spotlighted the stained glass windows—Titus could not remember ever seeing a church fitted with electricity. The windows themselves were gratingly ugly in their modernity. Uplifted in the homily, the voice of the celebrant rang jangly and loud, amplified in some uncouth modern way. The dozen members of the congregation were almost blasphemously dressed. Titus gulped down a deep breath and tried to concentrate.

"—not only are they ineffable. As Jehovah in the Old Testament had his chosen prophets, the Forties communicate through those who can understand them—in their case the scientists and astronomers who have translated their message . . ."

Titus scowled, uncomprehending. What were the Forties—the time period, the 2040s? Dear God, what had happened to the faith of our fathers! But then the music rolled from the pipe organ, a hymn from his boyhood.

The last time he had heard this tune was at Sunday morning prayers in the little stone church in Gestingthorpe village, where as the young squire of the manor he had presided in the family pew. Homesickness rose up in his throat. His soul balked like an over-tried horse at the new and ugly and strange. He ached to go home, to the place and time where such songs were part of daily life. Though he knew the words, he could not join in.

It was the closing hymn. The priest pronounced a benediction, and the congregation straggled down the aisle and out into the sunshine. Dr. Gedeon fidgeted but did not rise, while Titus struggled with his misery. The priest, saying goodbye to the tardiest old lady, noticed the new faces in his flock and came down the aisle. Dr. Gedeon smiled up at him. “Just visiting.”

“You’re very welcome all the same,” the priest said. He was a tall balding man in a dog collar, the image of a regimental padre.

Dr. Gedeon stood up and shepherded Titus out into the aisle. “I’m so thrilled to hear a homily about the Fortie project!”

“It’s on everybody’s mind, so every denomination has to throw in their two cents’ worth. There’s even a rumor the Pope is writing an encyclical.”

“I think Titus here is an Anglican,” she said in a helpful spirit. “And I’m Shulamith Gedeon.”

“So you’re the dancing doctor! I’m Rev. Pollard. We call it Episcopal in this country, but that’s just terminology.”

“Shulamith?” Titus’s jaw slacked with astonishment. “Shell” must be a nickname, just like “Titus” was. “What on Earth kind of a name is that?”

“Jewish, isn’t it?” Rev. Pollard said.

“My grandmother,” Dr. Gedeon said. “And my father was a Santeria wizard from Bermuda. So I really don’t fit in with your churchy stuff—though the building’s absolutely gorgeous.” She looked up at the stained glass windows.

The priest smiled with gentle pride. “All the original Art Moderne glass, too—”

Titus wanted to laugh. “How did you ever become a doctor? A nigger, a Jew, and a woman!”

To his complete astonishment Dr. Gedeon turned on her heel and slapped him across the face. He would have tumbled over if the priest had not caught him by the elbow. She continued turning, marching away out the

door, her thick strange shoes plopping angrily against the stone floor. “Did I say something wrong?”

Rev. Pollard stared at him from under his grey eyebrows. “You were very rude.”

“Was I?” The padre’s cold disapproval whipped the blood to Titus’s cheeks as a blow could not. I can’t go back, Titus realized. The world he had known was gone forever, never to be found again. It had been a natural impulse but an utterly false step, to pursue familiar old things like this church service—to wind himself into a cocoon that resembled, more or less, the past. To retreat rather than advance was shameful, a coward’s ploy. He had assumed the job was to retain what he had always been, the well-bred Edwardian soldier and explorer. Now he saw he had been pitchforked into a war, the scope of which made his heart sink: the war to make a life for himself in the year 2045, a fight he had no choice but to wage and win. “You’re quite right,” he almost gabbled in his haste. “I must beg her pardon.”

He sprinted down the dim aisle, through the narthex, and out into the summer sunshine, acutely aware that she was fleeter than he. If she had run beyond view, he would never be able to follow. He cursed his own helplessness, and grimly promised himself it should be short-lived. But there she was in the street, standing next to a big shiny-yellow beetle. “In you go,” she said as he ran down the steps. “Let’s go back to the TTD.”

“In?” He realized it was a vehicle, a fantastically futuristic motor of some sort, and she was holding the door open. Awkwardly he climbed in. She would have banged the door on him, but he kept it from latching and ducked his head through the window to grab her sleeve. “Doctor—Shell—I apologise. I’m not sure what I said wrong, but I’ll do my best to learn. Please—give me a chance.”

“The PTICA-TTD, at 93rd,” she was saying to the driver. “Look Titus, it’s not your fault, I know. But even though you don’t look it, you’re a sexist, racist, anti-Semitic old fart! So let go my arm, okay?”

The grinning driver made a tasteless remark in what Titus recognized as Hindi. Automatically he flung the fellow a viperish oath picked up during his Indian service, and went on: “You can’t send me back alone in this thing. I’ll suffer from chronal displacement, just like Dr. Lash is afraid of.

I'll have the blithering vapours. I'll get lost. I'll—I'll be robbed by the driver."

The cabdriver, cowed by amazement for the moment, seemed unlikely to do anything of the sort. But Dr. Gedeon sighed. "I suppose Kev would never let me forget it." She pulled the door open again.

Titus made room for her on the slick seat—plastic again, they must love the substance. And, God! "I'm sorry, I didn't ask if I could call you Shell," he said quickly.

"What?" Her grey eyes were blank with astonishment.

"It's an unwarranted liberty—isn't it?"

"Goodness, that's not important. I only assist Sabrina with your treatment, so we don't have a formal doctor-patient relationship. Keep on calling me Shell. Although I know it gives Kev a charge when you call him Dr. Lash, so maybe you should keep that up."

"I will. Shell, I'll find my feet as soon as I can—"

The vehicle lurched into sudden vehement motion and then screeched to a halt, flinging him against the sliding window that separated the driver from the passenger compartment. The driver turned, shrilling, "Careful! Son of a fool, hold onto the handle!"

Horns blared. Titus obeyed, cursing the driver comprehensively to the third generation. The seemingly solid handhold under his fingers suddenly gave way with an ominous click as some mechanism in the body of the door activated. The door swung perilously open out into unsupported space, taking him with it.

"No, Titus! Not that one!" Shell reached across him and pulled the door to. Titus got a terrifying glimpse of the roadway speeding past not a foot below, before she slammed the door shut.

The vehicle swerved wildly as the driver leaned on the horn while turning to abuse them. "You destroy my beautiful taxi!"

"Sorry!"

"Will you keep your eye on the road and drive!" Shell yelled at the driver. "And you, Titus, don't touch anything! Just sit!" She pushed him back into his place and with her other hand touched a button or control. A restraining strap slid out of a recess and clasped itself round his torso and waist, pinning him courteously but firmly to the seat. "My God, Kev will

wet himself . . .”

The vehicle barreled along at an impossible pace, fast as a railway engine but darting in and out like a fish. Every moment new collisions and fresh disaster seemed imminent. Lights blinked in a blare of colour, metal hulls glittered like talons, and the traffic roared its hunger. Titus felt that dizzying disorientation creeping over him again. He licked his dry lips and clutched his hands together in his lap where Shell had placed them for safety. He stared at the turbaned back of the seething driver’s head, reasoning away his discomfort. This driver is not a man of unusual gifts, he told himself. I’ve driven motors myself, just not as fast—and the road was empty! I could manage this vehicle. It can’t be difficult, if a native can do it. I could learn. “You see why I *need* to learn,” he said hardily. “As long as I don’t know what’s what, I’m a danger, to myself and others.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Titus.” Shell slumped against the seat in not-entirely-exaggerated exhaustion, her short blonde curls escaping from their headband. “You’re going to need a minimum of information before you can even begin to learn. But give yourself some slack, okay? Take your time. The twenty-first century isn’t going anywhere. We don’t have to do it all today.”

“You teach him,” the driver snarled. “The fool, the idiot! He cause an accident to my taxi, I sue!”

“What is ‘sue’?” Titus demanded of Shell. “It sounds like some hell-and-tommy impertinence!”

“I’ll tell you later,” Shell said. “Look, here we are, thank God! One more word out of you, driver, and I’ll report you to the taxi commission. No, Titus, don’t pull like that! Let me unbuckle it—oh, all right, unbuckle it yourself. You push this bit right here, and voilà. Yes, yes, here’s your fare, and the hell with you, pal. That’s right! And if you don’t like the tip you can stuff it up your ass and set it afire.”

Titus’s mouth dropped open again. In all his wide travels, he had never heard such red-blooded invective from the lips of a female. A hard-bitten cavalry trooper could say no better. Torn between admiration and horror, Titus followed Shell inside.

• • • •

Titus began the new regime the very next morning by stacking all the antique books back onto their cart, and rolling it out into the hallway. He wanted to add a label, the sort they put on steamer trunks: “Not wanted on voyage.” He had learned everything he needed to know about the past. Onwards, to the present! He capped the gesture by demanding the morning paper. “You do still have newspapers?”

“Not *paper* papers,” Dr. Lash said. “I mean, not usually printed on paper.”

“What do they print them on then?”

“Screens, old man. Like this.” He tipped the sleek little black machine he held, so that Titus could see the square glowing window on the front, small as a postcard. It looked nothing at all like what Titus would call a screen—screens were for fireplaces, to shield the glare. “And trust me, Titus—you would not understand a newspaper. It’s too soon for you to dive into current affairs. Wouldn’t it be easier to start with a précis of world history for the past century and a half? Work yourself up to the present day?”

Titus knew this was only common sense. Nevertheless he felt it was time to be bloody-minded. He had pretty well proven that he could do anything he set his will to. “I can do both. I know it.”

“At least let me find you a paper newspaper,” Dr. Lash pleaded. “We don’t have to learn to surf the net today. Let me print out a paper edition of the *Times*.”

“The *Times*? Truly?”

“The *New York Times*. But there’s no reason why other papers shouldn’t be available too.”

“The only *Times* is the London *Times*,” Titus growled. When Lash went out, he pulled a piece of paper from under his pillow. He had found it in the wastepaper basket of his bathroom—from the printing on the outside it must have once formed the wrapping for a roll of toilet tissue. Now Titus started his list on it. To “plastic” and “elevator” he now added “screen” and “net.” He was going to have to get a proper notebook, and a pen rather than a pencil. And no more of this keeling over like a stunned ox from swotting at the books. He would pace himself, sensibly.

Dr. Lash returned triumphant. “You’re in luck, Titus! Jackie had last Sunday’s *New York Times* printed for her son’s history project. A couple

days old should make no difference to you, eh?"

"I'll overlook the deficiency this time," Titus said with mock severity. He spread the weird undersized paper out on the counterpane. But within the hour he had to admit Dr. Lash was right. The *New York Times* was almost completely incomprehensible: not because any given word was beyond him, but because he had no context in which to place each sentence. What was the pork-barrel? If they were building a freeway, then it should be free—so why was funding it cause for vituperation? Who was the Internet AG, and how did his indictments combat Fortie frauds? It had been the same when he listened to Rev. Pollard's sermon yesterday. And the paper was too small and felt odd. Frustrated, he tossed it aside.

"Had enough, huh?" Shell came in with an armload of brightly coloured books and magazines. "Maybe these will go down better. Kev's been buying up antique children's texts and reprints of old comics." She balanced the stack on the chair.

"Children's books? You must have a poor opinion of my intellect."

"Not at all. But you're not interested in scholarly analysis or minutiae. You want the broad overview—just enough to go on with till you find your feet. Did you know that to understand a written text you have to already know seventy percent of the words? Some TTD expert worked it all out that this level of difficulty should be about right for you now."

Not quite right, Titus noted. Not seventy percent of the words, but seventy percent of the *knowledge*. Grasping seventy percent of the meaning was the fence he was finding rather high. In any case, the size of the stack was disheartening. "What I really want," he said boldly, "is another walk. Longer this time."

"Sorry, Titus. I'm booked today, and so are you, with that reception this evening. Let me just give your vitals a check-over, okay? Sabrina is in consult all day today, so I promised her I'd do it."

"I don't want to over-work myself again with the books," he said, pressing his advantage. "Walking is good for me. You said so yourself."

"Oh, for God's sake." But she was smiling as she consulted the glowing screen of the little machine in her hand. "They didn't tell me you were persuasive. Tomorrow, how about."

"I shall look forward to it. Oh, and what is—" He consulted his list.

“Paticalar’?”

“Oh! The initials PTICA stand for Pan-Terran Interstellar Contact Agency. Everyone calls it the Fortie Project, though. This building you’re in, everyone here, is the Time Travel Division, the TTD. And people who work for PTICA wind up being Paticalars. A silly name, but a newsie coined it in ’39 and it stuck.”

This was not very helpful, but Shell was obviously in a hurry to some other appointment, so he let her go. Instead he made a note of the names, PTICA and TTD. With the prospect of another outing comfortably in hand, Titus turned to the stack of books. He had never been of a scholarly turn. Now he found the large letterface and the shiny coloured pictures in *A Boy’s British History* soothing. King Arthur, William the Conqueror, Henry the Eighth, oh yes. There will always be an England. It was disappointing that Scott and his Expedition didn’t rate a chapter, but merely a paragraph. And good God, Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts project had flourished! Then wars and more wars—Titus groaned aloud. He had missed all the fun, curse it.

“Ask me any questions you like,” Dr. Lash said, coming in.

Titus preferred to quiz Shell because she was less of a fuss, but it would be foolish to carry prejudice too far. “Lash, what is this Fortie business you’re all on about?”

“You could say that the Forties are the reason you’re here, old man. They’re certainly the *raison d’être* for the entire PTICA-TTD.”

“Then they’re very important. Come then, tell!”

“I’m trying to choose the best way, Titus. Have you ever seen a film? A movie, a motion picture?”

“Of course,” Titus snapped. “They took cinematographs of the Polar Expedition, you know.”

“So then you think you’d be comfortable viewing an educational film?”

“About this Fortie business? Certainly!”

“Hmm, there’s enough time.” Titus noticed that Lash consulted not a pocket watch or a wristwatch, but his little machine. In 1912 a watch was the badge of competence and responsibility, yearned for in boyhood and carefully kept in later life, but obviously customs had altered. Instinctively he felt in his trouser pocket for the watch he always carried, the most accurate timekeeper in the Polar party, but it wasn’t there. Lash was saying,

“And it would be good if you had something to converse with the Ambassador about. But you’re sure it won’t be upsetting, Titus? There will be pictures of your rescue—”

The mere suggestion made his blood rise. “Don’t coddle me, Lash. I insist on seeing this film.”

“Well, let’s risk it. While you get ready, Titus, let me give you a brief summary of the phenomenon. The first contact with extraterrestrial intelligence in 2015 set the world ablaze with excitement . . .”

Attending with only half an ear, Titus put on his shoes. He was rather ashamed that he’d fallen into this habit of tuning poor old Lash’s blather right out, but at least Lash’s self-importance blinded him to it. He led the way to the stairwell and briskly down the metal stairs while Lash trailed behind. Titus felt like a terrier straining at the leash, urging the slow-footed human along.

But instead of pushing through the big double glass doors, Dr. Lash turned the other way in the lobby. The single steel door he chose gave onto a plaza on the other side of the building. It was a fine hot day, blazing with sunshine, and beneath the shade of leafy trees were booths and stands and placards and bright-clad people. “A market,” Titus hazarded. “Like in Egypt.”

“Not a bad guess,” Dr. Lash said. “But this is a marketplace of protesters and cranks, in the main. Better to let them have their say here, where PTICA has some control over the process. Ignore them all, old man. After the film you’ll know what’s what.”

The doctor linked an arm through his. Titus suppressed the impulse to pull free. The booths and placards did look beastly dull. Nothing edible or alive or interesting was on offer, but only leaflets. Titus remembered with brief nostalgia the teeming markets of Bombay. He had bought heavy silver bracelets for Lilian and Violet, and—

Dr. Lash suddenly stopped dead. “The brass-balled nerve of the fellow! No, this is too much! Titus, stand right here. Don’t move an inch, all right? I’m just going to fetch the police.”

“The police? I—” But Lash was gone, darting away through the press. Titus stood as instructed, and stared at the cause of Lash’s ire. It looked like just another set of placards, presided over by a lean old man absurdly

dressed in pale pink. The fellow was shouting some service or product and passing out leaflets.

“—safety for you and yours, when the aliens come,” he said rapidly. “Condos burrowed into the rock on Easter Island, the most isolated place on Earth.” The people filtering through the plaza didn’t pause to listen, even when the old coster thrust leaflets into their hands.

Titus’s motionless stance made him very obvious. “How d’you do, sir?” the old fellow greeted him. “Here you are.”

Titus took the offered leaflet. “What’s it all in aid of then?”

“Don’t ever trust what those PTICA people tell you, sir.” His watery old eyes shone with sincerity. “What are they getting out of this? You think about that, sir, because you’ll find it’s the key to everything. They’re all grinding their own axe. A secret agenda, do you understand me, sir? They don’t have *our* interests at heart at all.”

Titus wondered if he meant Shell or Dr. Lash. It came to him that this fellow was the first modern he had spoken to, who wasn’t involved in his rescue. But the old fellow was rattling on: “They tell us the Forties are too far away to be dangerous. But, come! Nobody knows what they’re really after. Everybody agrees on that. Do you want to risk your family, sir, your children, on the unfounded assumption that they’re nice folks? Safety first, that’s my policy.”

“And a damned craven one,” Titus interjected.

The salesman evidently didn’t know what “craven” meant, because he didn’t pause. “Easter Island, the most remote place on Earth, that’s where we’re erecting the first series of shelters, sir. And construction is already beginning under the Antarctic ice cap—”

That one word was enough to galvanize Titus. “In Antarctica? Where’s your base camp? Has the British government approved this incursion?”

“Britain?” The old man was momentarily derailed. “What do the Brits have to do with it?”

Conceding Amundsen’s prior claim still stuck in Titus’s craw, but in justice he had to add, “Or the Norwegians.”

But suddenly the old man clapped his placard together, scooping up the stack of leaflets and shoving them into his pocket. Without a word more he began to scuttle away through the crowd. Titus heard a distant shout, “He’s

running for it!”

That was Lash’s voice! Without thinking about it, Titus lunged and clapped a strong hand onto the old man’s shoulder. The placard went flying. The fellow squealed and writhed like a pig, no more that one would expect from a professed coward. “Let go!”

“Oh, buck up,” Titus said in disgust. But, how odd—was that a fountain pen he was pulling out of his breast pocket?

Too fast for Titus’s unaccustomed eye to take in, a pellet or stream or projectile shot from the pen’s end, hitting a passing woman squarely in the stern. She whirled, teeth bared in outrage. “Tep!” she yelled.

A host of divergent irrelevancies instantly took charge of his thought processes, so that Titus stood there clutching the pink shoulder of his captive like a dummy. Perhaps “tep” was a curse, his first modern swear word? The pen could not be a deadly weapon—the enraged female victim had taken no injury. What was she saying? It was too fast and impassioned for him to grasp, but she sounded damned stroppy. Perhaps the pen was like pistols, fairly harmless at a distance but dangerous up close. Not for the first time, it struck him that his ignorance was downright dangerous. The old blighter was pressing the thing up to his ribs. At point-blank range even a popgun might be annoying—

A huff of surprised breath escaped him. That hurt! Some sort of electrical shock, was it? A fiery pain had run from the pen right through his body. Without knowing how it had come about he found he had let go and fallen reeling to one knee. A weapon, by Heaven, and surprisingly effective.

But the enraged woman was keeping the fellow at bay, yammering like all the Furies unleashed. Titus felt a new and profound sympathy for her attitude. Astonishing, how respect for grey hairs could evaporate under the stimulus of a low trick like that. He took the fellow’s wrist in both hands and hauled himself upright, digging his thumbs hard into the tendons along the way and twisting the hand open. The little cylinder dropped clattering to the pavement, and the angry woman immediately snatched it up, snarling.

Sputtering, the old man took a swing at him with his other hand, but his arm was too short to connect. “An old cove like you shouldn’t be so feisty,” Titus observed sardonically. “Might you consider yourself overpowered? I’m a foot taller and two stone heavier than you, after all. And twenty years

younger—” He bit the words off short. Not true, if one calculated by the birth date!

A pair of women in blue uniforms swept up on either side of him and collared the captive before Titus could say more. “Thank you, sir,” one of them said to him in passing.

Dr. Lash trotted up panting, and dragged him aside. “I didn’t mean *you*, Titus! Dear God, you shouldn’t have waded in like that. It was very dangerous!”

“Stuff and nonsense—nobody was much hurt.” He rubbed the place on his ribs where the tingling pain was passing off, and nodded at the agitated little group.

The old man drooped in the grasp of one female constable, while the other waved a black machine. The enraged woman had finally slowed to comprehensible speed, saying, “Damn right I’ll press charges!”

Everything seemed to be under control. Reluctantly Titus allowed Lash to shepherd him away from the fuss. “What’s it all about, then?”

“This is the fourth time we’ve caught this old fraud here, selling shelters against alien invasions.”

“Under the Antarctic ice cap,” Titus recalled.

“Is that the latest? Naturally there’s nothing being built there. The scheme’s fake as a wooden nickel. To have that sort of thing here give the impression that *we* endorse it. Thank God nobody seems to have fallen for it today.”

None of this made sense to Titus. The familiar sense of overload was creeping over him again, triggered perhaps by the crowded plaza and its excitements. He trailed after Dr. Lash, masking his discomfort behind a cavalryman’s reserve. Surely they were nearly there, wherever their destination was? They were approaching the building that formed the other side of the plaza now. Titus had to make a deliberate effort not to hurry up to its big glass doors.

Resolutely sauntering at Dr. Lash’s heels, Titus had a perfect view of the portals swinging open at Lash’s approach, without a hand laid to them. The wonder of it nearly cracked his mask, but he refused to demand how the mechanism worked right now. Later, perhaps.

Inside the crowd was thicker yet, clustering at one end of the lobby. Titus

was weakly grateful when Dr. Lash bypassed the crush, opening an inconspicuous door behind a pillar. Beyond was a vast dim space. “Mind your step!”

“It’s a bleeding cliff.” Titus peered over the railing.

“Not at all, there’s a stairway to your left. Let’s find a seat before the crowd comes in.”

As his eyes adjusted, Titus realized it was not really so dark. Not until they were descending the stair did he grasp that these were seats forming the steep slope. This was a theatre, a very oddly-shaped one. He sat down in the seat Lash indicated. “But where’s the stage? The curtain?”

“This is a *film* theater, Titus.” Lash dropped into the seat beside him.

“Film theatres need curtains too,” Titus grumbled. But the crowd was filtering in now, entering from the lower doors. And a bunch of trippers they were, too—children with jujubes, women carrying big bags or sniveling tots, men sipping from cups. It was like an outing to Bournemouth. A long time seemed to drag by, before everyone took their place.

There seemed to be no screen, but only a smooth blank wall, six storeys high. The seating sloped steeply enough so that every member of the audience had an unobstructed view. The lights faded slowly to a pitch dark, filled only with the anticipatory rustle of the crowd, the crackle of candy wrappers, and the whimper of a baby.

Violins, a swooping bit of romantic fluff by one of those German composers. A small spot of light appeared in the darkness, so small that Titus almost mistook it for a trick of his eyes. With a sudden swoosh the spot grew into a familiar blue globe. “What’s all the cotton-wool round it, though?”

Titus felt rather than saw Lash’s glance. “Clouds. That isn’t a model, Titus. It’s a motion picture of the Earth itself, taken from a satellite.”

Questions surged up in Titus’s chest: How did they loft anything so high? Who was running the camera? Since when did they take pictures in colour? But the entire wall suddenly exploded into light and life, and it was as if he were hurtling in a taxi driven by that Hindu again. The Earth whizzed by, six storeys high and tipping alarmingly until his stomach heaved. He gripped the arms of the seat and swallowed down the bile. It’s only a blistering film,

he reminded himself. This speed and size—it's a deliberate effect, damn them.

A voice spoke and made him jump. So they had learned to add sound to the moving pictures, the clever little buggers! Why had no one done it in 1912? But he wasn't going to give way to distraction. He forced himself to put amazement aside for the moment, and pay attention strictly to what was being said.

“. . . LN-GRO, the most powerful gamma-ray space telescope in existence,” the voice was saying. “The pulsar is a natural stellar phenomenon modified by alien intelligences to carry a message, transmitted in a series of gamma rays bursts. The message was enormously long, taking three years to capture in its entirety. It took another ten years to translate it.”

Incomprehensible patterns of light and dark squares, moving back to reveal that they were merely depictions upon screens, the glowing rectangular screens of machines like those Shell and Lash used. Then the image moved back yet again, to show people sitting and standing at those machines, puzzling over the patterns. An instant soundless dissolution, and the huge image split into nine images—some of them continuing to depict scientists staring at screens, and others showing things Titus could not name, machines working or people doing things. For a moment he was totally at sea.

The music buzzed, busy and driving and joyous, giving Titus the clue he needed. He blinked with tardy understanding. The film was depicting a process: thought, research, the work of many people all driving towards a solution to the translation problem. He had never thought of telling a history in this way, but he dimly perceived the power of it. If only he knew more of what was being shown! To his astonishment, the film's voice intoned, “A minimum of information is necessary for comprehension to even begin.” Shell had told him the same thing. It must be a proverb of the era.

But the film was going on about the mysterious star message, the possible interpretations of the signals and the final conclusion as to what they meant: “An invitation?” Titus muttered. “Someone in the stars wants us to come to tea, perhaps.”

“Shh,” Dr. Lash whispered. “Watch, they'll explain.”

“—an invitation, and perhaps the means to get there,” the voice said.

“Albert Einstein told us that it was impossible to travel at the speed of light. But the Forties’ novel theories of space and time have showed us how to warp space—and time. Their clues have helped us make theory into reality, and build a faster-than-light interstellar drive. The final proof was pulling a historical figure from the past to the present. This personage was carefully chosen from a spot where nothing was alive: on the Antarctic icepack, to ensure that not even an insect or a plant seed was inadvertently removed from the biosphere loop. Precisely placed in space and time on the 80th parallel on March 16th, 1912, his body has never been found. The bodies of his companions are still entombed in the glacier which will carry them out to their final ocean resting place in another hundred years, so that no question arises of some plant or algae being deprived of the nourishment of his component atoms . . .”

It was a single image now, of this door into the past shining with weird white light. Titus stared in jaw-dropping horror at the colossal screen. It was himself up there six storeys tall, falling through that door, the Rock of Ages cleft from the other side: the slow endless drop into blank whiteness. And not his clean whole current self, but the emaciated and gangrened cripple, stiffly clad in frozen mitts and tattered windproof, collapsed forward out of the glowing portal onto the gleaming white floor in a flurry of blizzard-driven snow. Chunks of ice, or perhaps bits of his frozen flesh, shattered off to melt into brownish disgusting puddles. The researchers in the film cheered loud and long, clapping each other on the back at this living proof of their theories. Dr. Trask and a horde of other medicos armoured in gloves and masks dashed forward to the rescue, turning the icy dying thing over, their shining tools poised.

Titus gazed up at his own face sideways on the screen. Several tots in the audience wailed at the horrific sight. The frozen white lips had writhed back, revealing a red-black slice of rotting gums and bloody teeth. Scarred with frostbite, the skin blackened by the wind and pocked with scurvy pustules, the countenance was inert and deformed as an Egyptian mummy’s. The back of Titus’s nose and throat constricted at a powerful memory of the nauseating aroma, the overwhelming rotten-sweet stench of his own body shivering into decay around him as he dragged himself along. “God, I shall be sick,” he gulped.

“I beg your pardon?”

Titus lurched to his feet. He had to get out of here, before the bubble of vomit rose to the top. He almost fell down the stair, his leaden feet catching on the carpet, trapped in a nightmarish slowness. Above him the music blared triumph and joy, and the film’s voice boomed, “. . . Captain Lawrence Oates, heroic explorer lost in Antarctica . . .” And where was the blasted door?

He pushed through and fell flat gasping onto the carpet. Dr. Lash, close behind, nearly tripped over him. “Hang on, Titus, I’m paging the doctors. Don’t try to move!”

Of course this was intolerable. Titus immediately sat up, breathing hard. He wiped his clammy forehead on his sleeve. “Oh God. Oh bloody fucking hell. Lash—that was I!”

“But you knew that, Titus. I told you, it would explain all about your journey here.”

“I don’t understand. I do not understand.” With self-contempt Titus listened to the weakness, almost the whimper, in his own words. Was he actually unable to grasp the knowledge offered to him, the way a dog is unable to manipulate a pencil? Were these people so far beyond him? Seventy percent, they said. Get seventy percent by the throat, and the rest will come. He reeled to his feet and walked, staggering a little, ignoring Lash’s protests. He was a soldier, and a soldier could not give in. This was the true war, the one he was going to have to fight for the rest of his life: the battle to adapt and understand and survive here. No surrender, damn it. Never!

The lobby was thronged. Faces swam and spun past him, busy and self-absorbed. Thank Heaven people were unlikely to recognize him, thawed out, cleaned, and healed as he was now. Moving, using his arms and legs even in blind purposelessness, was the solution he instinctively clung to. The creed in the Antarctic was, if a man could walk, he could live. And it did not fail him. His stomach steadied and his courage returned a little. When a familiar quacking blatted out as he passed, he turned to look.

It was a duck call, just as he’d thought. A very young black man was blowing on the short wooden tube for the benefit of a gaggle of children, and making a damned poor job of it. The raspberry noise he made was

embarrassing. “Now, what does this call say?” the young man asked them.

The only reply was giggling. Titus couldn't stand it. “Give me that.” Without waiting for a reply he held his hand out over the heads of the seated children. Such was the power of his expectation that the young Negro meekly handed the duck call over. Was it done, to call them Negroes? In his day Titus had flouted class and race divisions not from any burning sense of the brotherhood of man, but in pure anarchic bloody-mindedness. The egalitarian quality of modern society caught him on the hop, as discomposing as kicking a huge weight that suddenly was no longer there. He held the little tube to his lips and blew. The call was not quite the same shape as the long thin ones he was used to, and there was something entirely novel about its innards. But it was not too odd, and he had been well-taught by the old gamekeeper at Gestingthorpe when he was a boy. A magnificent and utterly authentic-sounding quack echoed through the lobby, the cry of the mallard patriarch in his pond. Titus could almost see the ducks gliding in towards the water. His palms itched for his old fowling gun.

“Oh, nice!” the young man said. “And what does it say, can anybody guess?”

“Hello!” “Or g'bye!”

“When a duck says quack, that's what it means, probably,” the young man said. “But when *he* blows the call, what does he mean?” He pointed at Titus. “Sir, why do you say ‘quack’? What do you want?”

Titus handed the duck call back. “Roast duck for dinner.”

The black man beamed at his audience. “So we might know what the Forties are *saying*, but we might not know what they actually intend, you get what I mean? If the ducks knew that this gentleman was a hungry hunter they wouldn't come when he calls . . .”

A boxful of noisemakers, animal calls, and other toys had been passed round the group, and the nippers seized this moment to try them all out at once. Wincing at the cacophony, Titus moved off. He saw now that the lobby of the building was fitted out with a series of displays and exhibits. How slack of him, to have come in earlier without noticing!

Titus halted to stare without comprehension at a spidery metal erection taller than he was. It was asymmetric and gawky, a derrick adorned with

shiny rectangular boxes and flaps and the odd white plastic plate here and there. “A model of the trans-solar gamma ray satellite,” Dr. Lash said at his elbow.

Putting the pieces together was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle cut out of granite. No wonder they’d chosen children’s books for him. “The satellite received the message,” Titus said slowly. “The message from somebody out in space, in what’s-the-place.”

“Tau Ceti, that’s the name of the star system. Yes, it was the newsies that dubbed the aliens the Forties—because the gamma-ray source was numbered 4T 0091, you know.”

Titus didn’t know, but wasn’t going to say so. He strolled on towards the next exhibit, which was made up of black boxes stacked in tiers around rows of chairs. All the chairs were occupied by rapt people, but someone stood up to leave and Lash nudged him forward. As Titus took his place in the semicircle of boxes, the sound enveloped him—a thump or pulse or syncopation. He looked up, and on a large screen directly above their heads was colour, washes of colour throbbing from red to yellow and back again to blue. Neither sound nor picture made the least bit of sense, and Titus sat in mystification for several minutes before he noticed the words crawling past on the ceiling at the edge of the coloured lights. Admiring the ingenuity of the system prevented him from actually reading for another couple of minutes. How did they make the words creep right round in a circle? A cine-projector could only project in a straight line, could it not? Look as he would, he couldn’t even spot the projector. But finally he was able to absorb what the words were saying. “So this is *it*? This is what the Forties sent, this light and sound? Coy little creatures, aren’t they!”

“More precisely, this is one of the interpretations we’ve made of their binary signals,” Dr. Lash said.

Titus could not imagine how an invitation could be extracted from this. Or advice on how to travel to Tau Ceti. But he remembered the film, how many thinkers laboured for years at it. What damned *smart* people these were! He felt both pride and an uneasy inadequacy.

In his world, courage had been the paramount virtue. Now the rules had changed, and he had a distinct sense that courage was well down on the list. Look at that leaflet chap out in the plaza, for instance. What did they value

nowadays? Communication, perhaps—being able to talk to unknown star-beings, and children, and yes, even the occasional time-travelling Polar explorer. Suddenly he felt a feverish desire to get back to those books Shell had brought. He had a lot of catching up to do, no leisure to idle about with tourists. “Shall we go back now?”

“Had enough, eh? I don’t blame you.” Lash sighed with relief. It was only when they got outdoors that Titus saw the white vehicles waiting at the kerb flashing their red and yellow lights, and Dr. Trask hovering with a stretcher crew at her back. “I told you I was paging them,” Lash defended himself when Titus glared at him. “It’s our job to keep a close eye on you, old man.”

In the tone of a nanny dangling a toy before a baby Dr. Trask cooed, “A ride in the ambulance will do you good.”

“I’m going to walk back,” Titus told her, and strode off across the plaza. Lash, and all of them, meant him only good, Titus was sure. But the closeness of their care, the modern obsession with safety and security, weighed on him like chains. He remembered now that Shell had mentioned he was closely observed. Even now Lash was trotting behind, blathering.

“Are you still watching me somehow, Lash?” Titus interrupted him. “I won’t have it!”

Dr. Lash frowned. “Shell is such a chatterbox, I’m ashamed for her. My boy, you’ve only returned to the land of the living for a couple days. It’s our job to keep a close eye on you. This is, count them, your fourth day of waking life in the twenty-first century. Be reasonable!”

Titus could not deny it. But he could refuse to concede defeat. He stalked tight-lipped into their own building, Lash panting behind like an overweight lap dog. “The elevator for me,” he wheezed. “How about it, Titus?”

“Instead of the stairs? A pleasure.” Titus thawed instantly at the prospect of being initiated into yet another modern mystery. Tall panels slid aside, revealing themselves to be doors. The room beyond was very small.

“Nowhere to sit,” he remarked as he followed Lash in.

“We’ll only be in here for moments,” Dr. Lash said. “Thirty-nine,” he added, mysteriously. Titus noticed that the discreet digits 39 lit up in blue on a wall panel a moment after Lash’s spoken words. The metal doors slid shut, and only the discreet murmur of an engine betrayed any motion. When

the doors opened, a disembodied voice made him start by sweetly announcing, "Thirty-nine." So machines these days could talk and be talked to! And there was the familiar corridor with the door of his own chamber standing ajar at the far end.

"Delightful," Titus admitted. "Better by far than hauling up all those stairs. But what's this?"

"Hi, Titus!" Dr. Trask popped out from a room just behind. The anticipatory gleam in her sea-blue eyes would make a cavalry brigade falter. "Did I mention that an ambulance ride would be faster, too? Just step in here for a moment—I left an entire surgical board meeting just for you." She held her stethoscope up.

"I'm fine! Lash, call these harpies off!"

At his other elbow Shell said, "Harpies? I'm hurt, Titus. Is that nice? I thought you were going to learn modern manners." He babbled apologies until he saw the twinkle in her eye and realized she was jesting. By then they had him jockeyed onto the examination table, tapping and probing with their shiny tools.

He made an effort to be gracious. "I quite appreciate the work you've put into my restoration. I very much enjoy having use of my limbs. But the job is finished! I'm in good nick. There's nothing wrong with me now."

"I don't like these spells of dizziness," Dr. Trask said. "But on the whole we've made a fine job of you, Titus." She beamed at him with pride, the way one might admire a prize steer.

Titus held his commentary until they let him go. Then he snarled to Lash, "Don't I get any credit for my own sodding health? She makes me sound like a house pet."

"She made a *spectacular* job of you, old man," Lash said. "I could show you the film—they cloned bits of you and reattached them, extracted samples of diseases of your time and inoculated you against modern ones —"

"Film? There's another damned cinematograph?" Titus was aghast.

"Of course there are complete records. Titus, not only are you an important historical figure. You're the first time traveler, probably the last to —"

Titus could imagine the pictures six storeys high of himself in the

altogether, being patched together and reassembled by Dr. Trask and her team. Had he a scrap of privacy left? Seething, he flung himself into his chair, picking a book up at random and pretending to be absorbed in it until Lash went away.

As his anger faded however Titus was drawn into the book. It was something he had never seen before, a story told in pictures and labels, something like Hogarth engravings but more colourful. He turned back to the title page: *Buck Rogers: The First 60 Years in the 25th Century*. He gathered from the foreword that these things were called comic strips. At first he could not imagine why Dr. Lash had selected this for him. But when he began at the beginning he understood. This Buck Rogers fellow was a soldier who had travelled into the future, too. The discovery made him chuckle. And how clever of Lash's cohorts, to take an idea from a children's book and make it reality!

And the comics themselves were ripping in a juvenile sort of way—evil Asiatics kidnapping shapely blonde girls, battles across land and sea. They were the sort of fare his boyhood chums at Eton would have thoroughly enjoyed. He whiled the afternoon away very pleasantly.

"Titus, old man," Dr. Lash came in to say. "Time for dinner—the banquet, you remember. Would you care to dress?"

"A bean-feast? Nonsense. I don't know a soul in this world, except you and the other doctors."

"Titus, we haven't discussed this much," Dr. Lash said. "But think about it. You are famous, the first time traveler. Furthermore, you're the quintessential British hero, an historical figure. Naturally people are interested in you. Now you're on your feet again, let us show you off a little."

"Claptrap!" But Titus noticed Lash's nervy air as he laid out new garments on the foot of the bed. Perhaps it would be letting down the side, not to indulge him. "So what's this then? Can't I wear the trousers I have on now? They fit well enough."

"These will too. They're the same size, just a more dressy cut."

"What has the world come to," Titus grumbled, dressing, "when khaki can be spoken in the same sentence as dressy?" None of the garments were what he would have chosen for himself, these ill-tailored trousers and the

nasty coarse shirt and unnaturally sheer socks. Everything fitted well enough but felt tatty and fake, like stage costume. He would have spurned a necktie, but none was offered. Only the wool jacket was tolerable, though its blue was a hair too assertive. “But I know—knew, I should say—a tailor in Mhow who could make a far better job of it.”

“I’m afraid that, after technological advances, the changes in dress will be the most trying for you,” Dr. Lash said placatingly. “Yes, just step into those shoes. Now, this way . . .”

Titus was glad he had bathed and shaved this morning. In Antarctica while sledging, nobody had had the strength to spare for personal hygiene. They had niffed like foxes after four months of brute physical work in the same clothes without bathing. He wondered who’d been handed the nauseating job of cutting him out of his polar clothes after the rescue, and hoped to blazes it had not been some female. That was probably where his watch had gone, too. But he could probably find out, damn them—it was all on film somewhere.

He followed Dr. Lash down the elevator, congratulating himself on how commonplace the ride already had become. They got out on an unfamiliar level. Beyond the elevator hallway was a large meeting room with nobody in it. “Good, the Secret Service finished their sweep,” Lash said. “The President and the British Ambassador were anxious that the occasion be kept as casual as possible for you—”

“You mean the President of this country? Of the United States?”

“Yes, Titus, I was telling you. But there’ll be photographs and so on, you’re used to that, and also more video—film, moving pictures.”

“Yes, yes.” Titus recognized the experience now: codswallop, the sort of silly attention-grabbing that the nibs, nobs and snobs arranged to amuse themselves. Some things never changed. He regretted now not smuggling the *Buck Rogers* volume in.

But then the doors opened, and a horde of people came surging in. “Let me make some introductions,” Dr. Lash said genially. “Titus, this is the TTD’s Medical/Cultural Management Section, essentially everyone who works here in New York, mostly—Marjie’s on vacation, and a couple people are out sick . . .”

The faces and names blurred in Titus’s mind as Lash presented them.

Only Dr. Piotr, pinkly plump and overly well-groomed, seemed to be important. Titus gathered that he ran the entire show on the time travel side. Everyone seemed hugely delighted to meet him, smiling and squeezing his hand with enthusiasm.

Sabrina Trask startled him speechless with her bright yellow trousers. Women wore trousers in this era! And though he had been too flustered to notice at the time, he dimly recalled now that females out in the street and in the museum had been similarly clad. Titus had not realized until now how clothing signaled status and sex. It was the sort of thing everyone instinctively knew in his time, though from pure hellishness he had occasionally amused himself by cocking a snook at the standard. Now he murmured inanities as the line passed, all the while trying to deduce the underlying principles of modern dress.

Trousers were obviously no longer confined to men, nor skirts to women—surely that fellow over there was not wearing a gown? Perhaps it was a robe of the kind worn by Hindus. Some men had beards, some were clean-shaven like Lash, and there were plenty of thick mustaches like his father had favoured when Victoria was Queen. Was hair the key? This one with hair nearly as long as Sabrina's must be male from his beard, yet right behind him was another chap shorn to quarter-inch stubble. In his day all women had long hair, but there was Shell with her boyish curly crop, and Lord! Here was a woman absolutely bald! Titus opened his mouth as he shook her hand, but no words came out. Lash had warned him that the sartorial fence was going to be a high one—perhaps it was not necessary to clear it today!

Even the women in skirts didn't walk like ladies any more, with the delicate slow saunter enforced by tight corsetry. They walked like men, brash and bold. And the thrill of glimpsing a well-turned ankle was gone, when a man could see all the way up to well above the knees. In his day even the shilling dockside Gerties were not so bold! Yet it passed belief that so many bits of muslin would be presented to the swells, and there was no lasciviousness in their manner or faces. He was forced to conclude that all the women he'd met in the twenty-first century must be respectable after all. The lewd signals sent by their clothing were to be ignored. He thrust the confusion aside to think about later.

Last in line, Shell was gowned in electric blue—were there no *sober* colours in this time?—and vibrating with nerves until her earrings jingled. “I hate this, don’t you?”

He nodded in fervent agreement. “Like a cursed dog show.” No hats and no watches, Titus concluded, but without exception everyone carried or wore a little machine. Perhaps they were the modern equivalent? He shoved his hands into his pockets to hide his lack.

Everyone stood in loose rows, like troops being reviewed only much more casual, Lash and Dr. Piotr flanking Titus. Titus suddenly noticed the buffet tables laid out at the far end of the room. Dinner! Though the body had been restored, yet the mind still lived in the posture of starvation. His stomach gurgled audibly, and he crossed his arms over it in embarrassment.

But there, thank God, was a stir at the door, and a number of new people came in. Only a few of them came forward to be greeted by Dr. Piotr. “Madam President, may I present Captain Lawrence Edward Grace Oates. Titus, this is President Livia Hamilton.”

In a slight daze Titus shook the President’s hand. He would have placed her as the headmistress of a dame’s school, with that firm mouth and pinned-up grey hair. Had American presidents ever been women in his time? He could not recall, but rather doubted it. “This is an honor,” the President said in a deep horsy voice. “Captain, welcome to the twenty-first century.”

“Thank you.”

His concise reply seemed to disconcert them. Dr. Lash said, “And this is the British Ambassador, Sir Harold Burney.”

More handshaking. “Sir,” Titus acknowledged. Dr. Lash bobbed his head in an encouraging manner, but Titus was damned if he was going to bark on command like a trained seal.

“On behalf of His Majesty the King, I welcome you back to the land of the living,” the Ambassador said.

How fine it was to hear a British accent! But, “His Majesty?” Titus demanded, startled. Surely King George V was not still alive?

“Oh! His Majesty King William V. You poor fellow, haven’t they caught you up to date yet?”

“In due course, sir,” Dr. Lash broke in. “We’ve tried to bring the Captain

up to speed gently. It's a big adjustment to make."

The Ambassador beamed with pride. "But if I know anything about it, you've been damned plucky, eh?"

"Not at all." Titus remembered now that this was why he loathed Society—one had to *converse*. Every anarchic instinct in him rebelled at the expectation. He was tired of being a tame poodle. "What I want to know," he began, in his plummiest drawl.

"Yes, yes?"

Titus pinned the Ambassador firmly with his gaze. "I wondered why a pack of Yanks are making these great discoveries. I get the distinct sense that Britain's no longer in the forefront of human endeavour."

The Ambassador turned pink and opened his mouth, but only a few disjoint syllables came out. "Shameful backsliding, I call it," Titus pursued, twisting the knife a little. "The work we put into keeping the Empire on top of things, fighting the Boers, trekking into the hinterlands of the globe, and now look at it!"

Dr. Lash's grip on his elbow was almost painful as he swiveled Titus back to face the President.

"So, Captain," the President said. "Now that your life has been restored to you by Dr. Piotr and these good folks, what do you intend to do?"

"There's a facer," Titus said, at a loss. The question had not occurred to him till now. Which just showed how pulled down he was, since it was obviously of the first importance. "Something useful."

"A fine idea."

"I don't suppose Britain's at war or anything," Titus said with dissatisfaction. "Perhaps we could try and claim the Colonies again, eh?"

The President's smile did not waver, but her gaze flickered, searching for rescue. The British Ambassador hastily said, "No wars on at the moment—but your old regiment, the Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, is anxious to welcome you back into the ranks."

Titus had kicked his heels in an idle peacetime regiment before—codswallop, pointless parades, catering to the whims of the brass—and was not about to take the shilling for more. "Perhaps I could work at the TTD here," he said. "Lend a hand with the time traveling business. I have the experience, after all."

The Ambassador gave a small polite laugh. “Oh, very good.”

The President glanced at Dr. Piotr. “You planning another jaunt into the past, Doctor?”

“Not soon,” Dr. Piotr said. “And not another person. Captain Oates here is probably the one and only man who will ever travel through time, because that’s a dangerous trick to try. But by plucking him out of the past we have more than just the proof of the fundamental theories. It was a test of the Fortie technology. They taught us how to build a drive that can twist space—or time. This was the easy part. The Captain is living proof that the time travel works. Next, we test the technology on the main job: travelling to the stars.”

Titus listened closely, sifting nuggets of meaning out of the incomprehensible. “Do I understand you correctly?” he cut in, interrupting Dr. Piotr in mid-peroration. “You didn’t set out to travel through time? You didn’t intend to rescue me?”

The scientist cast a pained glance at Dr. Lash, who said, “But, Titus! I explained this to you. And the film this morning discussed it in detail!”

“This is the Fortie project, Captain,” Dr. Piotr said patiently. “Your rescue was part of it.”

“Ah, you took him over to the museum, very good,” the Ambassador said. “I love IMAX films myself, ever since I saw *To Fly* down at the Air and Space Museum when I was a wee lad.”

For a moment Titus was speechless. No one had said that he was the sole beneficiary of a titanic temporal rescue effort. He had only assumed his was the central role. Apparently he wasn’t the pivot of the project: had never been. He was an unimportant cog in a big engine that was driving across the heavens towards Tau Ceti. The readjustment in his picture of the situation was painful but nearly instantaneous. He had never been one of those status-conscious blokes, always trying to get an edge on his fellows. He had enough self-confidence to speak up right away: “Right-oh. Count me in then. I’ve never been to another planet! When do we leave?”

Embarrassment, shuffling feet, a nervous laugh. Had he said something wrong?

“Now isn’t that just the spirit of exploration,” the President said, with the air of a schoolteacher determined to find something positive to say about a

rowdy pupil. “You’re a firecracker, Captain. Larger than life!”

“A credit to the nation,” the Ambassador said. “Ah, sherry!”

An overall relaxation, as trays of drinks circulated and people began to move towards the buffet. Titus seized a glass of sherry and hung back as the nobs went forward. “Monster,” Dr. Trask whispered, grinning. “So this is how Victor von Frankenstein felt!”

“You’re a troublemaker, Titus,” Shell agreed. “You’ve got your nerve, jerking the poor Ambassador’s chain like that. I thought I’d bust a gut.”

Titus refused to be distracted, even by the spread of food. “I like the idea of going to Tau Ceti. Who else is going? You, Lash?”

Dr. Trask snickered at the idea. “Not with his asthma! And you’re never getting me up in one of those things. Clonal surgeons have plenty of work Earthside, grafting new limbs and boobs and organs onto people. Shell’s the one who’ll sweep those Forties off their feet.”

Titus blinked. He had not meant to suggest that women could be explorers. “If they *have* feet,” someone else in the line remarked.

Shell sipped her sherry and laughed. “Did you see that awful cartoon on the Today page?”

“Well, prophylactics wouldn’t take up all that much cargo space!”

The talk veered off into jokes and chatter that went right over Titus’s head. “It sounds like a perfect job for me,” he grumbled, accepting the plate someone handed him. What an odd and casual way to eat—and they called this a banquet? To Titus, banquets meant waiters and service, not shuffling through a line for bangers and mash.

Dr. Trask plopped a scoop of potatoes onto her plate and said, very kindly, “Titus, the teams have been in training for ten years. It’d be an awful lot of work for you to get up to speed.”

“Frankly, old man, you were the highest example of the explorer as amateur,” Dr. Lash said. “But this is the age of the professional. It’s no reflection on your own worth.”

In fact Titus did not believe this. His entire experience, leavened with the example of Buck Rogers in the twenty-fifth century, assured him that all he had to do was try. Surely a concerted effort would bring success. He helped himself to an enormous plateful of food, only belatedly noticing that he had cleared off half the sausages. How odd, that meat should make up such a

small fraction of the offerings! But he had always been a carnivore, and it would surely be incorrect to shovel part of his portion back onto the platter. Instead he allowed them to seat him at the head table.

The President had asked Dr. Piotr a question about the economic impact of speedy space travel, and the talkative scientist was off and away. “At FTL,” he said with enthusiasm, “the planets are just suburbs. We can colonize the solar system! No more of this three-years-to-Mars stuff. We’ve already gained so much from this one Fortie contact, I can’t wait to see what else is coming.”

Every word was English, but Titus found he had no idea what was being said. He leaned nearer to Shell. “Do you understand him?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t.”

She laughed. “And Piotr prides himself on being a populizer, too! Don’t disappoint him by telling him.”

“Hamilton’s such a show-off,” Sabrina Trask muttered from beyond Shell. “Just because she taught economics and math at Stanford.”

Titus wasn’t even sure what economics was. Something to do with money, he hazarded. Born to wealth, all he knew of money was how to spend it. He wondered what precisely Buck Rogers had lived on, and how he had got into the twenty-fifth century’s military. “Shell, how much education have you had?”

“Me? Gosh, let me think—twelve years of school, four years college, medical school, another two for my communications doctorate . . . If you count the Fortie training, I’ve been in school just about all my life.”

Dr. Piotr had finished his remarks, and the President applauded, saying, “Doctor, I swear if you ever want to quit the Paticalar business, I have a job for you in politics. You could sell shoes to snakes.”

The doctor grinned, pinker than ever. “Once, Madam President, you might have tempted me. Now, I know the better part. This is where the fun is going to be.”

“Gad, I envy you young people,” the Ambassador said. “Tell us more about the time business—what’s this new time window trick the newsies are chattering about?”

Obligingly Dr. Piotr said, “Well, it’s disruptive and difficult to pull a real

object or person through time. A perfect candidate like the Captain here is rare. It would be as much fun, and cheaper, to just pull light—images. I wouldn't mind a photograph of a velociraptor, would you? We could make a fortune on the posters and screensavers alone.”

This is beyond me, Titus admitted silently. He bowed his head to the inevitable. Buck Rogers was a cheat, the invention of some fantasizing duffer who'd never actually had to work with less than seventy percent of the knowledge necessary. Titus would live the reality, and he could acknowledge now that much of it would be forever beyond his comprehension. To swallow down the entire twenty-first century was too big a mouthful. His only hope was to select an area to worry at and, please God, to master.

But which area? If he wasn't going to explore, then what? “Lash, what am I going to live on? They must have proved my will and settled the estate. I don't suppose my heirs' descendants, my great-grandnephews and so on, will want to part with the money even if there's a bean left after all this time. Will you people support me until I die?”

“A stipend's in the works,” Dr. Lash said. “PTICA is responsible for your existence, Titus—you won't starve.”

“But I bet anything you like, you're not going to want to live out your life as a couch potato,” Shell added. “I can't wait to see what the newsies will say, about your re-conquering the American Colonies!”

Dr. Lash shuddered. “I could wish, Titus, that you'd be more careful about what you say!”

Titus ate steadily, thinking hard. His life had been handed back to him on a platter. But the President, of all people, had put her finger on the key question: What could he do with it? He knew how to fight, and he knew how to die. He had a sense there was very little call for such skills in the twenty-first century. As useful as knowing how to blow a duck call, he thought sardonically. Perhaps he could assist that young black at the museum.

He had it now: enough information so that he could distinguish what was truly vital. Clear as day, Titus saw that if he didn't carve a niche for himself, he would indeed become a couch potato—he was repelled without even knowing what that was. There was a higher fence to clear than just learning

to exist here. The crucial battle lay not in the past, nor the present, but the future. From infancy, playing with popguns and wooden horses, he had always known what he would be: a soldier. Now in this strange new world this destiny was gone, and he was adrift. He could do anything he set his will to. But first he had to find a new destiny to replace the one he'd left behind in 1912. Else he'd become a pet, a parasite, leeching off the moderns for the rest of his useless life, trotted out for display every now and then to bark for the visiting brass.

It reminded him of his first sight of the Himalayas, in India. Some dashed impressive mountains, but then the morning haze lifted for a moment, and the eye took in the colossal heights beyond, snow-capped peaks rearing up to pierce the sky. What he had thought was the real battle had again been nothing but the first skirmish. How much easier a sharp crisis would be! Walking to one's end in a blizzard, perhaps. "May be some time," indeed! This slow stubborn uphill slog would last till his dying day—in the spirit of locking the barn door too late, he swore that when he drew that final breath it should not be expended on feeble ironies that would come back to haunt him.

Wars came to an end in a year or two. Even manhauling to the Pole and back had to be accomplished in six or seven months during the austral summer. But this was never going to end. It would call for more pluck and resolution and bottom than anything else he'd ever set hand to, because it would never be over. For a moment the prospect was unspeakably daunting, and he slumped over his empty plate. But with an effort he straightened. Stiff upper lip and all that. He had conclusively demonstrated, after all, that he could do anything he set his mind to. "I've survived far worse," he said aloud.

Dr. Lash glanced up. "What's that you say, Titus?"

No time like the present to begin. Titus gazed thoughtfully at the other man's little machine, lying beside his plate. "Lash . . . what time is it?"

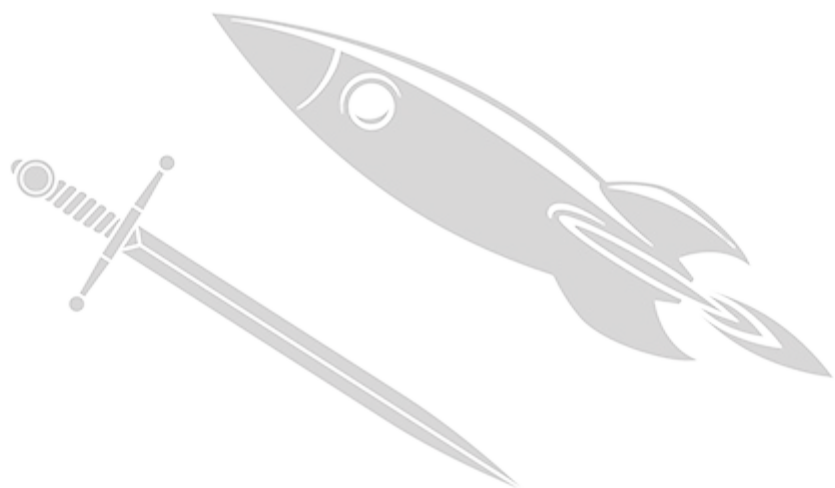
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda W. Clough is a science fiction and fantasy author. She has published numerous novels, including *Doors of Death and Life* and *How Like a God* from Tor Books. Her short fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Starlight 3*, *Science Fiction Age*, and many more. Her story *May Be Some Time* was nominated for both the Nebula and Hugo awards.

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With her husband Larry, she lives in a cottage at the edge of the forest, where her garden is steadily taking over the lawn.

NOVEL EXCERPTS



NOVEL EXCERPT: *A Gathering of Shadows* (Tor Books)

V.E. Schwab | 3720 words

I

The Arnesian Sea

Delilah Bard had a way of finding trouble.

She'd always thought it was better than letting trouble find *her*, but floating in the ocean in a two-person skiff with no oars, no view of land, and no real resources save the ropes binding her wrists, she was beginning to reconsider.

The night was moonless overhead, the sea and sky mirroring the starry darkness to every side; only the ripple of water beneath the rocking boat marked the difference between up and down. That infinite reflection usually made Lila feel like she was perched at the center of the universe.

Tonight, adrift, it made her want to scream.

Instead, she squinted at the twinkle of lights in the distance, the reddish hue alone setting the craft's lanterns apart from the starlight. And she watched as the ship—*her* ship—moved slowly but decidedly *away*.

Panic crawled its way up her throat, but she held her ground.

I am Delilah Bard, she thought, as the ropes cut into her skin. *I am a thief and a pirate and a traveler. I have set foot in three different worlds, and lived. I have shed the blood of royals and held magic in my hands. And a ship full of men cannot do what I can. I don't need any of you.*

I am one of a damned kind.

Feeling suitably empowered, she set her back to the ship, and gazed out at the sprawling night ahead.

It could be worse, she reasoned, just before she felt cold water licking her boots and looked down to see that there was a hole in the boat. Not a large hole by any stretch, but the size was little comfort; a small hole could sink a boat just as effectively, if not as fast.

Lila groaned and looked down at the coarse rope cinched tight around her hands, doubly grateful that the bastards had left her legs free, even if she was trapped in an abominable *dress*. A full-skirted, flimsy green

contraption with too much gossamer and a waist so tight she could hardly breathe and *why in god's name* must women *do* this to themselves?

The water inched higher in the skiff, and Lila forced herself to focus. She drew what little breath her outfit would allow and took stock of her meager, quickly dampening inventory: a single cask of ale (a parting gift), three knives (all concealed), half a dozen flares (bequeathed by the men who'd set her adrift), the aforementioned dress (damn it to hell), and the contents of that dress's skirts and pockets (necessary, if she was to prevail).

Lila took up one of the flares—a device like a firework that, when struck against any surface, produced a stream of colored light. Not a burst, but a steady beam strong enough to cut the darkness like a knife. Each flare was supposed to last a quarter of an hour, and the different colors had their own code on the open water: yellow for a sinking ship, green for illness aboard, white for unnamed distress, and red for pirates.

She had one of each, and her fingers danced over their ends as she considered her options. She eyed the rising water and settled on the yellow flare, taking it up with both hands and striking it against the side of the little boat.

Light burst forth, sudden and blinding. It split the world in two, the violent gold-white of the flare and the dense black nothing around it. Lila spent half a minute cursing and blinking back tears at the brightness as she angled the flare up and away from her face. And then she began to count. Just as her eyes were finally adjusting, the flare faltered, flickered, and went out. She scanned the horizon for a ship but saw none, and the water in the boat continued its slow but steady rise up the calf of her boot. She took up a second flare—white for distress—and struck it on the wood, shielding her eyes. She counted the minutes as they ticked by, scouring the night beyond the boat for signs of life.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Come on, come on, come on . . .” The words were lost beneath the hiss of the flare as it died, plunging her back into darkness.

Lila gritted her teeth.

Judging by the level of the water in the little boat, she had only a quarter of an hour—one flare's worth of time—before she was well and truly in danger of sinking.

Then something snaked along the skiff's wooden side. Something with teeth.

If there is a god, she thought, a celestial body, a heavenly power, or anyone above—or below—who might just like to see me live another day, for pity's or entertainment's sake, now would be a good time to intercede.

And with that, she took up the red flare—the one for pirates—and struck it, bathing the night around her in an eerie crimson light. It reminded her for an instant of the Isle River back in London. Not *her* London—if the dreary place had ever been hers—or the terrifyingly pale London responsible for Athos and Astrid and Holland, but *his* London. Kell's London.

He flashed up in her vision like a flare, auburn hair and that constant furrow between his eyes: one blue, one black. *Antari*. Magic boy. Prince.

Lila stared straight into the flare's red light until it burned the image out. She had more pressing concerns right now. The water was rising. The flare was dying. Shadows were slithering against the boat.

Just as the red light of the pirate's flare began to peter out, she saw it.

It began as nothing—a tendril of mist on the surface of the sea—but soon the fog drew itself into the phantom of a ship. The polished black hull and shining black sails reflected the night to every side, the lanterns aboard small and colorless enough to pass for starlight. Only when it drew close enough for the flare's dying red light to dance across the reflective surfaces did the ship come into focus. And by then, it was nearly on top of her.

By the flare's sputtering glow, Lila could make out the ship's name, streaked in shimmering paint along the hull. *Is Ranes Gast*.

The Copper Thief.

Lila's eyes widened in amazement and relief. She smiled a small, private smile, and then buried the look beneath something more fitting—an expression somewhere between grateful and beseeching, with a dash of wary hope.

The flare guttered and went out, but the ship was beside her now, close enough for her to see the faces of the men leaning over the rail.

“*Tosa!*” she called in Arnesian, getting to her feet, careful not to rock the tiny, sinking craft.

Help. Vulnerability had never come naturally, but she did her best to imitate it as the men looked down at her, huddled there in her little

waterlogged boat with her bound wrists and her soggy green dress. She felt ridiculous.

“*Kers la?*” asked one, more to the others than to her. *What is this?*

“A gift?” said another.

“You’d have to share,” muttered a third.

A few of the other men said less pleasant things, and Lila tensed, glad that their accents were too full of mud and ocean spray for her to understand all the words, even if she gleaned their meaning.

“What are you doing down there?” asked one of them, his skin so dark his edges smudged into the night.

Her Arnesian was still far from solid, but four months at sea surrounded by people who spoke no English had certainly improved it.

“*Sensan,*” answered Lila—*sinking*—which earned a laugh from the gathering crew. But they seemed in no hurry to haul her up. Lila held her hands aloft so they could see the rope. “I could use some help,” she said slowly, the wording practiced.

“Can see that,” said the man.

“Who throws away a pretty thing?” chimed in another.

“Maybe she’s all used up.”

“Nah.”

“Hey, girl! You got all your bits and pieces?”

“Better let us see!”

“What’s with all the shouting?” boomed a voice, and a moment later a rail-thin man with deep-set eyes and receding black hair came into sight at the side of the ship. The others shied away in deference as he took hold of the wooden rail and looked down at Lila. His eyes raked over her, the dress, the rope, the cask, the boat.

The captain, she wagered.

“You seem to be in trouble,” he called down. He didn’t raise his voice, but it carried nonetheless, his Arnesian accent clipped but clear.

“How perceptive,” Lila called back before she could stop herself. The insolence was a gamble, but no matter where she was, the one thing she knew was how to read a mark. And sure enough, the thin man smiled.

“My ship’s been taken,” she continued, “and my new one won’t last long, and as you can see—”

He cut her off. “Might be easier to talk if you come up here?”

Lila nodded with a wisp of relief. She was beginning to fear they’d sail on and leave her to drown. Which, judging by the crew’s lewd tones and lewder looks, might actually be the better option, but down here she had nothing and up there she had a chance.

A rope was flung over the side; the weighted end landed in the rising water near her feet. She took hold and used it to guide her craft against the ship’s side, where a ladder had been lowered; but before she could hoist herself up, two men came down and landed in the boat beside her, causing it to sink *considerably* faster. Neither of them seemed bothered. One proceeded to haul up the cask of ale, and the other, much to Lila’s dismay, began to haul up *her*. He threw her over his shoulder, and it took every ounce of her control—which had never been plentiful—not to bury a knife in his back, especially when his hands began to wander up her skirt.

Lila dug her nails into her palms, and by the time the man finally set her down on the ship’s desk beside the waiting cask (“Heavier than she looks,” he muttered, “and only half as soft . . .”) she’d made eight small crescents in her skin.

“Bastard,” growled Lila in English under her breath. He gave her a wink and murmured something about being soft where it mattered, and Lila silently vowed to kill him. Slowly.

And then she straightened and found herself standing in a circle of sailors.

No, not sailors, of course.

Pirates.

Grimy, sea stained and sun bleached, their skin darkened and their clothes faded, each and every one of them had a knife tattooed across his throat. The mark of the pirates of the *Copper Thief*. She counted seven surrounding her, five tending to the rigging and sails, and assumed another half dozen below deck. Eighteen. Round it up to twenty.

The rail-thin man broke the circle and stepped forward.

“*Solase*,” he said, spreading his arms. “What my men have in balls, they lack in manners.” He brought his hands to the shoulders of her green dress. There was blood under his nails. “You are shaking.”

“I’ve had a bad night,” said Lila, hoping, as she surveyed the rough crew,

that it wasn't about to get worse.

The thin man smiled, his mouth surprisingly full of teeth. “*Anesh*,” he said, “but you are in better hands now.”

Lila knew enough about the crew of the *Copper Thief* to know that was a lie, but she feigned ignorance. “Whose hands would those be?” she asked, as the skeletal figure took her fingers and pressed his cracked lips to her knuckles, ignoring the rope still wound tightly around her wrists. “Baliz Kasnov,” he said. “Illustrious captain of the *Copper Thief*.”

Perfect. Kasnov was a legend on the Arnesian sea. His crew was small but nimble, and they had a penchant for boarding ships and slitting throats in the darkest hours before dawn, slipping away with their cargo and leaving the dead behind to rot. He may have looked starved, but he was an alleged glutton for treasure, especially the consumable kind, and Lila knew that the *Copper Thief* was sailing for the northern coast of a city named Sol in hopes of ambushing the owners of a particularly large shipment of fine liquor. “Baliz Kasnov,” she said, sounding out the name as if she'd never heard it.

“And you are?” he pressed.

“Delilah Bard,” she said. “Formerly of the *Golden Fish*.”

“Formerly?” prompted Kasnov as his men, obviously bored by the fact she was still clothed, began to tap into the cask. “Well, Miss Bard,” he said, linking his arm through hers conspiratorially. “Why don't you tell me how you came to be in that little boat? The sea is no place for a fair young lady such as yourself.”

“*Vaskens*,” she said—*pirates*—as if she had no idea the word applied to present company. “They stole my ship. It was a gift, from my father, for my wedding. We were meant to sail toward Faro—we set out two nights ago—but they came out of nowhere, stormed the *Golden Fish* . . .” She'd practiced this speech, not only the words but the pauses. “They . . . they killed my husband. My captain. Most of my crew.” Here Lila let herself lapse into English. “It happened so fast—” She caught herself, as if the slip were accidental.

But the captain's attention snagged, like a fish on a hook. “Where are you from?”

“London,” said Lila, letting her accent show. A murmur went through the

group. She pressed on, intent on finishing her story. “The *Fish* was small,” she said, “but precious. Laden down with a month’s supplies. Food, drink . . . money. As I said, it was a gift. And now it’s gone.”

But it wasn’t really, not yet. She looked back over the rail. The ship was a smudge of light on the far horizon. It had stopped its retreat and seemed to be waiting. The pirates followed her gaze with hungry eyes.

“How many men?” asked Kasnov.

“Enough,” she said. “Seven? Eight?”

The pirates smiled greedily, and Lila knew what they were thinking. They had more than twice that number, and a ship that hid like a shadow in the dark. If they could catch the fleeing bounty . . . she could feel Baliz Kasnov’s deep-set eyes scrutinizing her. She stared back at him and wondered, absently, if he could do any magic. Most ships were warded with a handful of spells—things to make their lives safer and more convenient—but she had been surprised to find that most of the men she met at sea had little inclination for the elemental arts. Alucard said that magical proficiency was a valued skill, and that true affinity would usually land one gainful employment on land. Magicians at sea almost always focused on the elements of relevance—water and wind—but few hands could turn the tide, and in the end most still favored good old-fashioned steel. Which Lila could certainly appreciate, having several pieces currently hidden on her person.

“Why did they spare you?” asked Kasnov.

“Did they?” challenged Lila.

The captain licked his lips. He’d already decided what to do about the ship, she could tell; now he was deciding what to do about her. The Copper Thieves had no reputation for mercy.

“Baliz . . .” said one of the pirates, a man with skin darker than the rest. He clasped the captain’s shoulder and whispered in his ear. Lila could only make out a few of the muttered words. *Londoners. Rich. And ransom.*

A slow smile spread across the captain’s lips. “*Anesh,*” he said with a nod. And then, to the entire gathered crew, “Sails up! Course south by west! We have a golden fish to catch.”

The men rumbled their approval.

“My lady,” said Kasnov, leading Lila toward the steps. “You’ve had a hard night. Let me show you to my chamber, where you’ll surely be more

comfortable.”

Behind her, she heard the sounds of the cask being opened and the ale being poured, and she smiled as the captain led her belowdecks.

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Kasnov didn't linger, thank God.

He deposited her in his quarters, the rope still around her wrists, and vanished again, locking the door behind him. To her relief, she'd only seen three men belowdecks. That meant fifteen aboard the *Copper Thief*.

Lila perched on the edge of the captain's bed and counted to ten, twenty, then thirty, as the steps sounded above and the ship banked toward her own fleeing vessel. They hadn't even bothered to search her for weapons, which Lila thought a bit presumptuous as she dug a blade from her boot and, with a single practiced gesture, spun it in her grip and slashed the ropes. They fell to the floor as she rubbed her wrists, humming to herself. A shanty about the Sarows, a phantom said to haunt wayward ships at night.

How do you know when the Sarows is coming?

(Is coming is coming is coming aboard?)

Lila took the waist of her dress in two hands, and ripped; the skirt tore away, revealing close-fitting black pants—holsters pinning a knife above each knee—that tapered into her boots. She took the blade and slid it up the corset at her back, slicing the ribbons so she could breathe.

When the wind dies away but still sings in your ears,

(In your ears in your head in your blood in your bones.)

She tossed the green skirt onto the bed and slit it open from hem to tattered waist. Hidden among the gossamer were half a dozen thin sticks that passed for boning and looked like flares, but were neither. She slid her blade back into her boot and freed the tapers.

When the current goes still but the ship, it drifts along,

(Drifts on drifts away drifts alone.)

Overhead, Lila heard a thud, like dead weight. And then another, and another, as the ale took effect. She took up a piece of black cloth, rubbed charcoal on one side, and tied it over her nose and mouth.

When the moon and the stars all hide from the dark,

(For the dark is not empty at all at all.)

(For the dark is not empty at all.)

The last thing Lila took from deep within the folds of the green skirt was her mask. A black leather face-piece, simple but for the horns that curled with strange and frightening grace over the brow. Lila settled the mask on her nose and tied it in place.

How do you know when the Sarows is coming?

(Is coming is coming is coming aboard?)

A looking glass, half-silvered with age, leaned in the corner of the captain's cabin, and she caught her reflection as footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Why you don't and you don't and you won't see it coming,

(You won't see it coming at all.)

Lila smiled behind the mask. And then she turned and pressed her back against the wall. She struck a taper against the wood, the way she had the flares—but unlike flares, no light poured forth, only clouds of pale smoke.

An instant later, the captain's door burst open, but the pirates were too late. She tossed the pluming taper into the room and heard footsteps stumble, and men cough, before the drugged smoke brought them down.

Two down, thought Lila, stepping over their bodies.

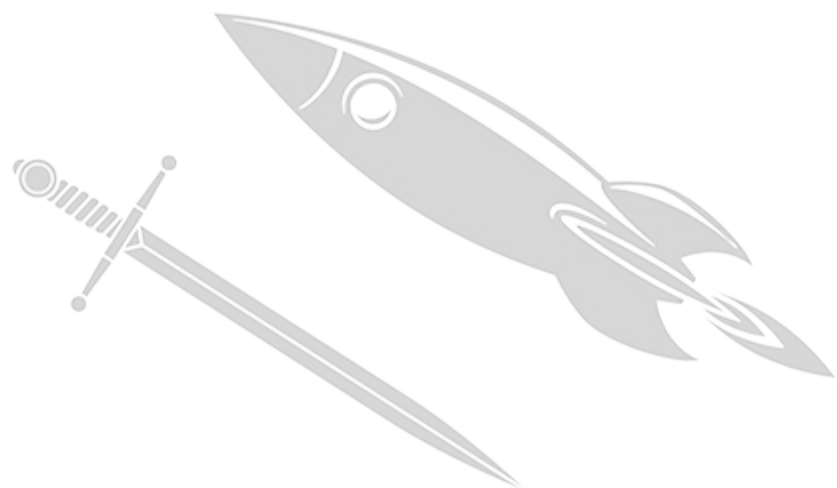
Thirteen to go.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

V.E. Schwab's first adult novel, *Vicious*, debuted to critical praise and reader accolades. Besides her Shades of Magic series (which began with the dazzling *A Darker Shade of Magic*), Schwab is the author of YA novels, along with writing Middle Grade for Scholastic. *The Independent* calls Schwab "the natural successor to Diana Wynne Jones" and someone who has "an enviable, almost Gaiman-esque ability to switch between styles, genres, and tones."

NONFICTION



Television Review: *The Expanse*

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy | 9545 words

The Syfy channel debuted their new show, *The Expanse*, at the end of November. The show is based on the space opera series by James S.A. Corey. Here a panel of geeks—Andrew Liptak (who contributes to *Lightspeed's* book review column), Justin Landon of Tor.com, and Liz Shannon Miller of *Indiewire*—share their thoughts on *The Expanse*.

This roundtable discussion first appeared on Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, which is hosted by David Barr Kirtley and produced by John Joseph Adams. Visit geeksguideshow.com to listen to the interview or other episodes.

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David Barr Kirtley: Today on the show, we'll be discussing the new Syfy channel show, *The Expanse*, based on the novels by James S.A. Corey, which is the pen name of authors Daniel Abraham and Ty Frank. We previously interviewed Daniel back in episode 35 and Ty back in episode 113, so check those out if you missed them. This may involve spoilers for the first book in the series, *Leviathan Wakes*, as well as for the first four episodes of the TV show, so just be aware of that.

I'm joined by three guests. First up, we've got Andrew Liptak, who you may remember from our panel on the Syfy channel shows *Killjoys* and *Dark Matter* in episode 167. He's the weekend editor of Gizmodo and io9, and he also co-edited the anthology *War Stories: New Military Science Fiction*. His reviews have appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Kirkus*, *Lightspeed*, and Tor.com.

Next up, we've got Justin Landon. He's the host of the *Rocket Talk* podcast on Tor.com and also a consulting editor with Tor.com publishing. He was nominated for a Hugo award and won a British Fantasy Award for his work on *Speculative Fiction 2012: The Year's Best Online Reviews, Essays, and Commentary*.

Also joining us today is Liz Shannon Miller. She's the TV editor for *Indiewire*, and has also written for *Gigaom*, *Attack of the Show*, *The New*

York Times, *Variety*, *The Wrap*, *Nerve*, and *Thought Catalogue*. She also hosts the podcasts *Liz Tells Frank What Happened In . . .* and *Very Good Television Podcast*.

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David: Let's start out and talk about the first book in The Expanse series, *Leviathan Wakes*. Andrew, you wrote a long article about this series for BarnesandNoble.com called "Evolution of a Space Epic." Tell us a bit about how this series came about.

Andrew: I'd been a fan of the books since before they came out. I picked up *Leviathan Wakes* when it was an ARC and fell in love with it. As the TV show had started to come up, I was getting interested in writing about how do you go from a book to a television show. I'd interviewed James S. A. Corey, his two parts, Ty Frank and Daniel Abraham, and I had asked them questions over the years, and I sort of had this sense that there was a really interesting story behind it. I emailed them and said, "Hey, I'd like to write this long article. Where did you get the idea from? And how did you go to being a television show?" As I started to dig a little bit deeper, the story got more and more interesting. It was a very different type of origin story than most novels to television shows.

David: Tell us a bit about that. Because it started out as a game world, right?

Andrew: Yeah, so what happened is that way back, probably about 2003 or so, Ty had been coming up with these ideas for this space epic that he wanted to play with. Just ideas. And a friend of his . . . she had an opportunity to create a massive multiplayer online game for a Chinese internet provider and was looking for pitches. He's like, "Well, I've got this idea." He started to develop some material for it and went from there, developed a pitch, and then the pitch didn't go anywhere. The provider looked at the cost and said, "Nope, we're not doing that." He trunked it and ended up turning it into a role-playing game on a play-by-post forum. It's a role-playing game on a discussion forum. He started coming up with this story with all of this material that he had come up with.

He was playing it online for a couple of years, and then he moved down

to New Mexico with his wife, and he fell in with Daniel Abraham, George R. R. Martin, and a bunch of other writers down in that area. They went to him and said, “Hey, we heard you do a really good role-playing game. We’d like to play this game that you’ve been doing.” So, he basically introduced them to that. He started developing more of the story. So, that’s when Daniel Abraham said, “You’ve got a novel here. Can I write it?” Ty basically told him, “Yeah, go ahead.” And Daniel started writing it, and when he handed it over to Ty, Ty said, “Nope, this is all wrong, let me go rewrite it.” That’s when they started working together. Daniel wrote some stuff, then Ty would edit it, then Ty would write some stuff and Daniel would edit it, they would go back and forth, chapter to chapter, and soon they eventually had what became *Leviathan Wakes*. All the story that’s in *Leviathan Wakes* came from the games. There’s several instances where this was all stuff that had come out of the gameplay sessions that they had been putting together. The book is really almost an adaptation of their role-playing games.

David: Do I have this right, that Miller was Daniel’s character in the game, and he wrote those chapters in the book?

Andrew: I think so. There’s one group that had been playing Holden’s crew. There’s one character that meets a pretty grisly end, and that was a player who had to leave the game early, so he was told that he would get a pretty epic death. I think Daniel Abraham’s group had been the ones playing with the mystery-noir element, and so once they put the novel together, they had mashed the two of them together, and it worked out pretty well.

David: Justin, you told me that the first book review you ever wrote was *Leviathan Wakes*. Tell us a bit about how that came about.

Justin: It’s funny, I was just talking to the editor who bought the Expanse series. His name is DongWon Song, and he was at Orbit Books. I told him about why I got into the book— it was actually added as ancillary content to *The Dragon’s Path*, which was the first book in Daniel Abraham’s Dagger and Coin series. I wasn’t a blogger at that point, but I saw an opportunity to get two books for one, one of which wasn’t out yet. I thought that was cool. They were giving away this copy of *Leviathan Wakes* for free in the ebook. I think they did the reverse, too, later; if you bought *Leviathan Wakes*, you got the ebook of *Dragon’s Path* with it. When I got *Leviathan Wakes*, this advanced copy of it through *The Dragon’s Path*, I

said, “Oh, this is cool. I guess I’ll write a review because a lot of people haven’t read it yet because it’s attached in this way.” I posted a review and it was just sort of dumb luck. Through that is how I actually got into reviewing. That was the first thing I posted on a blog. Obviously, the rest is history. I actually didn’t like *Leviathan Wakes* very much, as it were. I ended up loving the rest of the series, but I think it’s by far the weakest book.

David: Why do you think it’s the weakest book?

Justin: I don’t think the noir elements work very well adjacent to the space opera ones. I think Detective Miller is a bizarre character couched within the rest of the series. I don’t think it’s any kind of surprise that you don’t really see those noir elements popping up as much as the series goes along. Having heard the history from Andrew about how these books evolved, it sounds like Miller was Daniel Abraham’s darling, right? So it was in that first book, but Miller’s role obviously decreases in each book for many reasons. I guess we can probably spoil that, but his role decreases, and I don’t think we see that kind of noir stuff pop up again. I just thought it was a weird fit. I thought Detective Miller is not a very interesting character personally. I actually don’t think Jim Holden is a very interesting character, either. So, that first book relies entirely on these two somewhat boring characters, and the series doesn’t really sing until it’s introduced in *Caliban’s War* with Chrisjen Avasarala and Bobby Draper, that the series really takes off, in my opinion.

David: That’s interesting. Liz, let’s get your perspective here. Tell us, how did you come to read *Leviathan Wakes*?

Liz: Actually, my copy of *Leviathan Wakes* came from NBC/Universal. I went to a press day for NBC’s upcoming slate of projects back in April, I think. They just kind of handed out copies of the first two books of *The Expanse* right there. Then I saw the pilot at Comic-Con with a friend of mine who was a huge fan of the books as well. Then I was like, okay, well, they seem to have done a really nice job of bringing the two worlds together.

David: Did you read the book before you saw the show or vice versa?

Liz: Vice versa.

David: Okay, that's intriguing. Because I'm the same way, so it'll be interesting how we see it differently as opposed to people who read the book first. I guess I'm curious, Andrew, do you agree with what Justin is saying about the first book? Or did you like it more than he did?

Andrew: I actually really liked *Leviathan Wakes*. I like mysteries quite a bit. I thought it worked pretty well. What I took away from the first book, and what you sort of see in the pilot, is that it is paced very deliberately, and what these guys have done is they've put together a book that moves quickly. It keeps you reading. I think that's one reason why it really hooked a lot of people from that first book. That being said, the books do get better as they go on. *Caliban's War*, as Justin says, is a lot stronger, and there's a lot more interesting characters. *Abaddon's Gate* is really great. *Cibola Burn*, I wasn't as big of a fan of. I think that's actually the weakest entry in the series, but they pick right up again with *Nemesis Games*, and it gets even better.

David: I think one thing that's really interesting about this series is that it seems like most science fiction is either set in the near future, like *1984*, or it's set in the far future like *Star Trek*, where there's hyper drives and stuff like that. There hasn't been a ton of stuff exploring the in-between phase. Humanity has spread throughout the solar system, but gone no farther. Do you guys agree with that? Did that feel fresh to you?

Liz: Yeah, absolutely. I think one thing I really enjoy about the show is the fact that it has a really hard take on the brutality of space travel. I think all of the really great space stuff I've seen recently has always had this overriding theme, which is space is a terrible place that is trying to kill you at every moment, and that's something that I think *The Expanse* really nails in a lot of respects.

Justin: The claustrophobic aspect of these books and the television series is just tremendous. I have never seen another work of fiction that has made me feel as claustrophobic as *The Expanse* books do. Like, this notion of these tiny little capsules in this great void, that emotion that it captures is tremendous, and probably the thing the series does better than anything else.

David: It's interesting because in the show, space is so unforgiving, but in a way, this show is unforgiving, too, because there's so little explanation,

so little exposition, and Liz, you're one of the people here who was not already familiar with the books when you saw it. Did you have trouble understanding what was going on at all because the show doesn't spoon-feed you anything at all?

Liz: Not necessarily, but I think part of it is the show does a nice job of using the lexicon of other science fiction. There are elements of it that felt familiar to me, there are elements that I understood. I think in general, though, there's a lot you pick up via context that works really well. I think that's by design, like I got to speak with the creators of the show—it's weird to talk about them being the creators of the show because of course it's based on the books, but the executive producer, showrunners—and when I did, they made a big point about how they really tried to strip away as much exposition as possible because they just wanted to put you into the world of the show immediately.

David: Could you say a little bit more about how you got set up with that interview, and who those guys are, and what their background is?

Liz: Basically at the television critics association press tour this summer . . . It's actually funny, normally the TCAs are a great opportunity to get interviews if you're a television critic or a television reporter because all of the networks bring all of their major talent for upcoming shows to this one hotel in Beverly Hills or Pasadena, and so normally you get fifteen minutes face-to-face with somebody and it happens all day long and it's great. Basically, I sat down with Mark Fergus, Hawk Ostby, and Naren Shankar, and we were sitting down outside, and we were talking about Syfy and we were talking about the show, all this sort of stuff, and around half an hour into that conversation they were still talking to me, and I was like, "Okay, I'll go with this," and then forty-five minutes later, the PR rep wanders by and then wanders away again. I'm like, "Okay, well, I guess we're still talking," and we had a lot of fun stuff to talk about. I ended up getting a full hour from them, just getting into all the details and nuances of the show and how they were approaching it. Actually, I believe the writer Ty was also there. He was sitting to the side and not saying anything, but just listening to the conversation. It was weird. But he was very nice.

David: A lot of times with TV people, you get the feeling that they're not that invested in science fiction. I actually heard Ty say in some of the

meetings they went to, people asked them, “Does this have to be set in outer space?” Which I think is pretty ridiculous.

Liz: No, that was literally one of the first things I joked with them about, and they were like, “No, we had that meeting. We had the ‘does it have to be set in space’ meeting.”

David: I get the feeling, just from watching the show, that these guys are not that way. That they’re very serious about making this great science fiction. They also wrote the scripts for *Children of Men* and *Iron Man*, I think. Is that right?

Liz: Yeah, they’re some of the credited writers for those projects. But, what’s really neat is that they went outside of the science fiction realm to find writers, like they brought in a writer from *Mad Men*, they brought in a writer from something else that wasn’t SF-related, and it was just because they wanted to find people who had a really interesting, nuanced take on this world.

Andrew: I got to visit the set when they were actually doing production, and I had a long meeting with Hawk and Mark, and Hawk was actually saying that he wasn’t interested in this at first. Mark had picked up the book and had read through it and said, “Hey, this is a project we should work on.” Hawk had basically said, “No, I’m not interested. It’s going to be people in space doing space things and that’s not interesting. “And then Mark convinced him to read it, and he read the first book in a day and said, “You’ve got to get that meeting. This is not what I thought it was.” So, I think that the thing that the two guys found when they were doing the initial writing is that this was a character story in space, not a space story about technology and people just happen to be along. This is really, at the core of it, it’s a really personality-driven narrative.

Liz: That said, though, I think one really cool aspect of the show is the fact that they are trying also to do some stuff that’s different from other science fiction things, like the whole concept of the ships and the way they move through space, like that’s a lot of stuff that they’re trying to do that we haven’t seen before.

Andrew: On io9, I did a post about this a while back. The pilot episode is now freely available online everywhere, and I had posted up about that,

and some people were like, what do you mean this is realistic? You have people standing on spaceships on the floor. And all of the commenters started jumping in like, “No, no, they address that.” So, what’s really neat is that they’ve actually gone through and thought through a lot of the physics and the design. This also shows down through the set design and the actual trappings of the world. It’s all really well thought out.

David: I want to get Justin in here. So Justin, you mentioned that you had sort of mixed feelings about the book. Do you have mixed feelings about the show as well, or do you think that they’ve improved on the book in some ways?

Justin: That’s a fair question. I’ll say, when I first watched the pilot, probably three or four weeks ago, I was a little nervous after watching the pilot. There were some weird technical things with the show. I thought the sound was weird. I thought the Belter patois was going to be really challenging. I was getting kind of nervous about it, but then I saw the subsequent episodes, and all of my concerns were pretty much left in the dust. I think the way they’ve incorporated Chrisjen Avasarala’s point of view in particular, and the way they’ve adjusted some of the history of Holden’s crew and the things they’ve added earlier than they did in *Leviathan Wakes*, is giving all of the context that, to me, makes the series richer and more interesting that you don’t get until later, but they’re getting it right up front. So, we’re learning more about these characters quicker, and as a result, we’re buying into them quicker.

David: Justin, you mentioned that you had trouble making out the dialogue. I certainly had trouble making out a lot of the dialogue. The first time I watched this, I was using my laptop speakers that were not particularly close to me, and I was really having trouble making stuff out. Liz, did you have any trouble understanding what the characters were saying in this show?

Liz: Not particularly, but I can see why that would be an issue. Again, like I said, a lot of stuff I was just kind of picking up through context. The show deliberately doesn’t make it easy for you to understand what’s going on, but I think that’s one of its appeals, frankly.

David: The first time I watched it, I absolutely loved it. I loved every minute of it. But I couldn’t understand what half the characters were saying.

Justin: I actually think that's a pilot problem. I don't think it's a problem in the second, third, or fourth episodes. I really do think . . . I don't know if there was something about the sound editing in that early pilot that they put out that just wasn't right, and maybe it'll be corrected when it's aired on Syfy, I don't know, but it definitely was hard to hear stuff, like they had the background sounds amped up or something. And there was a lot more of the Belter language without any contextual preparation in the first episode that they start to actually prepare you for in the second and third episode. There's a really interesting scene where Havelock, detective Miller's partner . . . it's not clear if he's visiting a prostitute for many reasons, or if he's only visiting her for her to teach him Belter, but he's actually learning Belter from her, and I think that's an interesting discussion for us to actually understand what they're doing with their hands and the words they use. I almost think that should have been in the first episode, because I think it would've eased people's concerns, but it's an interesting choice to put it in the second episode like they did.

David: I would definitely recommend people read the book first, though, because I watched these episodes, and then I went back and read that section of the book, and then I went back and watched the episodes again, and it made a lot more sense the second time around. Andrew, what do you think about the Belter language and the sound? Did you have any issues with this at all?

Andrew: I watched the first four episodes with a couple of friends, and we all thought that the sound was a little bit weird. I had been thinking that the sound mix was a little bit off, either because it wasn't finished or it was sort of a piracy thing, so you don't get the full finished episode. They sent these press packs out to a lot of people. I'm guessing that the episodes have probably leaked online somewhere, so that was my initial guess is that the sound was just off so you wouldn't get a perfect product, and then the final version will be better. At least I hope. As far as actually understanding the characters, yeah, I had a little bit of trouble, but I think that's deliberate because you're sort of looking in on this very different world of the Belters, and they have their own little weird language. They have a lot of hand motions. The hand motions come from, reading from the books, because they have to communicate with space suits. And what I liked about this is

that they focused very closely on the background characters. If you watch the episode and you look at all of the background characters, you see that there are the hand motions, there's the body language, there's all this stuff that gets you immersed in this world, and I really, really like that. I thought that was a really good choice. I've read all of the books a couple of times, so I'm not really a good person to say whether or not this works really well, but I understood it fairly well, and I could understand what they're doing. I thought it was a very good way to build the world without actually telling everybody every single thing that they're doing to explain it. I know that they do sort of point out, this is what this hand motion means, but then they just sort of go on from there, and there's some other little background things that you see, and I thought it worked really well.

David: You mentioned the worldbuilding, and I thought that was one thing the show did amazingly well, just both in the hand gesture kind of things, and also the spaceships, and the environments, all the stuff. It looked like they spent a lot of money and put a lot of thought and time and care just getting everything you look at exactly right.

Justin: I actually saw the episode where Holden is dealing with the Martian navy, and the Martians actually start talking about the cultural differences between Mars and Earth. I don't recall any of that. I actually feel like I know more about what makes Mars tick from watching *The Expanse* television series than I do from reading all of the books, which I thought was interesting. Maybe I just don't recall those moments in the books.

Andrew: No, it's in there. I'm pretty sure I remember reading about it, because it's not something they dwell on a lot in the books. The show I think does a little bit better job of it, but the books do talk about how everybody is trying to focus on one thing, which is basically terraforming the planet. And that actually becomes a much bigger storyline later in the series. I think that's something that they're still playing with, especially as certain events happen, book four and beyond.

Liz: I wanted to look up something . . . someone actually visited the set, but apparently they used about eighty-thousand square feet of soundstage in order to build so much of the world of the show, which is really incredible.

Andrew: Yeah, I got to visit the set up in Toronto when they were filming. They were filming the last couple of episodes, and just the way I

described it, and the way I was told is that this is the same soundstage they used for *Pacific Rim*. They're incredibly huge, enormous buildings, and I got to walk up to the *Rocinante* and board it, and it was just . . . you walk in there and, "Oh my god, this is a spaceship." There's grating on the floor. There's warning signs plastered, as you would expect in any military vehicle. There's handholds. There's fire extinguishers. The seats look worn. This is all, "Oh my god, it's a spaceship." But even just looking at the other sets, this is really high-quality stuff that they're putting in there. They've dumped a lot of money into it, and they've put a lot of effort making it look right. Part of that is that I think the authors are involved, and they've got all the right people involved to make sure it looks right, but I think they've determined that this is a direction they want to see TV go in. This is the right story for it, and they've decided it's worth the investment.

David: I want to emphasize that, too. I don't know if we've said this explicitly, that Ty and Daniel are actually in the writers' room working on this show, which is very, very unusual, I think, for a TV show that's being adapted from books.

Liz: It's one of the many, many comparisons that you can draw between this and *Game of Thrones* actually. Like, the fact that the authors are really heavily involved. That they're really trying to keep fidelity to the original story while also making the changes necessary for this to work as a TV show.

David: Although, in the case of *Game of Thrones*, my understanding is that George R. R. Martin only writes one script per season.

Liz: Yeah, but at the same time, he's involved with the development of the story, especially right now, because *Game of Thrones* has officially caught up with his books, so he's essentially developing his story in conjunction with their development of the TV show.

David: Right, I agree with you, but I think in this Ty and Daniel, they're in the writers' room every day, working on the show, giving their feedback, so it's taking that even further.

Liz: Oh, totally.

David: Do you want to say a bit more, Andrew, about why you said this is kind of like a new direction for television? Have you heard stuff from the

Syfy channel about kind of what place they see this show occupying and what they're planning to do in this direction?

Andrew: Nothing from them, but just more of a sense of what they're planning to do. We talked a little bit about this in the last G.G.G. episode that I was on with *Killjoys* and *Dark Matter*, but Syfy has gotten beaten up over the last couple years for airing some kind of crappy shows and really sort of turning their back on the classic space opera stuff, so shows like *Stargate*, *Battlestar*, *Farscape*, and all of those other ones. They really stopped doing those types of show in favor of stuff that seemed a little bit cheaper, not as dramatic, not as exciting.

Obviously your mileage will vary depending on what you like, but a lot of people didn't like that about Syfy, and they thought that they were turning their back on their roots. They've had some leadership changes in the past year or two. I think part of that is that they've determined, let's go back to what the network is really known for. Over the past couple of years, science fiction and fantasy television has gotten really big. Just look at *Game of Thrones*, look at *The Walking Dead*. These are shows that could have been on the Syfy channel, and they could have done really well there because that's sort of their wheelhouse, but these other networks, which aren't known for science fiction, are taking the risk and reaping some really incredible rewards from it. So, I think they saw that they need to take a risk, they need to go back to something that people are really asking for, which is space. So, they've started really focusing on that. We saw *Killjoys* and *Dark Matter* come out earlier this year, which I thought were really in the vein of the older *Stargate*- and *Farscape*-type shows. Because they were light, they were funny, they took place in space, they had adventure, and now they're really doubling down by going sort of the *Battlestar* route with this new show. I think that the new direction is going to be, "Let's go look at what science fiction shows are out there," and I know that they've got others in the pipeline, and not just science fiction but fantasy. They're doing *The Magicians* later on. I think that they're really pushing in a more critically acclaimable direction, in space.

Liz: The fact that they're pairing the launch of *The Expanse* with, of all the things in this world to adapt, *Childhood's End*, like, that's a huge project for them. And, honestly, kind of baffling, like, this is the thing that Stanley

Kubrick couldn't figure out how to make, and so they're trying to take on this really classic work of science fiction. That's huge.

David: It's a six-hour thing, it's going to be over three nights. I saw the first night, it was pretty good, so I'm optimistic about it at this point. I think one thing going for them is that they have six hours to play with, which is a lot more than Stanley Kubrick could have done in a feature film.

Liz: Very true.

Andrew: I'm a little weirded out by that, because *Childhood's End* is a weird book, and I haven't seen any of it yet. I'm interested to see what they do with it. They do some interesting mini-series events, like *Ascension* from last year was definitely a strange one, and I don't know if that one quite worked as well. I'll be interested to see how well this one works. If it succeeds, it'll be another one of these critically acclaimed things, I suspect, but it'll be interesting to see how well that comes out.

David: Right, but I mean, this is what most of us science fiction readers have always wanted. There's all these great science fiction novels, and you're like, "Oh, why don't they just turn these into TV shows and movies," and so I'm really optimistic that that seems to be becoming more common now. And, Justin, in one of your pieces that I read, you were talking about this, like why don't they just adapt the stuff that everybody loves already rather than trying to get Hollywood people to come up with some ideas.

Justin: Well yeah, I think there's no question that the success of some of these other massive adaptations is informing their decision here, but it is crazy to think that Hollywood would just take something from scratch that has no existing footprint in the consumer's mind, when you have some tremendously successful intellectual properties that are perfectly adaptable, ready to go, with existing fanbases that have, in the case of *The Expanse*, has hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. I mean, even if you're only talking about a couple hundred thousand fans out there, that's a huge leg up when it comes to word of mouth and that kind of stuff, and given that TV is moving away from appointment viewing, that word-of-mouth thing is way more important for television than it's ever been before. Now it's almost like book selling. It's like this notion of you have to know where to look to get it, in a lot of cases. If I hadn't seen *Jessica Jones* blow up on Twitter, I

wouldn't have even thought to look for it on Netflix, I think it's on Netflix, I actually have no idea.

Liz: It is Netflix.

Justin: That's the thing, word of mouth is how we find out about television now. It's not like you just tune in on CBS and it just pops onto your TV in the way that it did ten years ago, and so I think adaptation is the best way, because word of mouth and the buzz is way more high for these properties than it is for something new.

David: I also want to make the point that with an adaptation you have the advantage . . . I mean, the Achilles heel of a lot of big science fiction shows in recent years, I don't want to mention any names, is that they had a good idea for what they were going to do in season one, and had no idea what they were going to do in season five, and that showed really dramatically. Whereas when you have this book series that you have five or six books, I think it's going to nine or more books ultimately, there's a lot of thought that has already been put into where the story is going before the adapters even have to wrestle with that stuff.

Andrew: And the problem there is that because *The Expanse*, they've projected it out to be nine volumes, so they're just a little bit over halfway through, what happens if the show gets canceled at season three or season four, so you sort of have this pitfall of having this really great story that you're supporting at first, you can't support the really long-term story without at least thinking about how do you end it short-term, so I hope that they will plan ahead for that, and if the show doesn't last for nine seasons, or probably more than nine seasons, basically it's going to change from what the books have planned out and it might change the caliber of the show, which is good and bad. There's certainly good things that they can do with a TV show that will make it different from the books.

Justin: I don't know, there's definitely a false climax in *Abaddon's Gate*, where if they tweak the proto-molecule story just slightly, they could easily end it there.

Andrew: That's also a result of how the books were published. They sold them as a trilogy, and as I was talking to them, I was sort of figuring out why this was, but they basically said, "Yeah, we sold it as a trilogy

because that's what you sell." And by the time they had written *Abaddon's Gate*, they wanted to make sure that they could end that particular arc well, but at that point they also said, "Look, we have a longer story that we want to write, let us know now, while we're writing this third book, if it's going to be the final one or not, because if you want it to be the final one, we'll end it. If you don't want it to be the final one, we can keep going, and we'll change it accordingly." So, that's sort of how the books came about, and they actually see the books as duologies, so *Leviathan Wakes* and *Caliban's War* tell their own arc, *Abaddon's Gate* and *Cibola Burn* tell their own arc, and then *Nemesis Games* and I don't remember what the sixth book is called, those books are basically one novel that is just cut in half.

Liz: We talk about the books having endings and all that, apparently there is a true official ending for the entire series that they've revealed to the creators, which is always interesting in these sorts of context because how that gets adapted, how that gets changed over the course of the series, that's the big question. But, I mean, any TV show is always playing with fire when it comes to, "Hey, do we develop all of the story in season two, or do we let that go out for longer, even though we're not totally sure there will be a season three?"

David: I actually saw they have the actual last line already written, so they know pretty specifically where this is going.

Andrew: And they are going on to a season two. They've got the writers' room together, and they're writing the scripts for another season right now, so that gives them a little bit more room to work with this first season.

Liz: When they go into season two, I always want a tv show to kind of take a *Wire* approach where, now we're at the docks, and now we're caring about all of these new characters, but they might actually do that with this one.

Andrew: The books certainly do that. Each book introduces a new set of characters, so *Caliban's War* introduces a father whose daughter is lost, there's Bobby the Space Marine, who, I'm with Justin, I cannot wait to see how they do her. She's my absolute favorite character. *Abaddon's Gate*, they introduce a whole bunch of other characters. *Cibola Burn*, there's a whole bunch of new characters, and it's not until book five that they

actually go back, and the only point-of-view characters are really just Holden's crew, and that's the first time that they've not introduced any new viewpoints.

David: What did you think, Andrew, about the casting in this? Did the characters match your image of them from reading the books?

Andrew: Naomi Nagata is dead-on perfect. They could not have gotten a better actress for her. She is just stunning. She is the reason to watch the show. She is going to be a major character for this, and I can't wait to see what they do with her. Thomas Jane as Miller I thought was really, really good. He captured a lot of Miller's mannerisms and his appearance and his attitude towards things. I thought that was really well done. Alex matches pretty much what I had envisioned. Holden, not as much; when I saw the casting news of that, I thought, "Well, he seems really young," and a lot of other people seem to assume that Holden was a much older character, and I guess not as pretty. But, seeing him on the screen, I thought he did a pretty good job. The only real character I didn't really get was Amos. He doesn't match.

Justin: Totally agree.

Andrew: He doesn't match up with how I envisioned him at all. I sort of envisioned . . . what was the brother-in-law from *Breaking Bad*?

Liz: Dean Norris?

Andrew: Yeah, maybe. The cop guy who is balding.

Liz: Dean Norris.

Andrew: Yes, okay. I'm terrible with actors' names. I always envisioned him as the perfect person to play Amos. So far, the current actor seems to be doing a really good job, and I'm really interested to see what he takes from it, but he's not what I envisioned at all. But I'll trust the creators. They're the guys who created the books. I assume they know what they're doing, and we'll see what they do for the next couple of episodes.

Justin: I think Amos is just way too pretty on the show, like, if you know Amos' backstory, the guy on screen does not fit. I imagined, like, Tom Hardy after he got his ass kicked, you know what I mean? That's kind of what I envisioned. I don't want to use words I'll regret using, but he should look a little bit more like he's come up on the streets. Amos just

looks way too soft to me. But, I guess he's certainly good looking and muscular. That's another thing, this is a guy who's been living in space for a long time, I know Amos is described as being muscular, but I think the Amos on screen might be a little too muscular for the what we know about what it does for bone density and that kind of thing.

Andrew: He did get the sort of sociopath element right, I thought. With the way that he looks at Naomi for guidance and things, I thought that their relationship was tweaked a little bit in the show, and I really like how they did it, so I'll be interested to see what direction they take that in.

Liz: Something I found interesting was that, of all the characters in the show, this was the one that Hawk Ostby cited as his favorite to write, because I'm looking at the interview I did, "His reactions to things are so different. Completely different than what we're used to. It's like he's got a bent antenna."

David: Did you, Liz, have favorite actors? What did you think of the casting overall?

Liz: I think it was a really great idea to bring forward Shohreh Aghdashloo. Beautiful actress, Academy Award nominee, and such a great presence in the show. I was really excited to see her as a presence, especially the way she's used in the first episode, I think. It was a really great moment for the show and for Syfy.

Andrew: And her voice is perfect, too. She's exactly as I imagined Avasarala in the books. The downside is that she can't swear in the TV show, and she really does in the books. So that's the one downside.

Liz: Apparently in season two, they're actually going to be able to give her a little bit more of a potty mouth. Their rating is going to go up a bit.

Andrew: Excellent.

Liz: But they mentioned it specifically because of her. They're like, "She couldn't swear quite as much as we wanted her to, but next year we'll be able to make that happen."

Justin: The one other comment I'll make about casting, number one, super delighted that it's a very diverse cast. I think Syfy could have easily defaulted to all the other science fiction casts of years gone by, and they didn't do that, which is awesome. However, there is one very interesting

casting choice that I thought was strange, which is Ade, the girlfriend of Jim Holden, is a Nigerian in the books, and is a white character in the TV series, which is such a strange choice for me. I don't know why they did that, given how diverse the rest of the cast is, but it really stood out to me as a fan of the books that they casted that character that way. I thought it was strange.

David: There was also Lieutenant Lopez was a white actor as well.

Justin: Lieutenant Lopez?

David: That was his name, right? The guy who . . . I don't want to get into spoilers, but—

Justin: Oh, the medical officer?

David: The guy who interrogates them.

Justin: Oh, on the Martian ship?

David: Yeah.

Justin: Oh yeah, I didn't pick up on his name. I actually thought that actor did a great job.

David: I thought he was fantastic as an actor.

Liz: You talk to people about casting choices, and it's always so tough because I think every creator at this point really wants to commit to diversity, but at the same time, it's kind of like life, you can't help who you fall in love with, and so I think a lot of people get kind of sucked into these like, "Ugh, we just like that actor too much to not cast him."

David: I could understand that in that case, because I did think that that guy did a fantastic job with that character.

Justin: Speaking of casting, what did you guys think of Fred Johnson, the guy they cast for that role? I don't know if Liz or David know much about Fred Johnson, but he's a huge player as the series moves along, and the guy they got to play him, Andrew, to me felt just . . . he didn't look, again, like just didn't look hard enough to me.

David: Sorry, who was that in the show?

Andrew: He was the one who threatened the space Mormons.

David: Oh, oh okay.

Andrew: He plays a really pivotal role. He's sort of the leader of the OPA and he's not really . . . I don't know if he's who I would have chosen,

but I think he's going to do a pretty interesting job with it. I know he was big in *The Walking Dead* and some other things, I don't know. I think he'll do fine.

David: We're pretty much out of time, so I guess maybe we should just wrap this up. Are there any things that you guys are hoping to see in future episodes, directions you hope the show goes in, without spoilers? Things from the future books you're hoping to see? Anything like that?

Justin: I'll just say what I'm very anxious to see is how they actually handle the protomolecule, which they haven't really even discussed on the show yet, but the protomolecule is the central plot MacGuffin, at least in the first book, and really throughout the series, and we haven't seen it yet. And how they handle what is really a bizarre science fictional plot MacGuffin on a show that is not doing bizarre science fiction plot MacGuffins like most science fiction shows do. It has this very authentic, gritty vibe to it, and they're going to have to introduce this thing that is different, and how they handle that, I'm very interested to see. I will say, the other thing I'm looking forward to is hopefully they lens flare a little bit less on the show, like . . . man, there's a lot of lens flares. Otherwise the camerawork is exquisite, like, I love the cinematography, but I could do with a little less lens flaring.

Liz: I agree, not necessarily with the lens flare, I'm a sucker for lens flare, I don't know why.

David: I'm with you there, Liz. I like the lens flare.

Liz: But, I agree that the most exciting thing about the show is going to be how it takes what's a really grounded approach and builds in some harder SF aspects to it.

Andrew: I have to say, as I said before, I'm really excited to see what they do with Bobby. She's introduced in *Caliban's War*, and is just absolutely phenomenal, and she actually comes back later on in the series, which I was happy to see. She's a pretty kick ass character. She's got a suit of power armor, and I really want to see what the production design for that is. But, if they stick with the track that the books are going, and this will be seasons and seasons later, I'm really interested to see what they do with the new worlds in *Cibola Burn* and what they handle with the major crises in *Nemesis Games*, if they get to that point. There's some really interesting

things that they can do from a television perspective and a story perspective, but first we have to get through the first couple seasons. I'm really interested to see what they do with the long arc of the Belter War and stuff like that.

David: Great. I just want to say, in case it's not clear, I absolutely love the show so far. I'm really excited that this is the direction that Syfy is going. This is like kind of the show I've always wanted. Every indication so far is that this is the science fiction show I've wanted to see all my life, so I really strongly recommend everyone check it out.

Andrew: From the first couple episodes, I have to say, I like it more than I like *Battlestar Galactica*. I'm a big fan.

Liz: Whoa.

Andrew: I've had people say that, but I really like it. I think the story is going to be a lot stronger and a lot more focused. I like the characters. And yeah, I'm on board.

Justin: Hundred percent agree, and I don't watch a ton of television anymore. My wife watches an immense amount, but I've kind of eased back, but I cannot remember the last time that a television show has made me need to urinate. The tension on the show is really well done. Every show ends with this really great last bit of tension, and you get the stomach cramps, it's just really well done. I can't remember too much TV that has done that for me. So, I'm all in.

Liz: Yeah, I do watch a lot of TV, and I can tell you, in the scope of everything that's going on right now, this is more under the radar than other projects, but it's still really exciting. Especially it's really exciting because of what it represents about Syfy's new direction.

David: Cool, so I think that's a good note to end on. We've been speaking with Andrew Liptak, Justin Landon, and Liz Shannon Miller, so thank you so much for joining us.

Liz: Thank you.

Andrew: Thank you.

Justin: Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is a science fiction/fantasy talk show podcast. It is produced by John Joseph Adams and hosted by: David Barr Kirtley, who is the author of thirty short stories, which have appeared in magazines such as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, and *Lightspeed*, in books such as *Armored*, *The Living Dead*, *Other Worlds Than These*, and *Fantasy: The Best of the Year*, and on podcasts such as *Escape Pod* and *Pseudopod*. He lives in New York.

Book Reviews: February 2016

Sunil Patel | 2389 words

For this month's review column, we'll be looking at *All the Birds in the Sky* by Charlie Jane Anders, *Steal the Sky* by Megan E. O'Keefe, *The Wildings* by Nilanjana Roy, and *The Girl from Everywhere* by Heidi Heilig.

All the Birds in the Sky

Charlie Jane Anders

Hardcover/Ebook

ISBN 978-0765379948

Tor Books, January 2016

320 pages

Many readers believe in strong, defined genre boundaries. Science fiction is science fiction and fantasy is fantasy, and never the twain shall meet. Do not get your peanut butter in my chocolate.

To them, Charlie Jane Anders flips the bird. All the birds. In the sky.

Patricia Delfine is a witch. Laurence Armstead is a mad scientist. They meet as children, neither one truly appreciated by their parents (poor Patricia practically lives under the stairs like Harry Potter), and they find a kinship in their shared secret freakdom. As adults, they have grown apart, fully immersed in their respective worlds, unaware that both the magicians and the scientists are very, very concerned with the salvation and/or destruction of the human race and the planet. And they each have very, very different ideas of what that constitutes.

All the Birds in the Sky is what would happen if Kelly Link got really high and wrote a novel. Anders filters all of the fantasy and science fiction through whimsical cheesecloth until it becomes mundane. She describes Laurence building a time machine as if he whipped together a ham radio out of spare parts. When Patricia talks to birds, it's only as out of the ordinary as the reader feels it is. Although there's plenty of worldbuilding—and this book has twice the worldbuilding of most—the focus remains on the “real” world, as it were, a satirically imagined near-future San Francisco Anders describes with all the absurdity of her legendary Writers with Drinks

monologues. It's so delightfully weird I didn't want to stop reading. I didn't even care that I couldn't tell what the "plot" of the book was because it was so fun to read. The characters and offbeat voice made up for the rather loose narrative.

Eventually, however, the book takes a turn as various bits of foreshadowing bring the shadows to the fore, and rather than laughing out loud every few pages, I was staring in shock every few pages. Things become more and more dire and then this book made me cry in a Pasta Pomodoro restaurant.

The brilliance of the novel's genre mash-up is the way Anders embodies each in her characters, making them individual representatives of the corresponding factions. Although, as a whole, the "science fiction" side and the "fantasy" side are in conflict with each other, Laurence and Patricia clearly belong together. As friends, as lovers, how ever. In a way, it's as if Anders is opening the conversation to fandom entire: Why can't we all just get along? I have no doubt *All the Birds in the Sky* will start all sorts of conversations. It doesn't resemble your typical SFF novel, and it does so with confidence and aplomb. This is the Reese's peanut butter cup of a book everyone will be talking about.

Steal the Sky

Megan E. O'Keefe

Paperback/Ebook

ISBN 978-0857664907

Angry Robot Books, January 2016

448 pages

In the first chapter of *Steal the Sky*, Megan E. O'Keefe masterfully establishes character, world, and plot through an interrogation scene. Detan Honding, a charming rogue with rogueish charm, has been detained by Ripka Leshe, a Watch captain who has little love for the man causing trouble in Aransa. Aransa is on the Scorched Continent, so named for its volcanic firemounts that produce the gas selium, which certain people can manipulate. In only a few short pages, O'Keefe sets up the economics, politics, geography, and culture of a world that revolves around this magic,

and then comes the hook. In order to secure his freedom, all Detan has to do . . . is steal an airship from ex-Commodore Thratia Ganal, a woman so ruthless she's known as General Throatlitter.

I love that the book is full of complex women with differing agendas. Thratia, making a play to become Warden of Aransa by any means necessary. Ripka, trying to keep her job in the face of this power play. Pelkaia, changing her face with the power of selium and assassinating key figures on a revenge quest. A couple other characters appear later to throw wrenches into the proceedings, and they're also women: Women hold all the power in this book. But Detan Honding and his brutish companion, Tibal, men though they are, have skills of their own, sometimes hidden. It didn't take long for me to care about each and every character.

I found the world itself fascinating as well, especially the different ways selium could be used. Although its primary use seemed to be as a buoyant gas for airships, the society mines the most out of this mined material, using it to do everything from lift up walkways to enrich liqueur. And yet the sel-sensitives who can actually work selium magic are feared and hunted, because if there's a prejudice to be had, humans will find it. O'Keefe also conveys the nature of her secondary world through language, with mixed results—neologisms like “firemount” are clever but using common words to mean something else (“grain” for “coin,” “mark” for “hour”) feels confusing and unnecessary. The slang, too, reflects the world these characters live in. From beginning to end, you are *in* this meticulously constructed world.

Steal the Sky is a fun secondary-world adventure with plenty of exciting action, surprising twists, and wonderful payoffs to small seeds skillfully laid throughout the story. While Detan Honding might scrape his way out of the huge mess he gets himself into this time, I'm sure O'Keefe can give him new challenges for years to come.

The Wildings

Nilanjana Roy

Paperback/Ebook

ISBN 978-0345812612

Random House Canada, January 2016

336 pages

Are you tired of books about boring old *human beings*? Then let Nilanjana Roy take you into the world of *The Wildings*, where you can whisker mind-link with psychic cats in Delhi.

Yes, I said psychic cats in Delhi.

In the old neighborhood of Nizamuddin live a great many creatures: cats, mice, kites, crows, mongooses, and even boring old Bigfeet. Roy imagines the world from the perspective of these animals, allowing them to communicate not only through the vocal utterances we cannot understand—often they speak the universal language of Jungleese—but also through telepathic connections. Occasionally, however, a cat with incredible psychic powers arrives, foretelling a time of great crisis, and this time the Sender is a scared little orange kitten who won't leave the house.

With remarkable skill, Roy brings these characters to life in all their feline glory: They are not human characters written as cats but *actual cat characters*, down to their mannerisms and thought processes. I had absolutely no trouble accepting them because the writing was so effortless, and Roy doesn't shy away from the inherent humor in treating cats as people: I was sold from the moment she used the word "all-cats-bulletin" on page five. The early chapters especially are truly delightful, and I loved the vibrant cast of side characters, including a chorus of crows named Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni, which is the Indian equivalent of naming them Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, and Ti. Each animal—the mouse the cats kill, the mongoose the cats fear—has a unique perspective on the world, creating a community as dynamic and interesting as any human one. In *The Wildings*, you see the world as they do, not only socially but also environmentally, in the way Roy depicts the buildings and locations and foliage.

The book has no clear main character, nor does it have a straightforward plot. While, in the end, I believe this is the story of Mara, the new Sender, Roy continually shifts POVs among the major cats in the clan. Beraal, the queen who is initially sent to kill the intruder. Miao, the elder Siamese. Katar, the strong fighter. Southpaw, the curious kitten who's always getting into trouble. I expected to spend far more time with Mara, but I enjoyed the journey wherever Roy took me, and through a series of encounters cute and horrifying, she builds to a very satisfying climax that rewards the investment I had in all of these animals, cat and non-cat alike.

Though *The Wildings* is the first in a duology—the second book will be released in July—this book stands alone . . . but I’m as curious as little Southpaw to see where Roy takes the story after this. It’s a lovely, evocative novel that will make you look at your cat in a whole new light.

The Girl from Everywhere

Heidi Heilig

Hardcover/Ebook

ISBN 978-0062380753

Greenwillow Books, February 2016

464 pages

TIME-TRAVELING PIRATE SHIP.

Do I have your attention?

I could sell *The Girl from Everywhere* on the concept alone: Captain Slate is a Navigator, with the power to use maps to take his ship, *Temptation*, through time. As if this weren’t cool enough, he can even use *fictional* maps to visit mythical realities, acquiring mythological creatures and objects like fire salamanders and a bottomless bag. He could do many things with this power, but he is driven by love, looking for the map that can take him back to one woman: the mother of his daughter, Nix. There’s just one problem: doing this could potentially erase Nix from existence.

But focusing on the high concept would do this book a disservice, not to mention be a bit misleading—one might go in expecting a seafaring version of *Doctor Who*, when in fact most of the book takes place in one location and time period. And unlike *Doctor Who*, which can tell stories in any time and place and chooses to keep returning to *modern-day London*, Heidi Heilig transports us to a far more interesting setting: nineteenth-century Hawaii, the *kingdom* of Hawaii, pre-statehood. Having only seen the tourist’s version of twentieth-century Hawaii myself, I loved exploring this world, from the royal palace to the lush forests complete with guavas.

As much as I like time travel, what kept me reading was the characters, especially Nix. Heilig very clearly establishes what’s at stake and what each character wants in the first few chapters, making it easy to get invested in them. Nix is truly a girl from everywhere, having grown up on the ship, but

that also makes her a girl from nowhere, all thanks to her obsessive father's quest. What does home mean for her, if her home is under his control? Her complex relationship with her father—whom she rarely refers to as such, usually calling him captain or Slate—is as compelling as any trip to eighteenth-century Calcutta. She must also examine her feelings for the charismatic thief, Kashmir, and the adorable artist, Blake Hart, and how those feelings affect her secret desire to escape. I appreciated the diversity of the crew aboard the ship: half-Chinese Nix and Persian Kashmir, plus a Sudanese first mate and Chinese cook who don't have major roles but are entertaining characters.

There's so much to love about *The Girl from Everywhere*, honestly. It's littered with literary references, and there are beautiful undertones about the way these stories, like the maps, have power. The strength of myth, the imagined becoming real. This is how Nix has defined her world—her metaphors come from stories and sailing. Heilig never explores these themes directly, but they're so clearly embedded into the prose and the storytelling that they shine through like a watermark in a map held up to the light.

I read the entire book in one day. The narrative moves swiftly throughout, but the tension gets cranked up significantly at the end, and the final chapters are atypically action-packed, which feels a bit out of step with the rest of the book yet provides many rewarding payoffs to little setups I didn't even realize were setups. While it's satisfying as a standalone, it leaves plenty of room for a sequel, and I'm ready to sail through time again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sunil Patel is a Bay Area fiction writer and playwright who has written about everything from ghostly cows to talking beer. His plays have been performed at San Francisco Theater Pub and San Francisco Olympians Festival, and his fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fireside Magazine*, *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *The Book Smugglers*, *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction*. Plus he is Assistant Editor of *Mothership Zeta*. His favorite things to consume include nachos, milkshakes, and narrative. Find out more at ghostwritingcow.com, where you can watch his plays, or follow him @ghostwritingcow. His Twitter has been described as “engaging,” “exclamatory,” and

“crispy, crunchy, peanut buttery.”

Interview: N.K. Jemisin

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy | 9470 words

N.K. Jemisin is the author of the Inheritance trilogy and the Dreamblood series. Her latest novel, *The Fifth Season*, is set in a world constantly wracked by natural disasters where sorcerers who can control earthquakes and volcanoes are both feared and valued.

This interview first appeared on Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, which is hosted by David Barr Kirtley and produced by John Joseph Adams. Visit geeksguideshow.com to listen to the interview or other episodes.

First of all, tell us a bit about what some of the books were that really got you interested in fantasy and science fiction.

I was a giant fan of Tanith Lee, of Octavia Butler, of C. S. Friedman. Kind of all over the place in terms of my interests. But I've also mentioned in other interviews that I read a lot of mythology, especially as a child and as a teenager.

How about those authors you mentioned, what are some of the things about their work that really drew you to them?

I liked the way that Tanith Lee played with conceptualizations of good and evil and also the way in which, in a lot of her work, she emulated that sort of ancient, epic style. So, for example, with the *Night's Master*, *Death's Master*, I can't remember what that series is called [editor's note: these are books one and two of the Tales from the Flat Earth series], but it felt very oral tradition recorded on paper, even though you knew that she had made it up. But she was able to capture the feel of stories that had been passed down and stories that had grown apocryphal with retelling and things like that. I like the way that she played with concept of who the hero was. You started off with, I think, Azhrarn as the first book's protagonist, who's a

terrible person—well, a terrible god. Over the course of the story you started to see so much more complexity to them.

Then with Octavia Butler, I liked the darkness of her science fiction. The fact that she really just did not pull any punches where it came to really depicting not just scientific implications if aliens showed up, not just depicting the way that the world would change, but depicting the way that people would react to those changes, which was something that I really had not seen a lot of in science fiction at the point that I had first started reading her. You see the usual science fiction . . . It's *Star Trek*, we're all going to boldly go and meet these aliens and we'll get along with them relatively well, or we might shoot a few, but for the most part we'll have a decent relationship. Really no discussion of, "What about us? Are we going to get ourselves together in order to meet these other peoples?" And Butler's take on that was, "Eh . . . maybe." With a whole lot of mess in the way. And I love the fact that she did not pull punches on that. That was refreshing for me, at the point that I encountered her.

I've heard you say in other interviews that you've been writing since you were a small child, but when did you start getting serious about wanting to publish your work?

I turned thirty and had a mini-midlife crisis. A very early midlife crisis. That was the point where I kind of decided I want certain things out of life, and one of those things is that I wanted to see if this thing that I've always done for fun is any good, and the way that I decided to determine whether it was any good was to see if it was publishable. So, at the time, I wasn't entirely sure how to begin. I started researching it, and I called up my father and asked him if he would loan me some money to go to Viable Paradise, which later on, I looked it up and found out they had scholarships, but anyway . . . at the time I didn't see that part. But I begged Dad to let me borrow some money—and I did pay him back—to go to Viable Paradise, and he paid for it, and I tried to get in, and I did get in. That was where I got my first taste of *hey, you are good enough*. This is the process you need to follow, or these are the steps you need to take. And basically a nice,

useful blueprint for how to make that dream become something real. So I started following those steps, and lo and behold, it worked. So, yeah, that's an endorsement for Viable Paradise, too.

Was your dad a science fiction fan? Could he relate to your desire to want to attend the workshop?

He's both a science fiction fan and an artist. When I was growing up, we would watch old school *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* every night on channel eleven at one in the morning during the summer times, and he would talk with me about them afterward, and he was geekier than I was about those shows in particular. Because he would be like, "This is the first kiss between a woman of color and a white man on television in years," and I had no idea. He was a giant science fiction fan. He was also very familiar with the desire to express yourself through artistic means. He does artwork as Noah Jemisin. Noah as in the ark. And does visual work and so forth. I decided to not really follow in his artistic footsteps, but writing is a form of art, and he was pleased that something of that creativity passed down to me.

Wow, that's great. So you attended Viable Paradise and then what happened after that? Did you get an agent, or were you sending out stories—what was the next step for you?

The next step for me was getting better at writing. I had actually already sent a novel to, I think, the Tor slush pile, which was not a very good novel, I have to admit. I sent it to the Tor slush pile, and then years passed because the Tor slush pile in those days took a really long time. Meanwhile was when I went to Viable Paradise. There they talked to me about the fact that I wrote novels, or had always written novels, but had never even attempted short stories. Several of the folks there basically convinced me that learning how to write short stories would make me a better novel writer. Because before that, I had been kind of thinking short stories and novels are not really the same art form. And they kind of aren't. But, that said, if you do cultivate the ability to grab a reader quickly and to tell a story succinctly, that

can only help your novel writing. And they were right about that. So, I joined a writing group. The folks that had been in VP created a writing group that we called “The Boston Area Science Fiction Writers” for a while, until we decided that we needed a better name and became “The Brawlers.” I don’t remember what that stands for. But we formed a writing group in Boston at the time, meeting once a month, and were celebrating not just successes and submissions and so forth, but also celebrating the other parts of being a writer, like rejections. We had this tradition where every fifty rejections, we went out for beer. That kind of thing.

Right, so then I assume you started selling some short stories?

Yeah, relatively quickly, although I continued to rack up rejections for quite a while. But I think my first pro sale took several years. I did a number of semi-pro sales before that. But then once I’d done enough semi-pro sales, I kind of felt like I was getting the hang of the short fiction format, and I started writing novels again. That’s when I started working on the books that became the Dreamblood [duology]. When I finished the first one of those, I sought an agent, and that’s when I got my agent, roughly 2005/2006, somewhere thereabouts, Lucienne Diver, who was my agent then and still is now. I continued writing short stories, and I continued trying to get short stories published and having better successes with those as I got better as a writer in that area. And I really do think that learning how to write short stories did make me a better novelist, and it started to show in the successes I started having in the novels from that point on.

That was *The Killing Moon*, right?

It had a different name at the time, but yeah. All of my early novel names were something different. I’m terrible at naming things. But yes, the book that became *The Killing Moon* was my first finished, publishable, in my opinion, novel. And it’s the one that got me my agent, but it didn’t sell. It got sent to all the New York houses. Some of them were more positive than others, including Orbit, the folks that ultimately did buy it, but some of

them sent it back with perplexing or uncomfortable notes, saying that they were uncomfortable with it, essentially. They weren't sure how to sell it. They weren't sure what audience would possibly be interested in it. Those kinds of things.

I got a little frustrated with that. I'm understating things quite a bit here. I went through a long dark night of the soul, actually. Kind of trying to decide whether I even wanted to continue with this genre or whether I wanted to continue trying to write at all. And around that time I actually started exploring self-publishing options and so forth, because I was hearing from a lot of other writers of color that my chances were none. The genre did not want writers of color writing about characters of color. And unless I was willing to give up some things that were near and dear to my heart, like seeing people like me in fantasy and science fictional settings . . . their conclusion was don't even bother.

But, I will say that a couple of things changed my mind about that. One was having my writing group, which was as supportive as it was, and the other was my agent, who was as supportive as she was. She really did believe in *The Killing Moon*. She did urge me to try writing another book, which I did. In fact, I took an old book and retooled it, literally reworked it from scratch, which was the book that became *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. I retooled it to make it more what I was then capable of writing. I had become a much, much better writer in the meantime. When I read the old draft, I was kind of like, "Ehh, something about this just isn't right. I don't know exactly what." And I scrapped it entirely and started over from scratch, and it just worked so much better the second time. I think I just wasn't good enough to write that book at first, and then second time was the charm.

I heard you talk about in interviews about how the frustration of your experience with *The Killing Moon* actually informed *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* and the form it took. Could you talk a little more about that?

Well, I was angry, and so Yeine spends the book very angry. I think that

was partly me channeling, you know, “Take that, publishing industry.” But a lot of it was generalized anger about . . . I can read the subtext. I can hear the unspoken. And when someone is saying that, you know . . . *The Killing Moon* is a bog-standard fantasy novel in every way except in that it takes place in Egypt and has an almost entirely black cast. It was third person. It was very traditionally shaped. There was a quest. There were bad guys. It was as traditional as I could make it without putting it in a very traditional medieval European setting, and giving it a white male protagonist instead of two black men and one black woman. And, so when I hear these statements like, “I’m not sure how to sell this. I’m not sure who its audience would be,” the assumption, the implication of that is, “I don’t think its audience would be the existing fantasy readership, and I don’t think the existing fantasy readership would *buy* this book.” And I was angry about that because it just kind of smacked of the whole, “We’re not racist. They’re racist. We don’t discriminate. They would discriminate. We’re just trying to look out for you.” And I think pretty much every person of color has encountered that kind of attitude and those kinds of excuses at some point.

So it felt very clear to me what was really going on and what the subtext was. And so when I rewrote the story, I think, initially, in the early version of it, the protagonist was male. The protagonists, I didn’t mention their race, although I did mention that their culture and their class was something not acceptable, but I don’t think I’d even gotten really into describing skin colors at the time that I first wrote the book. And when I decided to rewrite it from scratch, I just said, “I’m going to write this the way I feel like writing it. And the voice that was speaking to me was first person, so I decided to do it in first person. The character felt a little blah to me. I decided to make her more interesting to me, and she ended up being a woman of color, although not a black woman, although lots of people seem to think she’s black. I ended up making her a small, scrappy little woman of color who is cold and not necessarily likeable, certainly not perky. And she felt real to me, if not necessarily bankable, but I said whatever, I’m going to write what I feel like this time, and that was what resulted.

We mentioned that this book, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, was

the first novel of yours to get published. Could you talk about that experience? What was it like having that book get published, and what sort of response did you get?

I think the first indication that I got that the response was going to be positive was actually when the book went to auction. So, for folks that are not familiar with how the publishing industry works, or at least the traditional publishing industry, you give a book to your agent, your agent gives it to a bunch of publishers and says, "Let us know if you're interested." The publishers then say, "Hey, I am interested, and we'd be willing to buy this book for X number of dollars. And this is the kind of contract and these are the rights that we want, yadda yadda yadda." Well, when multiple publishers respond that way, then the agent is like, "Woohoo, bonus time." And turns it into a kind of game show where, I don't know, this is in my head, basically I was at work that day, and Lucienne kept calling me throughout the day to say, "Okay, so publisher A has said X number of dollars, and they really like this book, and they would like to find out if you're willing to do a sequel." And I'm like, "Yeah?" And a few hours later, "Okay, publisher B doubled that offer and wants three books." And I'm like, "Yeah?" And as the day wore on, I was kind of more and more shell shocked, and my coworkers were like, "What's wrong with Nora today?" because I would periodically close the door and scream. It was a scream of excitement, but it was still a scream.

That was my first inkling that it was kind of a better book than I had thought it was, and the response to it was going to be a lot better than I thought it was, because I'd developed a bad impression of the genre based on the reception to *The Killing Moon*. I kept thinking to myself, "Well, you know, I'm angry with these publishers that didn't want the book, but at the same time, they know the industry better than I do. They know the genre and the audience better than I do, and what if they're right? What if all these people that have been telling me it's a waste of time trying to traditionally publish, just do self-publishing, what if they're right?" I'd be lying to say that the self-doubt wasn't there. All that said, the book was not a bestseller when it did finally come out. It has sold steadily for all these years. It has never really stopped or slowed down. I get nice, even royalty checks for it,

which is nice. And it seems to have gained popularity over time and through a steady plateau of readership, as opposed to any kind of arc or curve, and that's wonderful. I'd say that if I had all the sales that I got over the years, that if I'd gotten them relatively quickly, then yeah, it would have been a bestseller, but in terms of flat sales, what you want as a writer is enough sales to keep your career going. And that's what I've got.

I heard you say that the book sold well enough that you were able to quit your day job, which is the dream of most writers, but you discovered that you didn't actually want to quit your day job.

Well, okay, the advance was good enough that I kind of had to, because with the way that the deal was structured, I needed to deliver books two and three relatively fast, and I didn't think I could do that on top of the job that I had at the time, which was roughly sixty-five hours a week and involved a lot of travel. I quit that job because I felt like there was no way I could do both and function as a breathing human being. I decided to use that as a chance to see what the dream writer's life of just living on my writing was like, and that's when I discovered that I am miserable when I don't have enough to do.

I sat at home for about three months. Going out, I tried to make sure that I created a nice routine for myself. I would get up at nine every day, I would go to the gym, I would come back, I would go to the coffee shop, and I would write, and I would make sure I did a certain number of words per day. It was very productive, but on the same level, I just kind of felt like I was missing things that I needed to feel fulfilled. I really do like my day job. My day job career involves working with young adults, mostly college students, and helping them figure out their lives. And that's just cool. So, I missed it, and I went back after a while and got a part-time job.

Eventually, when the money from the advance started to run out, and New York started to look more and more expensive, I decided to go back to a full-time job. Largely, that was for the insurance. This was before Obamacare, and my health insurance was starting to look more and more prohibitive, and I didn't like the idea of trying to wing it and see if I don't

get hit by a bus. I decided to go back to work in a job that was much lower in terms of its time demands, and thus far that's worked out. My day job folks have been very supportive. They're all aware of my writing career. My students aren't, which is kind of interesting. Some of them, some of them figure it out. A few of them that are into fantasy and science fiction say, "Hey, your name is a lot like the name of this author I like." And I'm like, "Really?" And I don't say anything. But that said, my current day job is very supportive. They don't mind me doing things like Skype interviews on the work computer after hours, and that's worked out nicely.

We mentioned that you finished the Inheritance trilogy, and then the earlier books, including *The Killing Moon*, you finished those as well. What kind of fan letters and things do you get? What do people really respond to in those two series?

With *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* and the Dreamblood, they are somewhat different audiences, I think. A lot of the folks who liked the Inheritance trilogy did not necessarily like the Dreamblood, and vice versa. I get a lot of people who like historical-flavored fantasy loving the Dreamblood and then bouncing hard off the Inheritance trilogy, and that's not necessarily something they convey in fan mail, it's just something I've noticed.

I do read my reviews, which I'm going to have to stop doing with *The Fifth Season* because while I'm still writing that trilogy, it's making me a little crazy, so I'm going to try not to do that with the Broken Earth trilogy. But I have read my reviews for the other two series, and it's clear to me that different things are speaking to different readers there. Although, I will say that both sets of readers do seem to really like the fact that what I'm writing is not traditional fantasy, even the Dreamblood, which as I said was traditionally shaped, just the choice of an all-black cast; I think there's like three white people in it. But I think just the choice of an all-black cast is radical enough to interest folks who are interested in that. And the choice of an Egyptian setting, certainly I'm not the first writer to do so, Judith Tarr, a bunch of other folks have touched on that subject matter. But it's still rare,

and I think for people who are getting tired of traditional fantasy, or have left, I hear a lot of people saying, “I stopped reading fantasy because it was the same story over and over again.” Or the same setting, or the same kind of story over and over again. And people who are sick of fantasy seem to be pulled back into it by my writing. Of course, there are some folks who have never left fantasy who like it, but I’m kind of heartened to help to further the genre by stemming some of the loss that we get. That benefits not just me, I think. But I’m glad that it benefits me.

You mentioned that this new series is called the Broken Earth and the first book is called *The Fifth Season*. Could you just tell us a bit about how this project came about?

There were two or three impetuses. One is a dream that I had, and I think most of my stuff stems from weird dreams that I start trying to explain in logical terms or making logic to fit the dream, and that’s how the initial worldbuilding starts.

But then, the other piece of it is, I felt like it was time to do something that would challenge myself. I felt like, “Okay, I’ve tried writing three standalone stories in the same universe. I’ve tried writing first person and third person. I’ve tried a story set in an Earth-like place, and a story set in a vaguely Earth-flavored place. Why don’t I try writing a story in nothing that resembles this world with a group of magical beings that are not mythological in a setting that is based on logic and how planets work, but is still fantasy.”

And I did not set out intending to do the second-person component that is part of the way that *The Fifth Season* trilogy is being told. I didn’t set out to do that. But, as I was writing test chapters, that was the voice that seemed to work best, and I resisted it for a while. I felt like this is not necessarily the way to tell any fantasy story. I didn’t think I liked second person, and I know a lot of other people that say that they don’t. But, as I tried working on it, it just felt right, and I tend to go with my gut on these things because my gut has been right so far. So, I finished it that way, and the result was this story that I could not tell in a single volume. This is going to be the first

contiguous fantasy—I don't know what you call it when you write a series that is the same story of the same person just spread out over time. This one is different from everything I've written before, in that the stories are not complete standalones. I don't think they're going to be standalone at all, but it's hard to say at this point.

You mentioned that this was partially inspired by a dream. Do you want to tell people what that dream was?

The dream was super brief. I had a dream of a pissed off woman walking toward me with a mountain floating along behind her, and I was not visible. I don't know why she was mad at me, but I just knew that she was going to throw that mountain at me. That was it. I woke up in a cold sweat thinking, "Oh my god, a mountain. How do I stop a mountain?" And also, trying to figure out, "What do I do with this? Why was this woman mad? How is that mountain floating along behind her? Why is it a mountain?" Then I needed to again build logic around that dream. It took a while. It took a very long time. I had the dream, and I came up with the core idea in between the end of the Inheritance trilogy and me revising the Dreamblood books for their publication. I came up with it, but then I needed to do a lot of research because I know squat about seismology, geology, any of that stuff. It literally took me a year or so of research before I felt ready to begin writing, and even then, I started writing while still doing research. I went to Hawaii to visit volcanoes and things like that. That's basically it.

The fact that you did a lot of research into seismology is very, very evident in this book. This book is full of really interesting words, some of which are real, and some of which I think that you coined yourself. I have one paragraph here I want to read to give people a flavor of this. One of the characters says in the book, "Everything does point to either a major pyrogenic deformation or possibly just a simple disruption of isostasy throughout the entire plate network. But the amount of orogenesis needed to overcome that much inertia is

prohibitive.” I just love all of those words. But, a lot of those are real, right? Do you want to talk about . . . if any writers want to write a book about earthquakes and volcanoes and things, what do you find are the best resources that they should look into?

Just to back up with that passage, I will say that was done for comedic effect. That was me deliberately pulling a technobabble moment, and in that same scene, all the other characters in the room stare at that character like, “What the hell are you talking about?” I also have no idea how that plays to real seismologists. My guess is that they’re like, “Oh, technobabble and BS.” But that said, the best resource that I actually got was interviewing some seismologists. There are a number of watering holes on the internet for seismologists, amateur and professional, and if you go into places like that, the various boards, and you’re very nice about saying, “Hi, I’m a science fiction/fantasy writer who is interested in learning a little bit more. What very basic plate tectonics for dummies books can you recommend?” . . . I got a lot of resources that weren’t so much books as a few scientific articles. Visiting museums was also useful for me.

I found it most useful to literally go to a volcano for things like smelling the sulfur and seeing what the sky looks like over a caldera and realizing how fast forests grow back in the wake of a major seismic or volcanic event. I walked across the Kīlauea Iki, which was a lava lake fifty years ago and now you can hike across it, and there’s a small, early-growth forest developing at one end of it. I stopped, and I had some spam sushi with me, and I toasted my spam sushi over one of the heat vents, so I got to eat some seismic energy, some geothermal energy. It was delicious. That was the stuff that I was looking for. It was not so much science. It is fantasy at the end of the day. I’m telling a story that is meant to be interesting and engaging to people. I’m not writing a textbook.

You also say in the afterword that you were influenced, at least to some extent, by the Launchpad workshop. What role did that play in the development of the idea?

Launchpad has impacted pretty much all of my novels thus far. You see it the least in the Inheritance trilogy, I think, because I was partway through it at the time when I went to Launchpad, but in the Dreamblood, for those that don't know, the story is set on the moon of a gas giant. I needed to figure out what the phases of that gas giant would look like in the sky to the people on that planet. So, there I was in Launchpad, doing some orbital mechanics and things like that, trying to figure out what happens if this moon gets in the way. "Oh, I just destroyed the planet. No, bad idea." And so on. So it was helpful to work that out in my head. Now, how much of that actually turned up in the story? Probably two sentences worth. But that said, understanding it helped me come up with some concepts that I had not before. Then, with this one, what I was trying to figure out was what happens if you've got a planet that does certain things. What happens if you've got a single large landmass? How does that get in the way of things like prevailing winds and water currents and so forth, and how does that impact what the landmass turns out to be? I don't think that was anything that we discussed in Launchpad proper, but since Launchpad was a bunch of smart people who liked science geeking out together, we had lots of interesting conversations over time about . . . well, I remember one really good conversation over beer one night, and I can't get too deeply into that conversation because there's some spoilerific stuff that I don't want to mess up for people who haven't read *The Fifth Season* yet, but it was really useful.

I think we should say, for our listeners, what the Launchpad workshop is. Could you say a bit more?

Launchpad is a NASA-sponsored workshop aimed at influencers, for lack of a better description, people who have the ear of the media, or the ear of the zeitgeist, I guess. It's kind of flattering that they think science fiction and fantasy writers might be such people, but they made the very clear case that one of the reasons that a lot of Americans believe complete bunk about the way that, say, for example, the seasons work, is because science fiction and fantasy writers had been telling complete bunk in a few cases, along

with other people.

In my Launchpad workshop, there were comedians there, Brian Malow, who is the science comedian, I think is what he's known as. Phil Plait was giving a lecture, he wasn't really a student in the workshop, but Phil Plait is known as the Bad Astronomer. He used to run the Bad Astronomy blog, which I think was part of discover.com. I don't remember. He's still active on various media, magazines, and Twitter, debunking bunk. I think most recently I saw him complaining about a meme that was going around saying that Mars and the Moon were going to show up in the sky as looking the same size as each other on some particular date in August. And he was like, "No, no, it's just not going to happen." He was one of the people involved in helping to present the information in the workshop. But, the workshop proper is run by Mike Brotherton, who is a physics professor at the university of Wyoming. It was fantastic.

We mentioned that the series was called the Broken Earth, and this novel is called *The Fifth Season*. Do you want to explain what those titles mean?

The Broken Earth trilogy name is something I literally just came up with. I told you I'm bad at naming. I was trying to think of a name for the series. My editor had asked for a complete synopsis. I was like, "Uh, something about rocks. Uh, earth? Uh, stones? Broken stones? No, that doesn't sound right." And that's how I came up with that. With *The Fifth Season*, though, it's the name of a phenomenon that occurs in this world. *The Fifth Season* is set in a world in which, for various reasons, every few years or so, there is an extinction level event.

In some cases, it's triggered by a volcanic eruption or massive earthquake. In some cases, it's triggered by various gaseous emissions that cause long-term negative effects on the ecosystem in a given area that triggers famines or something like that. This is a society that was at one point a globe-spanning society. But they've developed a system of preparing themselves for these events, which they call fifth seasons. In that system, whenever a season is declared, whenever they notice, "Oh hey, the sun

hasn't come out for like three months. And we're starving," things like that, then they declare seasonal law, and every small community turns itself into a self-sufficient survivor community, and they store massive amounts of food against the eventuality that this will happen. They build walls, they keep their population small, and they separate themselves into groups of essentially castes based on usefulness. So, the fifth season is referring to this cultural phenomenon as well as the ecological phenomenon that triggers it.

Right, and so you have this sort of post-apocalyptic-type vibe to the setting, and then also there're some magical elements to it. You want to talk about the magic system in this world?

Basically there are people in this world that have the ability to control seismic energy. They can trigger earthquakes, they can stop earthquakes, they can shut down a volcano, and channel away all that heat into water or somewhere else. They can stop geysers and gaseous emissions and things like that. They are tremendously useful in this world, but the catch is they use energy to do these things, and when there's already an earthquake or a volcano going off, they can use the energy of that. When there's nothing happening, though, they drag energy from the ambient, from everything around them, including the heat and kinetic motion of living things. So, they kill a whole lot of people. They're called "orogenes," and this is a fantasy mutilation of a real word—the science of orogenesis or orogeny is the processes through which mountains are created—and I just thought it was a cool word, let's turn it into a fantasy word.

So, these orogenes have this ability. There's more magical elements to the story than the orogenes, but the story focuses on orogenes and how they are treated by their society, which both values and is terrified of them, and tries to control them. It does so in a lot of cases by essentially enslaving them. But, other pieces of the story are these giant obelisks floating around in the sky, nobody really knows why, but they're big, shiny gemstones that seem to be flickering in and out of reality. Sometimes they seem real, sometimes they seem translucent or like ghosts, and they do things, but it takes a while in the story to realize what they do. There's also a non-human

race in this, which was my attempt to take the idea of the mythological creatures that you see in a lot of fantasy and create a set of mythological creatures from scratch. Instead of making elves or dwarves or whatever else we're used to seeing, I wanted to create something new. These creatures are called stone eaters, and they look like statues. Like, very realistic, classical statues, human features and so forth, but they are alive, and they can transit through stone, and they can do a lot more than that, but I don't want to get into spoilers.

You mentioned that a lot of the novel focuses on the way the orogenes are treated by their society, and they have this kind of magical academy called the Fulcrum, and I was wondering if you could talk about . . . obviously there are magical academies in Harry Potter and Earthsea, could you say a bit about how the Fulcrum compares to the magic schools we see in other kinds of fantasy?

It's evil. That's the simplest . . . okay, I don't want to get simplistic and binary here, and talk about good and evil, but it is very much a part of the system of oppression that they've put in place. Orogenes are not permitted to exist unless they are products of this Fulcrum, and I will go long here, and just sort of point out that I'm a giant Bioware, *Mass Effect*, and *Dragon Age* fan, and I will say that this was probably influenced . . . I didn't realize it until I was halfway through the first book, but I realized that this is influenced by *Dragon Age's* mages and mage circles. There are other places in fantasy and science fiction where I've seen similar systems put in place, but in this case, it's small children, or basically anybody before their teens, if they are caught and found to be an orogene at that point.

It's an essentially random thing. It just pops up in the populace whenever someone has this ability. They just luck up with it, or unluck up with it, whatever you want to call it. And, a group of people called Guardians will come and get them and take them to the Fulcrum. At the Fulcrum, they learn how to control their ability. If they learn how to control it well enough, then they become Imperial Orogenes, and they are dispatched to various places on the continent to seal volcanoes and help to stave off the

coming of the next Fifth Season. They are trusted to do this because they've learned how to control their power, they'll never kill anybody by accident, that kind of thing.

But, if they don't learn it well enough, they're simply killed. The system cannot abide those who are not good at learning, or those who are not obedient. And so, it's how a lot of systems of oppression work. It was also inspired partly by, you probably heard, reservation schools and schools to which indigenous peoples on multiple continents—this was not just a North American thing, but also Australian and so forth, where the children of indigenous people were snatched away and sent off to these places where they weren't permitted to use their own language, and where they were forced to acculturate to white society—because it almost always happened in European colonized places—forced to acculturate on pain of death, and in some cases . . . well, it wasn't *overtly* said that it was on pain of death, but in actual practicality, a lot of kids died in these schools. So, there were a lot of influences in this, but I was thinking about the ways in which oppression tends to work. It is not always a case of an evil overlord coming in and saying, "Mwahaha, I'm going to make you my slave." In a lot of cases, you've got people complicit in the system who are part of it themselves. The Fulcrum is run by orogenes, and you see that it is not a kind or gentle place despite that.

You mentioned Bioware games, and one thing I was really wondering, I've heard you say in interviews that you used to play *Dungeons and Dragons*, as I did, and my favorite campaign setting was the Dark Sun campaign setting. I was wondering if you'd ever played that?

No, around the time that I really was wanting to play *D&D*, I found an early group that I got involved in, and they kind of soured me on it because I wanted to be a paladin who was a black woman, and the dungeon master at the time was like, "No, you can't. Paladins have to be white guys."

I know, I know!

We were kids, in this person's defense, but that said, it left a bad taste in my mouth, and I stopped playing until I got to college. When I got to

college, I found a group of multi-racial, very geeky players who got me back into tabletop gaming for several years, and I loved it then because I had the dungeon master . . . well, we played multiple games. It wasn't just *D&D*; in fact, I don't think we ever did play *D&D*. So, the dungeon master, though, was perfectly cool with you having a black female character who was whatever, and because I was comfortable because I could do that, I started having characters that weren't just black women. Once I was allowed to be anything I wanted to be, I could then, and I did then become anything I wanted to be. But no, I wanted to play *Dark Sun*, but around the time that I fell out of love with gaming was around the time that that came out.

Well, if you ever get a chance, you should check it out, because it's sort of a post-apocalyptic fantasy, and they have these magic users called Defilers, and every time they cast magic it sucks all the life out of the things around them.

Yeah, that's fascinating. I remember that. I remember reading the playbook. I will check it out at some point.

I really love this book, and one thing that really struck me in the afterword is you say that there was a point at which you had to be talked into keeping it going, that you were considering giving up on it. I find that inconceivable, but what was going on that you would think of just abandoning the project?

I think every writer has these moments of self-doubt, and mine tend to be along the lines of, "Is anybody going to want to read this?" I look at the genre, and I see how the genre rewards adherence to formula, or adherence to a particular style and mode and setting and so forth. Although I've read a lot of very different stuff in other genres, I had not read a lot of second person in fantasy, for example. Even though that's only one of the three perspectives in *The Fifth Season*, it's still a perspective, and I'd gotten the distinct impression that nobody liked second person. And that no one was

going to read it because of the second person. Even though I had seen other writers tackle post-apocalyptic-flavored fantasy before, most notably Brandon Sanderson and the Mistborn books, again it was not common. And a lot of people in this genre are very . . . hmm, what's the word . . . very *particular* about how they want things.

It's like the old Reese's commercials, "You got your peanut butter in my chocolate. You got your chocolate in my peanut butter." I think I was terrified that the entire fantasy readership would take look at this and be like, "You got your science fiction in my fantasy. What is wrong with you?" and "You got your literary writing styles in my fantasy." I still get flak from people who got pissed off about the first person that I used in the Inheritance trilogy because first person is just not done in epic fantasy, apparently. It is. It's been done, but there are a lot of readers who are like, "I don't want it in my fantasy." Or who don't want romance in their fantasy. Or who don't want whatever.

I was doing a lot of things that were probably going to annoy those kinds of readers. And so, yeah, I kind of had a long dark night of the soul again, I have those often. I called up my editor and was like, "Look, I don't think this is going to work. This is terrible. I'm going to send you the bit that I've got, but it's awful. Awful, awful, awful." And, "What do you think if I change this from being a trilogy? I can rework it as a standalone that ends after the first book, and then I'm going to go cry somewhere."

She was basically like, "Calm down, Nora." She gave me some extra time to kind of go sit and think about it and decide how I really felt about it. And, I took some time, and during that time I wrote *The Awakened Kingdom*. I needed a palate cleanser, basically. And *The Awakened Kingdom* is a novella, roughly 40,000 words, sort of a sequel to the Inheritance trilogy that is about as light-hearted as that Inheritance trilogy can ever get, and it was from the perspective of a child god who does and says a lot of funny, cutesy things. I needed happiness and light for a while. After that break, I went back to it. The book was finished, but I went back and read it and was finally like, "Okay, this is not as terrible as I thought it was. I don't know if it's going to do any good or if it's going to end my career, but I'm satisfied with what I've produced, and I am now willing to continue with it." At that point, I sent it off in its final form, and we started the process of

production.

I just think it's terrific. I really encourage everyone to read it. I hope it doesn't end your career, because I'm looking forward to the next two books.

I hope not either. Thank you.

I wanted to ask you, the dedication of this book says that it's for all those who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question. Do you want to say anything . . . what does that mean to you? Or, do you want to say anything more about that?

Sure, while I was writing this book was when Ferguson and the Black Lives Matter protests began. I attended one rally for solidarity with Ferguson here in New York. I don't often have time to do protesting anymore. I'm forty-two, and I have a day job, but I went when I could, and when both of my careers would spare. It's hard to follow Twitter, to pay attention to world events, and to kind of realize that this is happening over and over again, and it has always been happening, and that really only the advent of social media is making the mainstream world aware of stuff that we've always known.

I was raised to be very wary of the police. I was raised to stay away from them unless you absolutely have to, because they're dangerous. I was told that if I ever get pulled over, there are certain things that I have to do. There's the talk that all black parents have, always with their boys, sometimes with their girls, too. I think they should have them with all of their black kids, because it's an issue for everybody.

It just started to really grate on me, because every day there was a new hashtag, every day someone else had been killed, or harassed, or beaten, or had their spine broken for looking at the cops. Nothing more than that. Or for talking back. Or for anything. It wore on me. So, this novel is, in a lot of ways, my processing the systemic racism that I live with and see and am trying to come to terms with. It's covering a lot of issues, there's a lot of

different kinds of identities being explored in the story. It's very layered, I think, in some cases, because I felt like real life is layered. I shouldn't be doing just one thing. And I wanted to write stories that felt real to me, and I wrote characters that felt real to me. There's a trans-woman in the story, there's gender issues, there's explorations of relationship configurations, and so on. But, at the core of it, the orogenes are me trying to process systemic racism. One of the ways in which the orogenes were kept in line was that they were told repeatedly that if you act right, if you are respectable enough, then you won't be hurt. And it's a lie. It's always a lie when you hear that kind of thing, because being respectable didn't stop Skip Gates from being arrested for trying to get into his own home and so forth. So, that was me processing real world events. A lot of times my fiction is allegorical, and in some cases it's not deliberately allegorical, but whatever is going on in my head tends to flavor what's coming out on paper, and I realized it in the case of *The Fifth Season*, and that was where that came from.

In the book, it does feel very, very real, and like I said, I was really impressed by this.

Oh good. All right, thank you.

Unfortunately, we're pretty much out of time, so just in order to wrap things up, do you want to tell us what's the status of the next two books in the Broken Earth trilogy, and is there anything else that you want to mention?

I have finished the zeroeth draft of the second book. I've been hesitant to give it a name, but it sounds like we're going to stick with the name that I initially came up with, which is *The Obelisk Gate*. I will not explain that because spoilers. But I have seen the draft cover of it. Orbit will probably do a big debut at some point soon. So, because the zeroeth draft is done, I'm currently working on a revision to polish it up into a first draft, and I intend to turn that in by the end of this month because (A) I want it off my

plate, and (B) I promised myself that if I finished it before my birthday, which is September 19th, I'm going to buy a PS4 finally. And I want that PS4, so I'm finishing it by the end of August. It is done. It needs to be made presentable.

Book three, I will start probably after about a month of relaxation time. And, other than that, I've got some short stories that I've written and are in slush piles and may get published soon. I have another novel idea that's brewing in the back of my head, Lord help me. And that's pretty much what's going on so far.

I guess I'll mention to that you have a short story called "Stone Hunger," which is set in the same universe.

Oh yeah! I forgot about that. When I'm working on a novel, I will often do something that I call a proof-of-concept story to kind of test out the world and see if it's ready to be novelized, so I'll write a short story set in that world, and "Stone Hunger" was that story. I think one of the characters in it shares a name with one of the characters in *The Fifth Season*, but beyond that, the characters are not related, and the stories are not related. It just happens to be in the same setting. But, if you want a taste of the Broken Earth without having to read an entire trilogy, "Stone Hunger" was published by *Clarkesworld* [clarkesworldmagazine.com/jemisin_07_14].

I think we're going to have to wrap things up there. We've been speaking with N.K. Jemisin, and the book is called *The Fifth Season*. Nora, thank you so much for joining us.

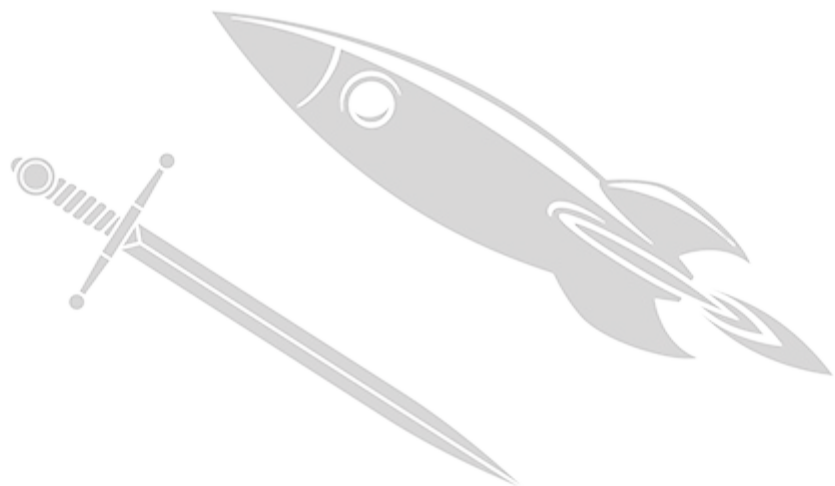
Thank you.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is a science fiction/fantasy talk show podcast. It is produced by John Joseph Adams and hosted by: David Barr Kirtley, who is the author of thirty short stories, which have appeared in magazines such as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird*

Tales, and *Lightspeed*, in books such as *Armored*, *The Living Dead*, *Other Worlds Than These*, and *Fantasy: The Best of the Year*, and on podcasts such as *Escape Pod* and *Pseudopod*. He lives in New York.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS



Author Spotlight: Rachael K. Jones

Laurel Amberdine | 1011 words

What a neat story this is! Can you tell me the inspirations behind “Charlotte Incorporated”?

The original impetus for “Charlotte Incorporated” is a bit silly, considering the story that resulted! A couple years ago, my husband gave me a brain plushie for Christmas. At the time, I was taking an anatomy course, a topic I was immediately smitten with. I enjoyed learning about the body’s systems, how they’re independent in some ways, and interdependent in others. For example, your heart cells generate their own electrical impulses so they can go on beating without any input from the brain. And your bones are actually alive, constantly building and rebuilding and dismantling themselves to regulate your body’s calcium supply.

And anatomical variation! That’s a topic I could read about forever. Did you know that many people lack the palmaris longus muscle in one or both wrists? It’s vestigial, and doesn’t serve a functional purpose, so if you’re missing it, you’d never know. Here’s how you can check: touch the pinkie and thumb of the same hand together and squeeze them tight. If you’ve got the muscle, you’ll see a big tendon pop out in the dead center of your wrist. Make sure you check your right and left hands because sometimes it’s only present on one side.

So naturally, while studying anatomy, I’d stare at my brain plushie and wonder what hid behind its quirky little smile. Perhaps it dreamed of someday having a body of its very own. If you were only your brain, what about having a body would you look forward to the most? What if your hypothetical body was modular, and you could pick the exact variations you wanted? What if you had to buy everything separately? Would you bother with duplicate kidneys if one would do? What if you could only afford eyes or ears, but not both? What would beauty mean to you under such circumstances?

Running parallel to those ideas, I wanted to explore themes of personhood within a capitalist system that presents itself as a meritocracy.

Charlotte lives in a system that promises her everything she longs for as long as she follows the rules and works hard. At the same time, that system denies her any means of holding it accountable for its inherent unfairness. Because of the circumstances of her birth, she lacks even a legal right to her own name and gender. Meanwhile, the incorporated with the most success under this system can afford to incorporate their children from birth. How should an ethical person behave under such circumstances? Do you follow the rules and hope for the best? Do you forge your own way around the law? Or do you dial down your very dreams, delete your body parts, and live in a jar?

How long did it take for you to get this story into its final form? Were there many drafts?

I typically write and revise stories on a six-week cycle. Two weeks to draft a new story, two weeks to send out for critiques, another two weeks to think through those critiques and do my final revision. Then I usually let the story rest, fine-polishing the sentences and putting on that last layer of gloss before I call it done and ready to venture out into the world.

“Charlotte Incorporated” was different in that I drafted the first half very quickly, but it took me quite a while to find the proper ending. It spent several months in a file I keep for stories that are done, but don’t feel “finished” enough to send out just yet. Stories can stay there a long time. Then one day, I pulled out the half-finished draft and realized what was missing, and completely restructured the whole thing, resulting in the final version.

How has becoming an editor at PodCastle affected your writing?

It certainly hasn’t done me any favors timewise! As it turns out, editing is an endless cycle of reading and email—mostly email! But it’s hard to get too upset about that when I’m devoting that time to a podcast I’ve loved and followed for years. Working with my co-editor Graeme Dunlop has been an especially wonderful experience, and I love getting to work with

authors and narrators so directly.

As for my own writing, in my experience, all the extra reading I do as part of my editing work helps me keep the bar high when I sit down and put on my writer hat. Way back when I first started writing, I remember having grand intentions of systematically reading and analyzing all the pro zines so I could have an idea of the contemporary SFF short fiction scene. That . . . didn't really happen (let's face it: probably because of one of the Elder Scrolls games). Which is a shame, because it probably would've helped me early on, and I missed getting to enjoy a lot of great stories when they first debuted. But editing is great, because I'm more engaged with the short fiction world than ever before.

What are you working on lately?

I chronically suffer from “too many projects, not enough time!” Currently I've got around ten works in progress spanning all speculative genres, in various states of completeness. I'm particularly excited about a couple collaborations I'm working on with a friend of mine—a nautical adventure novelette in a second-world fantasy setting, and a futuristic sci-horror piece featuring cyborg sauropods operated by alien invaders.

At the time I'm writing this, I've also got stories forthcoming at *Shimmer*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, the *Clockwork Phoenix 5* anthology, and *Fireside Magazine*, so be on the lookout for those!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Laurel Amberdine was raised by cats in the suburbs of Chicago. She's good at naps, begging for food, and turning ordinary objects into toys. She recently moved to San Francisco with her husband, and is enjoying its vastly superior weather. Between naps she's working on polishing up a few science fiction and fantasy novels, and hopes to send them out into the world soon.

Author Spotlight: Rachel Swirsky

Jude Griffin | 978 words

How did this story come about?

This story started with a voice. Almost literally—I was living in Iowa at the time, in this nice apartment with hardwood floors and lots of light, and at some point the opening sentence just came to mind: “I am ugliness in body and bone, breath and heartbeat.” The voice was very distinct, very compulsive, very easy to write because of how much drive it had. Looking at the piece a number of years after I wrote it, I think the parts where ugliness narrates her experience as ugliness were what came first: that first paragraph, and then the section on how she emerged into understanding herself as a loathed thing. When writing this character, I enjoyed the process of figuring out where she might be “physically” in any scene; it gave her a really strong way of seeing the world both literally and philosophically.

Why does the protagonist love the prince?

I hope her perspective on that is clear in the text—she grew up with him, and got to know him when he was part of her. From my reading her, I’d add that she is also obsessed with the idea of beauty, and what it forbids her from. As a formerly ugly prince, he’s someone she feels kinship with, and yet he also exemplifies the things she finds unattainable—beauty, respect, the love of a people. In the text, he’s mostly a cipher; she seems more attached to what he symbolizes than the man himself. She sees herself as at the bottom of the hierarchy. He’s at the top—and of course if she can get him to do what she wants, she’ll be at the top, too.

The twist—I did not see that coming. Was that always how you imagined the end would go?

Apparently not, since my husband says I spent a lot of time grumbling,

“I don’t know what I want to do with this!” I don’t know what all the options I considered were, but from the way I’d built the characters and world, I knew I wanted to find a way to make the ending dark but not simplistic. I wanted a mood more like dread than pure horror or tragedy.

Whose faerie stories do you return to?

I talked a bit about retellings, and how much I love them and am obsessed with them, in my interview for *Lightspeed* about “Tea Time” (bit.ly/1TyfRzV). As a child, some of the people I went to for fairy tale retellings were Datlow and Windling, Tanith Lee, and Stephen Sondheim. I was also obsessed with a Showtime television series called *Faerie Tale Theatre* produced by Shelley Duvall.

There are a number of writers working with folkloric themes without doing retellings. Kelly Link and Kat Howard mine images from fairy tales and mythology to create these beautiful, surreal landscapes. Both Catherynne M. Valente and M. K. Hobson are creating modern fairy tales out of American geography and history. Of course, there are many, many others, too.

What else would you like readers to know about this story?

After thinking about this a moment, I guess I have this to say, especially for young readers: Ugliness and beauty aren’t opposites, and they aren’t objective. Nothing is only ugly; nothing is only beautiful.

You’ve been sharing links on Facebook every week to your work available free on the Web. How has that been going?

Lots of fun! I’ve lagged for about a month now, as I got distracted by life and haven’t queued up more pieces, but I’m looking forward to getting back to it. In particular, it’s been neat to have some of my family catch up on stories they haven’t read. They follow Facebook more often than places

like Twitter, where I usually hang out.

How has your work evolved over the years and where do you see it going in the next few years?

When I started publishing in 2006, the bulk of my work was quite short. It tended to be either very jagged and political (“Defiled Imagination”—bit.ly/1kD3573) or bizarre and surreal (“How the World Became Quiet”—bit.ly/1OF2rUR). I was a lot more ambitious with formal experiments. These days, I’m spending more time on longer, slower pieces, and meticulous character work (“Grand Jeté”—bit.ly/1OF2vUp).

While I’d love to take up some more formally ambitious pieces again—and hopefully I will at some point!—right now, I’m focused on retellings. I have a retelling of Galatea coming up in *Uncanny Magazine*, and it’s very detailed language work, with some experimental structure. I have some ideas for other Greek myths in that vein. I also have several fairy tale retellings set in American historical contexts without overt magic, so it’s mimetic fiction with a subtextual bite.

Any news you want to share with us?

My retelling of Galatea, “Love Is Never Still,” is coming out from *Uncanny Magazine* in 2016.

And of course, if readers enjoyed this story, I hope they’ll consider checking out “Tea Time” from December’s *Lightspeed* (lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/tea-time).

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, and photographer. She has trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo; was a volunteer EMT, firefighter, and HAZMAT responder; worked as a guide and translator for journalists covering combat in Central America; lived in a haunted village in Thailand; ran an international frog monitoring network; and loves happy endings. Bonus points for frolicking dogs and kisses backlit by a shimmering full

moon.

Author Spotlight: Samuel Peralta

Robyn Lupo | 624 words

How did “Hereafter” start for you? Was there a particular image that drew you to capture it?

“Hereafter” was my first sojourn into fiction, after a long, exclusive love affair with poetry. I was writing a piece for *Synchronic*—an anthology of speculative fiction put together by David Gatewood—when I first met Cpl. Caitlyn McAdams.

She was a character in the story I’d outlined, about a platoon fighting a war in another place, another time. Somewhere in the middle of the telling, she stopped everything, turned to me, and said: *Listen. I have another story for you.*

Now, experience has told me that when a character wants to tell her story, you listen. What Cpl. McAdams told me, over several breathless weeks, was a story about time travel—but it was really about distance and longing, about separation and faith, and whether in the end, love is truly enough.

When you write a story, or a poem, is there a time in the process where you select the medium, or is that choice a little more automatic?

I select the medium right at the outset. Short stories and poetry have their own idioms, and how you tell the story really depends on the medium you choose.

Never Let Me Go, originally a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, works wonderfully as a novel or a film. However, although the story they tell is the same, the complexity of emotions imparted depends very much on the whether the medium is film or the written word.

In the same way, poetry, with its metaphorical conciseness, presents a very different way of storytelling from the short story.

What do you think it is that draws us to read and write stories about

love that is negotiated?

What an amazing question. If you think about it, you might say that all love is negotiated—even love that looks natural and unconditional, like the love between a mother and baby.

However, storytelling is in essence about conflict and the resolution of conflict. That means that a love story becomes more interesting when that conflict is more overt—thus the allure of books about negotiated love.

You're an accomplished writer in a variety of mediums; do you have a favourite? What medium do you find the most challenging?

The challenges are different. I love poetry, and the raw power it has—but the ability of poetry, especially written poetry, to reach a large audience is very limited.

What's next for you, Samuel Peralta?

You may not know that I'm the creator of *The Future Chronicles*, a series of themed short story anthologies that has run to twelve collections so far—*A.I. Chronicles*, *Alien Chronicles*, *Immortality Chronicles*, *Galaxy Chronicles*, *Time Travel Chronicles*, and so on. I've been amazed to see that each title has gone on, in turn, to become the #1 anthology in science fiction or fantasy in all of Amazon.

I have twelve more titles planned for 2016, and over 100 writers are readying or already writing stories for these, all the way from *The Illustrated Robot*, to *Chronicle Worlds: Half Way Home*, to *The Mars Chronicles*. I like to think it's part of what I call the new Silver Age of speculative fiction.

In the middle of all that, I'm going to be working hard on finishing my first novel—and perhaps more poetry.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Robyn Lupo lives in Southwestern Ontario with her not-that-kind-of-doctor partner and three cats. She enjoys tiny things, and has wrangled flash for Women Destroy Science Fiction! as well as selected poetry for Queers Destroy Horror! She aspires to one day write many things.

Author Spotlight: Jeremiah Tolbert

Sandra Odell | 971 words

“Not By Wardrobe, Tornado, or Looking Glass” starts with a wonderfully surreal mix of magic and the mundane and only gets better from there. Can you tell us a little about the inspiration for the story?

I began working on the story nine years ago, sparked by a long-forgotten blog comment from a friend—I don’t remember what it was about, but only that it got me thinking about rabbit holes and what I could say about portal fantasies and how they work. That led me to wondering what kind of person would be most interesting to me in a world where everyone has their own portal to another world. That’s where Louisa and her frustrations came into play.

Early drafts had me insisting that Louisa could never find a portal for herself, and I couldn’t find a way toward any sort of happiness by denying my character what she most desired. It took almost ten years of life experiences (most important among them, probably, being having a child) for me to realize that it wasn’t a change in circumstances that Louisa needed but instead a change in perspective.

I’ve been learning a lot about the magic of a shift in perspective since becoming a parent, because your whole worldview shifts when it happens. The parts were in the early drafts all along—I just couldn’t see how they fit together yet.

Louisa is the perfect blend of fannish dreamer and sensible everywoman, a blend of the ordinary and wistful. Catherine is both poignant and bitter, caught in the tug of war between her dreams and her upbringing. How important is it to you in your writing to create characters readers can relate to?

I try to write people the way I see them in the real world and hope for

the best. Louisa reminds me of so many amazing women I know. And if I can't relate to the characters, I can't expect the reader to, but I've always found it's a bit of a leap of faith to think that just because I'm relating to a character, that means a reader will, too. Sometimes what I'm struggling to convey comes through, and sometimes it doesn't. But it matters a lot to me that my intent of empathy comes through. I love all my characters; even the bad ones. They're not bad, anyway, as Jessica Rabbit would say; sometimes they're just written that way.

At some point in their lives, everyone wants to run away: to a friend's house; to a bar; to a difference city or country; to a fantastical land. What is it about the different, the fantastic, that draws us to want for something more?

Dissatisfaction, mostly. I think at some level, most fantasy fans are optimists and idealists who are dissatisfied. Then again, I might just be projecting . . .

Your writing is filled with the tics and tremors that define characters. Louisa keeps a careful record of rabbit holes. Catherine fiddles with her soup, absently stirring. Annabelle's dwindling phone calls. Are you a people watcher?

These are the kinds of habits and details that speak to me most in people—the deeper stuff comes much harder to me than noticing these surface-level things. When I write, it's often the physical performances of the characters that come to me before their inner monologues. Probably too many years of watching movies in which characters' inner thoughts are never shared. I do enjoy watching people, but I think it's the subconscious me that understands them better and feeds back the little details.

What writers tickle your fancy when it comes to reading fantasy? Who stirs your imagination?

China Miéville hits my sweet spot like nobody else except Kameron Hurley. Intricate, Byzantine worldbuilding seems to turn my crank more than just about anything else (which is kind of funny, given that my own stories almost never achieve that complexity). They both excel at it.

Then there's the more folksy, Americana stuff that I just adore from writers like Andy Duncan, Howard Waldrop, and for some reason I think of Kelly Link here, although she's not quite in the same category. I'm also a sucker for fantasy noir, such as the works of Richard Kadrey or Mike Carey.

The main thing I don't read much of these days is high fantasy. Many years of playing *Dungeons and Dragons* satiated my desire for that sort of material. When it comes to epic, heroic stuff, I would just rather live it, even if by "living it" I mean rolling some dice and laughing with friends.

What's next for Jeremiah Tolbert? What can eager readers look forward to in 2016?

I have another fantasy story coming from *Lightspeed* sometime this year, I think, called "The Cavern of the Screaming Eye," and a science fiction story about food trucks and the singularity also scheduled to appear in *Lightspeed* soon-ish. I've also written a story that will appear in an anthology called *Swords vs. Cthulhu* that I think will come out in 2016. While those are making their way into the world, I'll be busy writing new stories when I can squeeze writing time in with my freelance web developer and parenting duties. "Cavern" takes place in a setting that I hope will be a sequence of stories and possibly even novels, and the next one is my current focus.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell is a 47-year old, happily married mother of two, an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's UNIVERSE*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *The Drabblecast*. She is hard at work plotting her second novel or world domination. Whichever comes first.

Author Spotlight: Sarah Pinsker

Jude Griffin | 1105 words

How did this story come about?

I sometimes struggle with this question, because stories often are a simmering combination of ingredients that don't really matter until they're soup, but I know the answer this time! *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* editor Scott Andrews and I were chatting at Capclave in fall of 2014. I don't remember the exact conversation leading up to it, but I said the line "the rock star washed ashore" and he said, "That's a story. You have to write it. And then, unfortunately, you can't sell it to me, because it won't be secondary world fantasy." We discussed how "the bard washed ashore" would be secondary world fantasy, but didn't have the same ring to it. And lo and behold, he was right. I did write the story, it wasn't secondary world fantasy, and I couldn't offer it to Scott.

In the first draft, the rock star washed ashore in another reality, but ultimately I liked the idea of tossing her off a cruise ship ark into something less alien.

Which came first: the title or the last line?

The last line. This was a hard story to title. Sometimes I have a title before I even begin a story, but this one went through about a dozen names. A couple of them I had to give up on because they were already taken. A couple were too generic. This was one of the titles I had toyed with, but I went with another when I sent the story off to *Lightspeed*. John Joseph Adams sent back the acceptance with a suggestion to use this title instead. He's good with titles; he was right.

Can you talk about the role of the framing device (the imagined interview with *Inside the Music* as opposed to straight flashbacks) within the larger story?

I liked the idea of two strangers meeting and putting up layers of protection, telling their stories to each other unreliably. Gabby is unreliable even to herself, telling herself stories that justify her own actions, and telling them in a way that denies the situation she's in.

It's hard not to look for parts of you in the protagonist—is there anything Pinsker-y of interest that was fodder?

Other than the fact that she's a queer musician who would prefer to go through life never playing "My Heart Will Go On," not really. She's nothing like me in personality, her path was entirely different than mine, and I wouldn't get onto a cruise ship ark if John Cusack was dangling from a tiny plane, shouting it was the only way to survive.

Who gets musicians right in literature? What are some of the things writers can get wrong?

I just read Elizabeth Hand's lovely *Wylding Hall*, about a seminal 1970s band and the summer they spent recording their best-known album. I had to fight my urge to look the band up online. They felt real, lived-in. The ways they interacted, the ways their songs came together. Lewis Shiner has written some great musicians, too, real and fictional, though I haven't read his books in a long time.

I can't even articulate what's wrong when writers get it wrong. It's the ring of falseness that is the opposite of the ring of truth. I think anytime you've got experience in something or working knowledge of it, you can suss out who is faking it. You get pulled out by false details or bad logistics.

What went into how you wrote dialogue for two such different characters?

Bay was one of the most fun characters I've ever written. I absolutely loved writing her because her voice was so distinctly her own. Basically any

time I was telling her story she let me know exactly what was going on.

Writing dialogue for characters who are different is way more fun than writing characters with more similar voices. You don't have to worry as much about the voices getting confused. If I stripped all the dialogue tags away, you could still tell who was who in this story, I'm pretty sure. That's an interesting way to test whether the characters you're writing are distinct, but it doesn't have to work. In this case, I'm pretty sure it does.

What else would you like readers to know about this story?

Helping a turtle cross the road is sometimes harder than you might think. They snap, and they're surprisingly quick about it. I'm not sure if that's really about the story, but it's related, I guess. Also, the research for this story taught me more about edible plants to forage than I knew previously. I don't really want to get stranded on a coastal island, but if I do, I'm more prepared.

You've published a few near-future stories now that take place after some fairly big changes to the way people live. Do you want to talk about that at all?

I think I'm a hopeful writer, but I've written a fair number of stories that might be called soft-apocalypse. They focus on the ways people come together rather than the ways people are broken apart. I've read a lot of post-apocalyptic stuff, and I feel like there's a lot of fear that we'll devolve in the face of water shortage or zombies or disease, and I'd rather write about the ways people come together. I loved Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*—oh! and I think she did music really well, too—but I couldn't figure out why people weren't planting instead of scavenging twenty-year-old tinned food. Anyway, I'm more drawn to the stories that come out of “people panicked for a week, but then worked together to get the electricity back on” than “we couldn't find any electrical engineers so we had to start eating people.”

Any news you want to share with us?

My fourth album is fully recorded and mastered. Hopefully it'll be out a month or two after this story.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, and photographer. She has trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo; was a volunteer EMT, firefighter, and HAZMAT responder; worked as a guide and translator for journalists covering combat in Central America; lived in a haunted village in Thailand; ran an international frog monitoring network; and loves happy endings. Bonus points for frolicking dogs and kisses backlit by a shimmering full moon.

Author Spotlight: Christopher Barzak

Liz Argall | 1593 words

How did this story come about?

I was approached by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling to contribute to an anthology called *The Beastly Bride*, which was part of their Mythic Fiction series for young adults. The stories in the anthology were themed around the concept of animal/human marriages or matings. I'd always been fascinated by the Melusine legend, which hinges on the rules of a marriage, and was also thinking a lot about the modern state of marriage, and how definitions of marriage were beginning to change, particularly in regard to same-sex marriage, and particularly the conflict around it in traditional quarters of society like the rural town where Meg and her family reside, which is similar to the town where I was raised.

Until Meg folds her arms under her breasts, we don't see any clues for our protagonist (and we don't get her name for quite a while). It's still refreshing in a world that defaults to certain white male presumptions to not have her gender immediately signposted; being human and female shouldn't be that unusual. As someone who has been shortlisted for a Tiptree and who writes nuanced female characters, how do you fit gender work into your fiction and how does it effect your creative decisions?

For me, when I write a character, I have to have their voice in my head and hear that clearly before I can proceed with doing any other work in a story. I have to know how that character would tell it before I can actually inhabit them and go forward. So when it comes to gender, I tend to let the character bring in details that signify their gender in wherever the most organic and logical place in the storytelling might be.

For Meg, that first detail you mentioned comes around the end of the first manuscript page, or the beginning of the second, and it's in reference to

how her brother has depicted her in one of his paintings. Since the majority of her story revolves around her relationship to her brother and her brother's partner, as well as to her family and town, bringing in the first reference to her gender seemed most likely when she begins to describe one of her brother's paintings of their family, which Meg dislikes because she finds them to be exaggerations of who they are, instead of realistic.

In other stories, my character's gender might be displayed earlier or later, and in some other fashion other than through a visual detail like the one in this story, but in each case, however their gender is cued, it's largely based on how that character relates to their own gender and where and when they find it appropriate in their story to realize that aspect of their identity. It's not *for* the reader so much as it is for the integrity of the character and how they present themselves, as we all do. I don't like getting hung up on traditional rules about denoting every aspect of a character's identity in the first paragraph of a story. Usually when people bring that rule up, it almost always goes back to gender identity, which I find suspicious, because there are so many other aspects of identity that no one decries hasn't been announced in the first paragraph. Race, age, sexuality, class, etc. Why not all of these other markers of identity in the first paragraph? Instead of making rules for writers about what they need to get into the first paragraph in regard to their main character's identity, I think we should probably focus on how that character would present themselves.

I enjoyed the way you depicted the complexities of life in a remote and rural community alongside how remote communities can be depicted in the arts. How important was exploring this concept for you, and was this setting inspired by a particular rural community?

This was a hugely important concept for me, both when I wrote the story back in 2007, and it still is nearly a decade later, in 2015. My most recent novel, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, was just released a few months ago, and it takes place in a small town very much like the one in this story. It's a setting that, no matter what I name the town (or even when I don't name it), is inspired by the rural community in which I grew up in northeastern Ohio.

Growing up on my family's small beef farm, among a wide network of family members—grandparents next door, uncle and aunt down the road, a brother and sister-in-law who later built a house next to the one my parents built—was a bit of a throwback in an age when most people were growing up in suburbs and cities, and the agrarian world was growing smaller and smaller, particularly as industrial farming encroached and drove most family farms out of business.

I left that community and went to college, and then traveled the US and lived in other states, and then in other countries like Japan, and the majority of my friendships in my adult life were with other writers, artists, musicians, and intellectuals, which wasn't really the case in my childhood and adolescence. When I came across depictions of rural life in a lot of stories, I felt like they were either overly reverent and pastoral, in the old tradition, or else incredibly exaggerated in a way that made rural people more into caricatures than real people. I felt like, in the character of Tommy, I had an opportunity to explore the complexities of all of this in one story, though I still think I have lots to say about the subject.

Tommy's current art series is called *The Sons of Melusine*. Melusine is a sort of water nymph, often with the body of a mermaid, but able to take human form (and more inclined towards marriage than drowning the impudent). The most common legends revolve around a noble falling in love with a beautiful woman who will only marry him if he will keep her privacy bathing and thus keep her serpentine nature secret. When the promise is inevitably broken and her true form revealed, the Melusine is revealed. This son of Melusine seems to have broken the family tradition by living a life somewhat less closeted (at least with his love). Was the duality of forms and secrets something you wanted to explore in this story? What concepts in the legends of Melusine call to you the most?

In some of the Melusine iterations, it's mentioned that she has had many children, and after her husband breaks his promise not to watch her bathing, she reveals her serpentine nature and flees, but continues to serve

as a protector in various ways to her descendants. I wondered, to some extent, about those briefly mentioned descendants, and what they might look like in modern contexts, and how the rule of privacy in regards to certain aspects of their identities (such as sexuality) might figure into a story that plays with some of the same conventions as the old story does. There's the son having broken tradition by living out in the open in regard to his sexuality, and there's also an extension of that briefly mentioned detail from the old stories about how Melusine goes on to protect her descendants in various ways. I was trying, in some ways, to explore the idea of protecting people who are different (which surely Melusine's children must have been, if we want to bring a lens of realism to the myth of a water nymph who has children with a human), and this theme is mostly realized by Meg, who, despite her problems with her brother, is inherently moved to fight against a number of injustices in the world. I've always thought she'd go on to become an amazing social activist.

What are you working on now? What can we look forward to next?

I'm nearly done with forming up a new collection of short stories that are all retellings of either classic genre fiction or else fairy tales or children's fantasy stories. I've always been interested in revisionist stories, and many of mine appear in my first collection, *Before and Afterlives*, but in recent years I've given myself over to that impulse to write an entire collection in that vein, partially because I love to reinvent stories, and partially to explore the various boundaries and forms retellings can take. I'm not sure if the collection's title will stick, but as I've been working on the stories, I've been thinking of the collection as a whole as *Monstrous Alterations*. However, there have been a lot of books with monstrous titles released in recent years, so I might need to reinvent the collection's title.

I'm also at work on a new novel, which I can't talk very much about just yet, but it's set in a small town like "Map of Seventeen" and is replete with ghosts and possessions.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Liz Argall's short stories can be found in places like *Apex Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *This is How You Die: Stories of the Inscrutable, Infallible, Inescapable Machine of Death*. She creates the webcomic *Things Without Arms and Without Legs* and writes love songs to inanimate objects. Her previous incarnations include circus manager, refuge worker, artists' model, research officer for the Order of Australia Awards, farm girl, and extensive work in the not-for-profit sector.

Author Spotlight: Paul McAuley

Robyn Lupo | 510 words

How did “Transitional Forms” start for you?

I was invited to contribute a story to the annual science-fiction edition of *Technology Review*, the magazine published by MIT. I wanted to write something about biotech, and started to think about a variation on the famous William Gibson quote—“The street finds its own use for technology.” But suppose—what would happen if technology found its own use for itself. What would happen if it started to modify itself? To evolve?

The hot zone is a place of disruption; the technology not only affects the physical environment nearby but the economy, causing a political and legal quagmire. Janine, too, is a massive disruption in Ray Roberts’s life. What role do you see these disruptions having in transitioning Ray and Janine’s society?

We’re a species that has a deep history of massive transitions caused by technology. From stone axes to agriculture, gunpowder to the internet. We’re never quite in control of the things we create. And biotech doubles down on that sense of loss of control, which is why it is hedged around with so many regulations, and is regarded by the public with extreme wariness and, quite often (especially when it’s applied to modifying human bodies and human reproduction) moral queasiness. The hot zone is a zone of containment. An attempt to quarantine, outside laboratory conditions, something that, because it’s evolving in every direction, is too interesting and valuable to be destroyed. And of course attempts at containment out in the world almost always fail. The question is, perhaps, can something useful come out of that failure?

In this story, the reader parses Janine’s story of the yeast scientist as received by Robert. Revealing matters to readers this way really

worked for me in terms of me “buying” the emotional content of the work. This seems to illustrate pretty well the relationship between author and reader. What other aspects of your process are there to sort of, well, make the reader meet you halfway? What inspired you to use the story-within-a-story technique?

The stories we choose to tell, and how we choose to tell them, can reveal as much about character as our actions. And it also reframes the story that contains it in what I hope is a useful and amusing way.

One way to read the ending is that Ray seems to believe he can't be a transitional form, that in some sense he was not ready, or missed his window. Do you think he's correct?

It's possible that he knows all along that he's the equivalent of an evolutionary dead end. But that doesn't mean he's irrelevant. Crocodiles once shared the world with dinosaurs. Their evolutionary clock has ticked over very slowly compared to that of, say, birds. Yet they are still pretty fearsome predators, in their particular ecological niche.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Robyn Lupo lives in Southwestern Ontario with her not-that-kind-of-doctor partner and three cats. She enjoys tiny things, and has wrangled flash for Women Destroy Science Fiction! as well as selected poetry for Queers Destroy Horror! She aspires to one day write many things.

Author Spotlight: Karin Tidbeck

Sandra Odell | 664 words

“Starfish” is a rich, intricate story. What inspired you to tell this particular tale?

This story has gone through several permutations. I once had a dream in which Skipper tells his story. That was the foundation for a poem that was never published, so it ended up on the recycling heap. I picked it up a few years later, and combined it with ideas from another story that I hadn't been able to finish. This is pretty typical for my creative process. I come up with a lot of ideas, but they usually have to ferment for a while, or permutate, before they become part of a story that works.

This is a very subtle story. Many writers rely on flashy, bright dialogue to carry the plot and weight of the story, but here you allow the conversations between Kim and Skipper to flow and ripple, expanding the world without weighing down the narrative. How conscious are you of the interplay between characters in a story?

Extremely. An idea itself is useless if the interplay between characters doesn't work. I just don't believe in high drama one hundred percent of the time; flashy dialogue isn't really my thing.

The wealth of sensory details comes together to create a framework for the story as a whole. The burn of plum brandy, the yellow-green glow of the starfish in Kim's cabin, the biting cold, the undercooked potatoes. What is it about such details that helps cement readers in a story?

Sensory details help anchor the reader in the story. I try to be very specific when it comes to detail, particularly if there are weird things going on. The stranger things I want the reader to believe in, the more specific I

get; I don't want the reader to be busy orienting themselves or losing their suspension of disbelief. I also find stories without sensory detail flat and uninteresting.

You write in both English and Swedish, and teach creative writing in Malmö. Do you write exclusively in one language and then translate into another? Do you find that your style of writing and use of description changes depending on the language for the story's publication?

I write primarily in English, although I sometimes take commissions for Swedish texts. Apart from commissions, I've pretty much given up writing prose in Swedish, since it pays so little and it's harder to publish. My writing does change depending on language, although it's fairly subtle, and the directions have changed over the years. I tend to be more florid in English and stark in Swedish. (I've been told that my English prose is considered exact, but it's nowhere near what my Swedish can be.)

Many English print and online markets make a point of seeking out a range of voices, to reach beyond the borders of language to discover new stories. How do you feel your work has been received by English readers?

I've had a very warm reception, and I'm grateful to all the readers and colleagues out there who have been so generous in promoting my work. However, I do think people tend to get too fixated on my nationality and the fact that English is my second language. It's not unusual that a review or interview is based almost entirely on my Swedishness. I hope that people will get used to my person and focus more on the stories.

If you could write a letter to the young Karen Tidbeck, what would you say to her?

“You don’t have to know what you’re writing about, and the word ‘plot’ is meaningless. Just let your imagination do its thing. You’re on the right track.”

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell is a 47-year old, happily married mother of two, an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen’s UNIVERSE*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, *Pseudopod*, and *The Drabblecast*. She is hard at work plotting her second novel or world domination. Whichever comes first.

Author Spotlight: Brenda W. Clough

Moshe Siegel | 921 words

Your Hugo and Nebula Award-nominated novella, “May Be Some Time,” explores the science-fictionalized fate of a real world figure, Lawrence Edward Grace “Titus” Oates. Had you the idea for a person-out-of-time tale prior to learning about Oates, or was this novella instead born from your interest in his specific story?

I think it must be the latter. I have always been fascinated by Robert Scott and his party, and there has been a great deal of material (books, PBS presentations, museum exhibits, re-enactments by nutty Brits with sledges or boats) in recent years. And I have always meant to write a time travel novel or two. In retrospect, it was only a matter of time before the two ideas collided in the reactor chamber.

Though he is the consummate explorer, Titus’s initial culture shock is palpable (and literal); was this sense drawn from your own globetrotting experience?

I don’t think so. My parents were in the US Foreign Service, and we have been traveling since I was a child. What it is really drawn from is reading history. The past is indeed another country, and a very little bit of reading shows you that the people from even a hundred years ago were both the same as us, and quite alien.

How much research went into the descriptions of Titus’s era and the Terra Nova Expedition?

Oh, it is endless. There are masses of materials, and I have had to quit collecting them. I think in the book Titus complains, rightly, that every single surviving member of Scott’s expedition wrote a memoir. And then there are tons of modern materials, analysis supplied with the help of

modern meteorology, or climate science, or even vitamin and nutrition research. (Did he have scurvy, or not? Inquiring minds want to know, and we do!) I think I have all the major works that were available in print when I wrote it, and I occasionally still pick up an exciting recent book—there’s one titled *Scott’s Last Biscuit* that came out in Britain recently . . .

2045 technology astounds and confuses Titus (at least at the outset), whereas the “moderns” take it all for granted (even the fussy Dr. Lash walks through automatic doors without realizing the impact on Titus). Did you find it difficult to remove your own “modern” blinders to reinterpret how someone from 1912 might see today’s world?

There are so many possible things to trip over that I had to select carefully the ones that would make for the maximal aggravation or that would tie into the theme of the work the best. And there are real life analogies—North Koreans escape to South Korea, or a villager from someplace in the boondocks is hauled back to the US to a modern hospital for some medical treatment.

This novella was later expanded into the novel *Revise the World*. What led you to this expansion? Had you always planned to grow the story or did you revisit it with some fresh inspiration?

In fact the work was originally a novel. My theory is that all writers have a natural length or two that they do best at, the same way that horses have a natural race they are bred to run. My natural length is almost exactly a hundred thousand words; nearly everything I write is about that length. Catherine Asaro read *Revise the World* and pointed out that the front part would make a natural novella, and that Stan Schmidt would instantly buy it. I was skeptical about *Analog*, but I could see the novella in there, and so I pried it out. And of course Catherine knows exactly how to sell to *Analog*—I should not have doubted her.

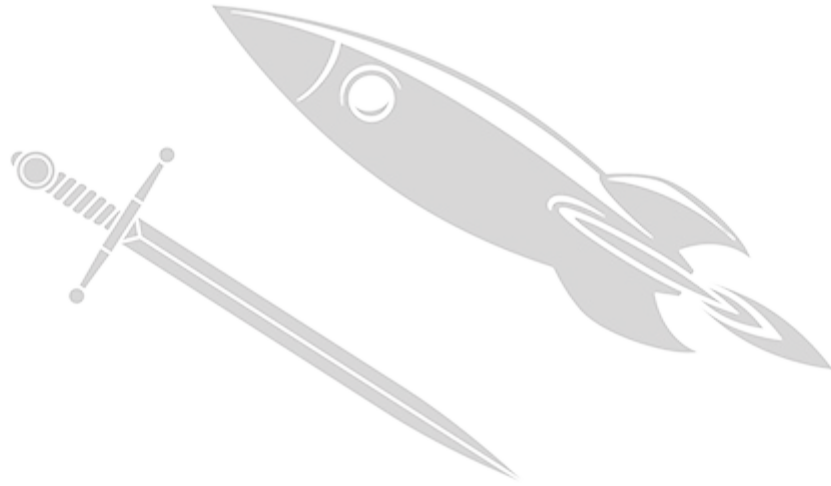
Do you have anything you'd like to add?

Oates is the first historical person I have ever written about. It helps of course that he died relatively young, and that much of what he wrote was destroyed by his family. He is thus a tabula rasa, a blank slate upon which I could create the fictional person. But when I was writing this, I had a dream. I dreamed of the real man, the historical flesh-and-blood Oates, not the character I was pushing through all these space-time shenanigans. In the dream Oates just glared at me. He was not pleased. He didn't want to be in some crummy SF novel, written by an American female, good God! what are women coming to these days—but to be left alone. I had channeled his voice so well, gotten so deep into his head, that I knew exactly how he would react. I woke up, and I knew that if I continued with this book there was going to be payback some day. Probably at the Pearly Gates, after I die. I will truck up to the gate and St. Peter will look up from his iPad and say, "Guy waiting to see you, hon." And there he'll be, Lawrence Edward Grace Oates himself, probably with a riding crop in hand. Gosh, I'm going to be in trouble. While I have a chance, I ought to think of some argument to make. But in the meantime, I wrote the book.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Moshe Siegel interviews at *Lightspeed*, works in the New York State library system, and hatches indie publishing plots from his Hudson Valley home office. Follow tweets of varying relevance @moshesiegel.

MISCELLANY



Coming Attractions

The Editors | 226 words

Coming up in March, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We have original science fiction by Caroline M. Yoachim (“Welcome to the Medical Clinic at the Interplanetary Relay Station”) and Craig DeLancey (“RedKing”), along with SF reprints by Timons Esaias (“The Mars Convention”) and Aliette de Bodard (“The Waiting Stars”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Rich Larson (“Sparks Fly”) and Marie Vibbert (“In Loco Parentis”), and fantasy reprints by Andy Duncan (“The Premature Burials”) and Seanan McGuire (“Rat-catcher”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns and an interview.

For our ebook readers, we also have an ebook-exclusive reprint Mark W. Tiedemann’s novella, “Miller’s Wife” and a novel excerpt.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out.

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Looking ahead beyond next month, we’ve got a veritable plethora of stories forthcoming, with new work from exciting writers like Nghi Vo, Kat Howard, Rudy Rucker, An Owomoyela, Adam-Troy Castro, and Kelly Barnhill.

So be sure to keep an eye out for all that SFnal goodness in the months to come. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Lightspeed*.

Thanks for reading!



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The Editors

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