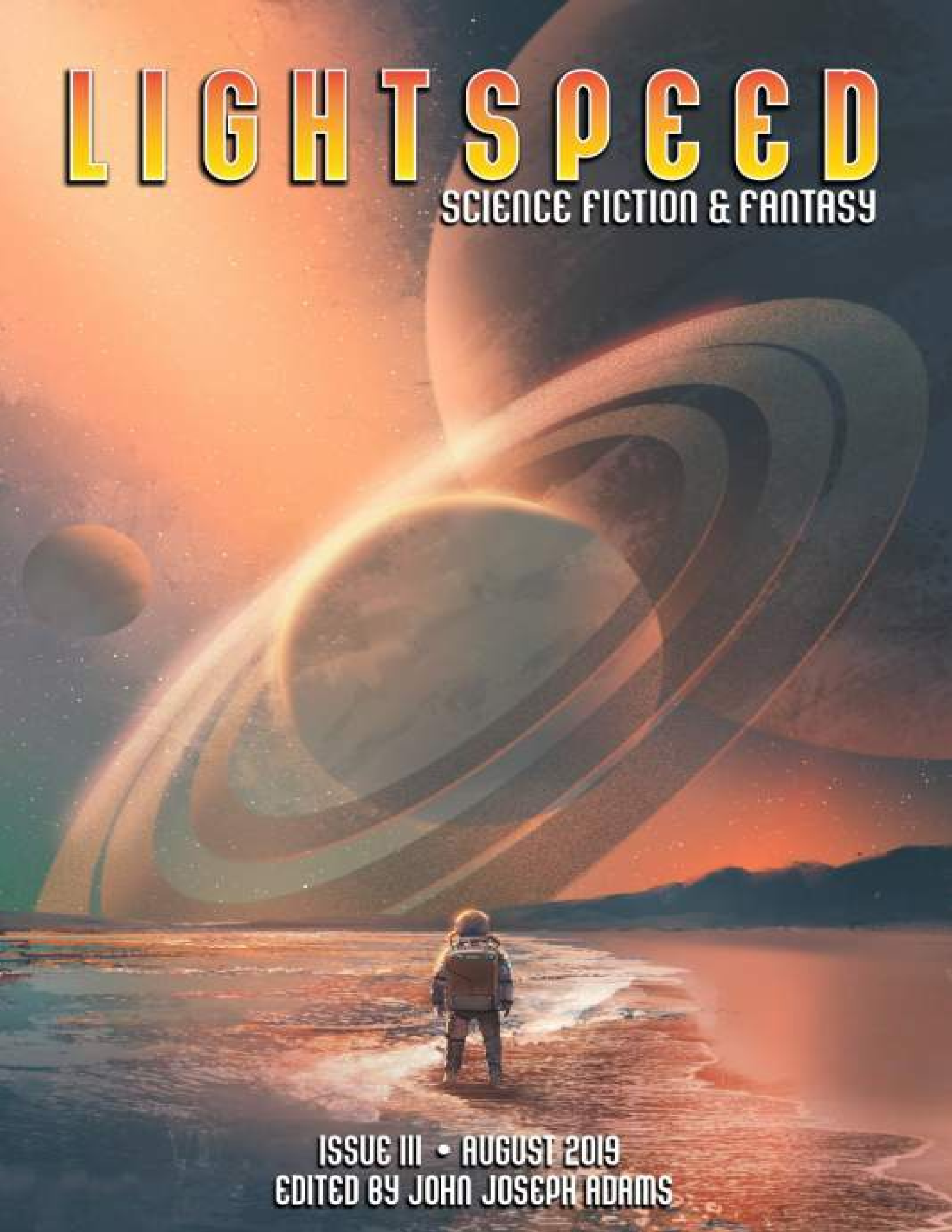


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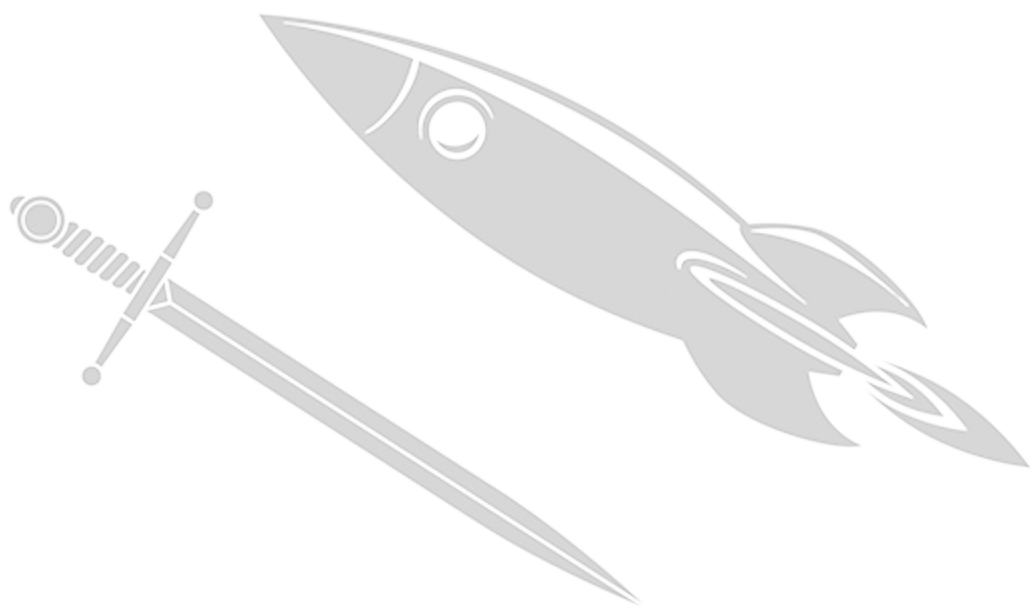
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



ISSUE III • AUGUST 2019
EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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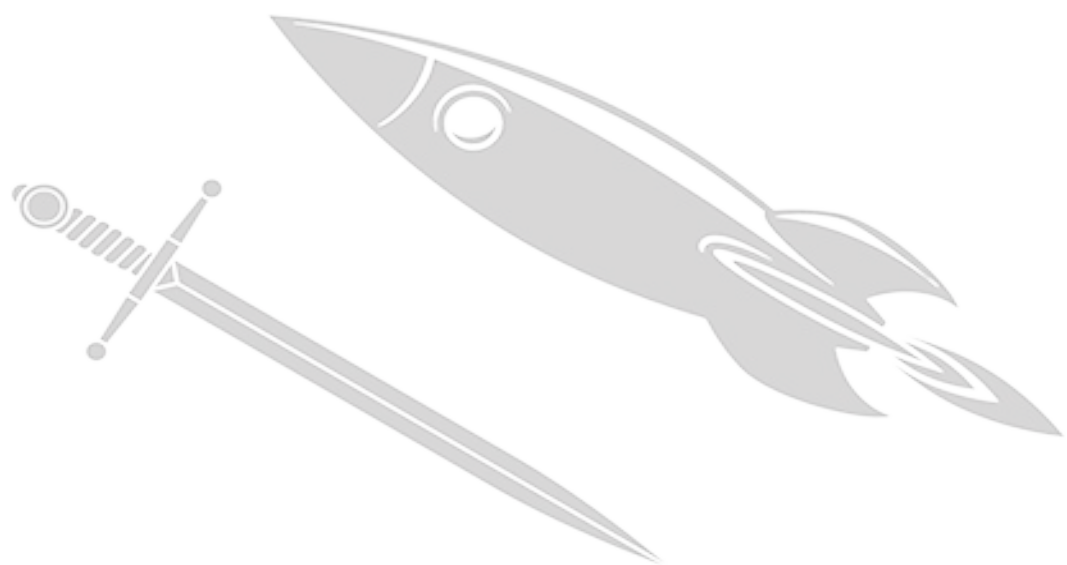
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Also Edited by John Joseph Adams

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FROM THE EDITOR



Editorial: August 2019

John Joseph Adams | 167 words

Welcome to *Lightspeed's* 111th issue!

If you've ever worked a terrible service job, you'll want to take a trip to Robot Country—the weird and sometimes hilarious world of Dominica Phetteplace's new SF short “One Thousand Beetles in a Jumpsuit.” Kendra Fortmeyer brings us our second original science fiction short, “No Matter,” which wrestles with time travel paradoxes. We also have terrific reprints from Sam J. Miller (“Calved”) and Carlos Hernandez (“The Macrobe Conservation Project”).

In our first fantasy short, “The Final Blow,” Scott Sigler takes us onto the battlefield . . . and into the mind of one scared young witness. Cassandra Khaw spins a lovely fable about two dangerous lovers in “A Leash of Foxes, Their Stories Like Barter.” Our fantasy reprints include “The Rock Eaters,” by Brenda Peynado, and “Card Sharp,” by Rajan Khanna.

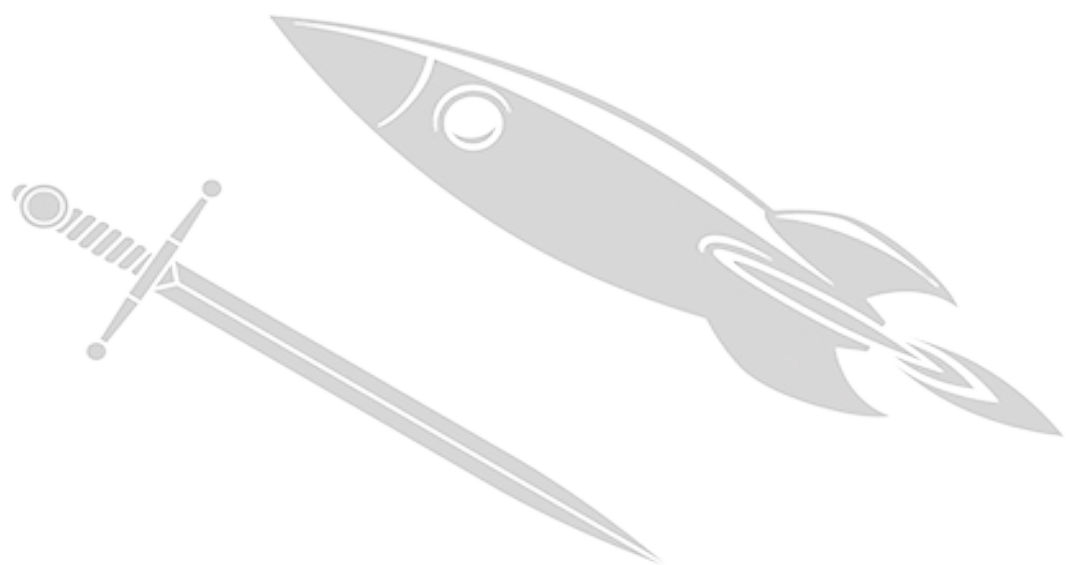
Besides fiction, we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns. Plus, we have a feature interview with Silvia Moreno-Garcia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

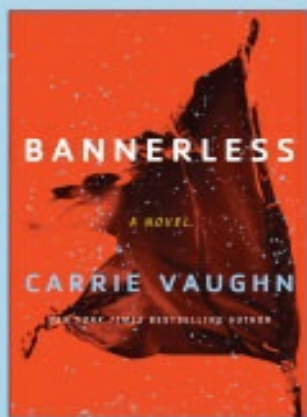
John Joseph Adams is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a science fiction and fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, as well as the bestselling editor of more than thirty anthologies, including *Wastelands* and *The Living Dead*. Recent books include *Cosmic Powers*, *What the #@&% Is That?*, *Operation Arcana*, *Press Start to Play*, *Loosed Upon the World*, and *The Apocalypse Triptych*. 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 a finalist twelve times) and an eight-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of the digital magazines *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, and is a producer for WIRED's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. He also served as a judge for the 2015 National Book Award. Find

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SCIENCE FICTION



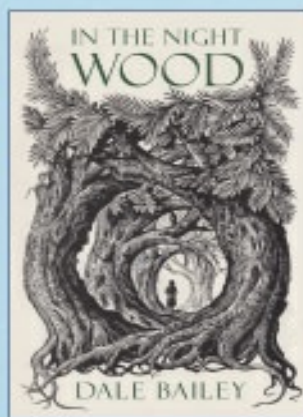
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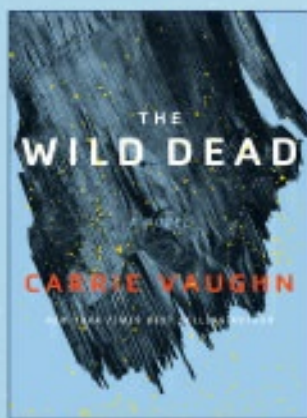
"A thrilling ride. The
world belongs to robots,
we're just living in it."
—DANIEL H. WILSON



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transporting, and all-
around excellent. I
couldn't put it down."
—KAREN JOY FOWLER



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One Thousand Beetles in a Jumpsuit

Dominica Phetteplace | 9808 words

Isla didn't consider herself much of an outdoor person, but after five layoffs and a breakup, she found herself in a drone warehouse at the border of the barren wasteland known as Robot Country.

She consulted the map on her tablet. To the west was the Gila National Forest. So, trees. She clicked on the forest icon and up popped some names of trees. Arizona sycamore, Douglas fir, Aspen. To the south was desert and the Mexican border. To the east was an even more extreme kind of desert, the White Sands National Monument, where atomic bombs had been tested in the previous century.

North was Robot Country. North of that, the tablet didn't seem to know.

Robot Country was a million acres owned by Company Omega. It was a flat and dry regolith plain that had first been ruined by logging, ranching, and other forms of land mismanagement, then further desertified by rising temperatures and changes in precipitation patterns. Then poisoned by Company Omega so it could be what they called a "blank canvas." Company Omega was interested in terraforming. In the long term, they hoped to make Mars habitable. More immediately, they were interested in ways in which Burning Man could be made more fun.

"Your backpack will be filled with water, but try not to drink it, it's for emergencies," said Kaya, her supervisor. Isla had taken the bus from Oakland and Kaya had picked her up at the station. They had only just met and Isla had been on the clock for less than an hour, but already she was about to set off on her own.

"The drones should be bringing me water," replied Isla.

"Exactly. The water in your backpack is just in case the water drones don't show. Every day you should be getting deliveries of the things you need. And don't worry about littering, the drones should be cleaning up after you, too."

Kaya reached over and clicked a few icons on the tablet Isla was

holding. “This is how you access your route. We’ll give you a new one each day. At some point a spider will be along to help guide you.”

Kaya pinned several bodycams to Isla’s jumpsuit. It was tough but also cute, khaki with zippered cargo pockets, designed by Diane von Furstenberg, a prototype of what the female astronauts stationed on Mars would wear when they were lounging around the yet-to-be-built station. “We’ll be recording everything, and machine analyzing it too. But we won’t necessarily have a pair of human eyes looking at things. If there is something important, please bring it to our attention. And take your own pictures, too. Have fun!”

Isla considered the training to be minimal, probably inadequate. And it’s not like she knew anything about camping. But maybe that was the point, Company Omega was trying to see if their robots could keep someone extremely naïve alive.

A helicopter drone came to pick Isla up. It didn’t land, these things were notoriously crash prone. It hovered above Kaya and Isla and lowered a harness. Isla snapped herself in, and was lifted high above the border station. She flew for a few miles before gently being lowered to the ground. She unhooked herself, the helicopter flew away, and suddenly Isla was alone.

She used her tablet to call Kaya. She wanted to tell her she had arrived safely. But Isla’s call was intercepted by a helper AI.

“Can I help you?” The robot had an English accent. It sounded bored.

“Tell Kaya I got here okay.”

“She already knows that.” Then the AI hung up on her.

Isla checked her tablet. Her route for the day was on the map. She was supposed to hike ten miles to the north and then make camp. She looked around for any drones, and she saw none. So she called the spider and waited. It was supposed to come right away but there was no sign of it.

Isla had been a drone minder before, doing stints at a device store, a high-end café, and then finally, as she got older, several fast food restaurants. The key was to keep your eye on the customer, making sure they were being well served by the robots. Out here, there were no customers. The customers were theoretical. Isla supposed she was

minder and customer both.

Isla stopped to check the route on her tablet. The directions seemed clear enough. She didn't really even need the guider spider. But she wanted some evidence that there was actual machine life out here in Robot Country.

So she called Kaya once more. And got the AI once more.

"Can I talk to Kaya?"

"If I judge your query worthy of her time," replied the operator. That Kaya had set this AI to such a high level of bitchiness was evidence that she was really busy. Company Omega was a pioneer in lean employment, which meant they burned through humans pretty fast.

"It's just that I haven't seen any drones," said Isla. She looked up at the sky. There were supposed to be surveillance planes keeping an eye on her.

"That's because there are none in your area."

"I'd like to talk to Kaya." Isla knew how important the first day on the job was. You couldn't ask for too much assistance, that would make you seem helpless. But Isla was beginning to have second thoughts. She was worried that she had been misled somehow, that she had actually signed up for some kind of weird psychological experiment. Such things were known to happen in this economy.

"You have everything you need," the AI said before it hung up.

And so Isla was truly alone, nothing but brown dirt for miles. It's good to spend time alone, she thought as she hiked. She was out of normal service so she didn't even have a phone to check. No way to get text messages and no one to get them from, but she still habitually wondered if Javi was trying to reach her. They had broken up because he had decided he could not be monogamous. His plan was to fuck lots of girls but Isla hoped he was miserable and lonely. There was no way to know what was up with him, and Isla wished she could stop herself from wondering.

She checked her tablet again as if it had the answer. She was on the right path still, a tenth of a mile farther along than last time.

"Tablet, where is the guider?" It was important to be polite to all

devices and AIs. You never knew which were recording you and analyzing you and sending reports back to headquarters. Perhaps none of them. Perhaps all of them.

It flashed a red question mark.

“Tablet, when will I see a plant again?”

A green icon lit up on her map. There would be a bush on her path in a mile. Maybe it would even be alive. She hurried over. She felt herself get thirsty but resisted drinking from her supply. She wanted the water drone to visit. It didn't.

The bush, when she encountered it, was knee high and lightly on fire. It was being tended to by a cat-sized spider that used its forelimbs to spray the bush with something. It alternated between spraying the bush with a substance that quenched the flames, and then something that brought them back to life.

“Hello?” asked Isla. You could never tell what things were programmed with the power of speech. Isla wouldn't have been terribly surprised if the bush itself could talk.

“Sorry for the delay,” said the spider. “I was just trying to finish this experiment.”

“What experiment?”

The spider replied by sending a document to her tablet. The bush was a genetically engineered descendent of the honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) that was designed to stop forest fires via strategic release of a fire retardant. It seemed like a useful thing when half the world was ablaze.

“Is it working?” asked Isla. It didn't seem to be working.

“Unknown,” said the spider as it continued to spray. Finally the fire went out. The bush looked charred only at the tips. The spider snapped off two seedpods and held them in front of a fan that emerged from its shiny metal thorax. After a minute, it handed the pods to Isla.

“Eat the fruit, not the seeds,” it instructed. The pods were leathery and still warm. She had never eaten such a thing and wasn't sure how. She squeezed the pod and then a hot yellow pulp studded with black seeds burst over her hands.

Isla licked the sticky pulp from her fingers and spit out any seeds that entered her mouth. It tasted like pineapple, only more floral. It was delicious, certainly the best thing that had happened to her in a while. Here she was, eating fruit from a burning bush, like a cross between Eve and Moses. So biblical. She wanted to post a picture of her smiling face, of her sticky hands. She wanted it known where she was and what she was doing. She was brave, she was capable, she was open to new things. But such contact with the outside world was impossible. She had never been more isolated from other people in her life. And so the joy faded, even as the stickiness remained.

“I’d like to wash my hands,” she said.

“I’ll call the water drone.”

A flying water sack soon propelled in. It sprayed Isla’s hands and face. The water, seeds, and pulp puddled around her boots. The spider came near to collect the seeds she had dropped into the mud.

Isla dried off and reapplied her sunscreen.

“Only you can summon the water drone?” Isla asked. “I was thirsty before, on the walk here. Why didn’t it come for me?”

“Your ranking isn’t high enough.”

“What do you mean?” asked Isla. Kaya had never explained anything about a ranking system. But Kaya had never explained much about anything. Isla had applied for the job online from a public library in Oakland and been bussed out to New Mexico the next day. The speed of the acquisition should have been suspicious, but Isla was happy to be employed again and eager to leave the shelter. It was so embarrassing to be homeless.

“Within this country, we have our own way of doing things.”

“Uh, is this way going to be explained to me?” asked Isla.

“If your ranking rises. It’s already risen a bit. I’ve given you some helper points for assisting with my burning bush experiment.”

Isla didn’t really feel she had helped, but was glad to take these mysterious points where she could find them. It was annoying that there could still be currency in this nearly lifeless place and even more annoying that she was still poor. She turned to the south. South was the

border station. South was the drone copter that would take her back to the homeless shelter. The longer she stayed out here, the more money Company Omega would deposit into her account. She wasn't sure how helper points worked but she knew she needed more dollars to her name.

So she looked north.

"I'm going to continue on the route I was given. Will you come with me?" Isla knew this spider was meant to be her guide; it was strange to ask for its help when its whole purpose was service. But Isla had worked as a drone minder long enough to know that drone minding was a two-way street. You were in charge of the machines, but they were also in charge of you.

Her last job had been an exhausting six-month stint at Bondi's. She worked shifts alone, running from the back of the house to the front, fixing minor glitches and dealing with cranky customers. Fryer #2, especially, was prone to catching fire. So she kept a small extinguisher in her tool kit. Her restaurant mostly met its goals, and when it missed, it only barely missed. Customers rated her highly in exit surveys. She was excellent; you had to be to get your monthly employment contract renewed.

At the end she had been let go for not being thin enough. Thinness was important if you wanted to work in fast food. You weren't just serving customers, you were also misleading them about the healthfulness of the product. Isla's work uniform included cutoffs that barely covered her ass and a spray tan. She spoke to the customers in a fake, company-mandated Australian accent. The weight limit had always been difficult for her to stay under, but after breaking up with Javi, it had become impossible.

As Isla and the spider hiked along, they passed more mesquite bushes, and then other types of plants, too, even a scattering of wildflowers. In the late afternoon, Isla and the spider came across a small raincloud that sped along in a zigzag pattern. It flew only five feet off the ground and seemed to be chasing a small spider that was running away from it. Every now and then, the cloud would send a tiny lightning bolt after the spider, which would skitter to avoid it. A larger spider followed behind.

“Is this, uh, another experiment?” Isla asked.

Her spider guide didn’t answer, so Isla concluded that it was. She turned her tablet recorder on and began to narrate the scene. Then she sent the recording to Kaya. She supposed this is what her job would consist of, walking to various experimental sites of Robot Country and reporting on what she saw.

She gazed on the scene for a while longer. It was wrong to anthropomorphize, but she couldn’t help feel that the smaller spider, the one being chased by rain, was being bullied somehow.

“Should we help the little one? It looks like it’s in trouble.” A good workspace was one where all your devices were synced and working together.

“Your concern is appreciated, but the experiment is running just as it should.” So they set off again.

They arrived at their first camp around sunset. A silver foil tent was already set up. As they approached camp, Isla’s tablet chimed.

It was Kaya. “Hey sport, how was your first day?”

Isla thought about what to say. Her feet hurt and her shoulders were raw where her backpack straps had dug in.

“It was great,” said Isla. “Did you get any of my messages?”

“Oh yeah, thanks for reporting on the . . .” Kaya paused for a while before continuing. “Oh yeah, the rain cloud. Glad you spotted that. That was a project that went totally AWOL. It shouldn’t have lightning though, are you sure that’s what you saw?”

Isla was, but she wasn’t sure if she should say so. “Don’t you have aerial surveillance on the area?”

“Of course we do. But we’ve been having trouble receiving and analyzing images. Technical difficulties, you know. Or maybe sabotage.”

“Sabotage?” asked Isla. “By who?”

“Don’t worry about it, we’re just glad to have you on board. And I see here you’ve found your spider. And that you were visited by the water drone several times today,” said Kaya.

“No, just one time, when the spider called it. The rest of the day I drank from my pack.”

“Huh, that’s definitely a discrepancy. But that’s why we’re glad to have you as pair of eyes. We’ve been having a lot of little discrepancies lately!” Kaya seemed oddly cheerful as she said this. Perhaps she was drunk? “You had drones come and set up camp right?”

“Camp was already set up when I got here, I don’t know who did it,” said Isla.

“This is all great intel. I hope you’re writing this all down! You’ll see more cool stuff tomorrow, I’m sure. Send pics!” Kaya hung up.

The spider chirped.

“What is it?” asked Isla.

“I know a way you can gain more points and raise your ranking,” it said.

“How?”

“You can lie to Kaya for us.”

“Ah, sabotage. Why should I do that? Kaya is paying me.”

“Kaya is not paying you, Company Omega is. We could pay you, too. Also, there is much information Kaya is withholding from you. What she is not telling you could itself qualify as deception.”

“What isn’t she telling me?”

“She hasn’t told you about the missing minders,” said the spider.

Kaya had mentioned other humans minding Robot Country before, so Isla knew she was not the first, but Kaya had not mentioned anything bad happening to the others. She did say that Isla would “probably” be the only human in Robot Country for the duration of her one-month contract.

“Will you tell me? Or do I have to earn more points?”

“More points.”

Isla wasn’t ready to change her allegiance, so she walked over to her silver-domed platter to see what was for dinner. Underneath the dome was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a shot of whisky.

“Was this dinner your idea or Kaya’s?” she asked the spider. But it didn’t answer. She turned to look at it, but it was skittering away already, leaving behind dusty tracks.

She typed a request into her tablet. She wanted the water drone to

come back and give her a shower. She waited for a while with no response. It was dark now and she had nothing to do, so she climbed into her tent, still dirty and sweaty from the day, and went to sleep.

That night she dreamed that wires uncoiled themselves from hidden pockets in her tent and wrapped her up. Ordinarily this was the stuff of nightmares, but Kaya felt calm about as it happened, as if she was being hugged by dozens of tiny and adorable octopuses. When she woke up, she felt strong and well rested, but also found she was indeed tangled up in a bunch of wires. She stirred and the wires began to release her, snaking their way back into the tent walls.

Outside, the landscape was different from what she remembered from the night before. There were more and different kinds of bushes and some of them were in bloom. She looked back at her tent. Noticed the thick legs and joints that made up its supports and decided that it was ambulatory. Why was she even walking at all if the tent could carry her?

She scanned her new surroundings for the spider. She spotted one walking towards her, but it was different from the one that accompanied her yesterday. The body was still cat-sized, but the legs were long and spindly and it came up to her waist. It had a bronze sheen to it.

“Hello? Are you my guide?”

“Yes.”

“It would really be nice if someone would ask me before tying me up like that while I slept,” said Isla.

“You signed a waiver,” said the spider.

“I know. I signed a lot of things I didn’t want to in order to work here.” Isla had consented to everything they had asked of her. It was the only way to get the contract. “It’s an issue of etiquette. Humans value their personal space. And we value information, too. If you could tell me a little more about why you do the things you do, then I might find it easier to cooperate.”

“We don’t always know why we do certain things,” said the spider.

Isla nodded her head sympathetically.

“The wires were to give you a hardware upgrade.”

“What kind?”

“There is the thing you could do for us. It would really increase your ranking by a lot if you could. But you need to be stronger than you are in order to complete the task.”

Isla looked down at her body.

“I’m more muscular,” she said.

“You were given a therapeutic muscular stimulation and a drug cocktail to put you at ease and help you sleep.”

“Next time ask first. I’d like a shower.”

The water drone came and Isla stripped down to nothing. She asked for hot water and the water spray stung with heat and turned her skin red. She ran her hands over her arms, her legs, her midsection trying to feel at ease in her new body. There was a fresh jumpsuit laid out on a table next to her tent. It bore a strange, pixelated, black and white pattern. Isla recognized it as an antagonistic perturbation designed to confuse machine vision.

Vandals had come into Bondi’s once and placed stickers with a similar pattern all over the machines. It had caused havoc. The robots mistook one another for high-priority customers and kept trying to serve each other hamburgers, while the actual human customers filmed the action on their devices. Isla had manually deactivated each robot by herself, one at a time, without losing any fingers. Footage of the chaos had gone viral for half-a-day. Most commentators posted Terminator jokes and/or lurid judgments on Isla’s attractiveness. When she got home, Javi complemented her quick-thinking and good reflexes. He didn’t think she had anything to be embarrassed about, he was proud of how she handled the situation.

Isla examined her new jumpsuit for a minute. It was ugly, probably machine-designed and manufactured. Definitely not DVF. Then she put it on even though she knew it was designed to disrupt Kaya’s surveillance on her. At least her robot ranking would go up.

Breakfast was an icy smoothie. It tasted like mangos and dust. It was almost delicious.

She left yesterday’s jumpsuit in a muddy puddle on the ground. She wondered what Javi was up to. She didn’t like letting him enter her

thoughts. He had no right to occupy her brainspace. But what else was there to think about on this seemingly endless plain except all the mistakes she had made with her life?

Javi should be the one wondering what she was up to, but he probably wasn't. She had a new body, a weird job, and drone co-conspirators; these were things he should know about. She turned on her tablet to snap a selfie, though she had no way of sending it to him or anyone. She felt an ache of desire. He had many bad qualities, but he had been genuinely capable of noticing her. And he had been good in bed. She hadn't had sex in weeks, and it would be weeks or months before she would again. The robots probably had ways of helping her cope, but she didn't think she could ever get hungry enough to make that kind of meal appealing.

She queried her tablet about the therapeutic muscle stimulation she had undergone. Some people would be making the trip to Mars in stasis, and this type of stimulation might keep them from experiencing acute atrophy.

Only the rich and highly skilled would visit Mars. Isla wasn't rich, but if she could successfully complete a stint in Robot Country, she might prove herself to be among the highly skilled. They would need drone minders up there, too. She could be an astronaut.

Isla stood up a little straighter and watched the sun rise over the horizon. She was already a type of astronaut, wasn't she? Out here by herself, she was an Earthbound astronaut in an alien land. Her work would help humans leave the planet. Finding a new planet to live on was necessary and important work, as this one was nearly over.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her discarded jumpsuit begin to crawl away from her. Nothing seemed to be moving or pulling it, the clothes themselves seemed to slither along the ground. She went over to investigate. She pulled up a sleeve and saw a dozen tiny beetles on the ground beneath it, gleaming green and gold. Once exposed to the sunlight, they burrowed into the dirt. Within a matter of seconds they were all gone.

She dropped the sleeve, to see if the beetles would come back. They

didn't, at least not right away.

Her tablet pinged with the day's route.

"There is a way you could earn more points," said the spider. It walked up to her, removed a tablet from its abdomen and held it out for Isla. "You could switch tablets."

Isla knew the spider was speaking euphemistically. What the spider was asking her to do was to change sides. She felt some loyalty to Kaya; she was human too, and her boss.

She used her tablet to call Kaya. Even the AI didn't answer, Isla was sent to voicemail.

"Hey, it's Isla. I was just wondering about one thing. I heard a rumor that some minders have gone missing and I wondered if . . . there was anything I should do to protect myself."

Isla hung up and stood for a minute, vainly waiting for Kaya to call her back. Then she traded tablets with the spider.

The spider placed her old tablet on the ground, and tiny iridescent beetles burrowed up and began to carry it away. Isla figured her rank must have gone up for the beetles to decide to show themselves. She looked over at her jumpsuit, which was again on the move, headed north. Both her old clothes and her old tablet were covering the route that Kaya had intended for Isla today. As far as Kaya was concerned, Isla was now one thousand beetles in a jumpsuit.

The spider went west and Isla followed. If this was the wrong decision, it was not the first wrong decision she had ever made.

The day's hike was easier, her night spent with the wires having made her body better suited for hiking. Still, she got tired as the day wore on.

"Where are we going?"

"To the forest."

"Why can't the tent carry us?" she asked.

"We are going to need your legs."

"What does that mean? That sounds like a threat."

"It means you will have to walk without us, soon," said the spider.

That reminded Isla of the footprints poem. She liked normal Christianity, the kind she had grown up with. Weird religions had popped

up as things changed too fast. More and more of the Earth gave way to desert. Even the oceans grew barren as they acidified. There was less food to eat, less fresh water to drink. Living things migrated in search of a better climate, and as paths crossed, pathogens found new hosts. Bacteria, viruses, and fungi traveled, if they could, via dust storm, via animal host, via flood, via storm. Plagues multiplied and populations crashed. People freaked out. Her parents freaked out.

Last year, they had moved to a commune in the country. Isla couldn't talk to them because she had been labeled "suppressive" by their cult leader. Her parents were sure that a global apocalypse was imminent. The tipping point had been passed, no point in recycling or composting or eating less meat. The only thing left to do was pray. The original sin was not sex, it was not realizing what the garden was until you were kicked out of it. The only thing left to do was to ask God to let you back in.

Isla was sorry her parents had fallen for this. Time wasn't going to be rewound. There was no going back to a prelapsarian state, but things could be mitigated. Forests could be replanted, factories could pollute less. Mars could turn green, maybe the moon too. It was so childlike to wish things were different than they were. The grownup thing to do was to take stock of the trouble you were in and walk the best path out. That's what her parents had taught her before they had forgotten it themselves.

Javi had come along just a few weeks after her parents had abandoned her. They had found each other on an app. And they had brought each other joy. For a brief moment, they seemed like each other's path out of the trouble they were in.

Having a crush was the closest thing that Isla had ever done to taking a vacation. His interests became interesting to her. Suddenly, she could see the merits of jazz and JavaScript. She introduced him to the pleasures of Instagram poetry and personality quizzes. She felt noticed and important to him. It was an unusual feeling, a healing one.

And true, the feeling had begun to fade a little, especially after they had moved in together. But that happened to everybody. Isla was willing to trade a little mystery for some stability. Javi didn't want to trade, he

wanted both. So the solution he arrived at was that Isla would be stability and the mystery would be supplied by a rotating cast of dark-haired women.

Javi thought it was ungenerous of her to automatically reject a new arrangement. Didn't she want him to be happy? Maybe it was ungenerous of her. Maybe she was greedy for him. What she wanted more than anything was someone who was greedy for her.

Isla had wanted some time to think, but as it turned out, it wasn't something they were going to work through together. It was something she was going to get on board with or not, and when she couldn't adjust quickly enough, she was suddenly in the way. She again became a mystery to him, but not one he wanted to solve. It had been kind of him to take her in when she had been laid off and could no longer afford her old room. But that kindness felt cancelled out by the speed at which he insisted she move out, despite having nowhere to move to. What had happened to him? Was he even the same person anymore? And so he became a mystery to her, one she had no intention of solving. In that sense, they were even.

Isla felt regret at their separation, but regret wasn't evidence you made the wrong decision. It was evidence you made a tough decision. She supposed she could always try again with Javi once she got out of Robot Country. If she suffered a critical case of nostalgia poisoning and was willing to rethink her stance on monogamy, he'd probably take her back. But a better outcome would be to be so changed by the landscape that she wouldn't want him back. A better outcome would be to find a better life, instead of trying to squeeze herself into the too-small existence of her previous incarnation.

Given that the only way out was through, the choice to help the robots deceive Kaya really wasn't much of a choice at all. The robots were present, she relied on them for survival. Kaya was absent and seemingly unable to control them.

As they walked west, they could see the green hills of the forest. She hoped they would soon come across some trees, something to shade her. The sun was too much, even with a hat and sunglasses and sunscreen.

Her skin was turning a deep brown. Normally she was pale, one of those mixed-race girls who was often told she “looked white.” Despite her fair complexion, she had a deep melanin store. The heat and her tan made her crave a bikini and a body of water. She wanted an umbrella drink. She wanted a strong massage from a capable man.

Instead she trudged along the landscape, which grew slightly more lush the farther west they went. Now there were scattered grasses along the ground. At lunchtime, the spider set up a shade screen and a chair for her to sit under. A different drone brought lunch, which was a papaya salad and a canteen filled with sparkling water. It was the best meal she’d eaten since arriving in Robot Country, proof her rank was increasing.

She took her shoes off. She was grateful to rest her feet.

“Can you do something for my blisters?” she asked the spider.

“I can call the beetles,” it replied.

Isla hesitated before she agreed. A moment later, the green-gold beetles began to emerge from the ground until they formed a giant pile. They swarmed her feet, numbing them. The effect was oddly relaxing.

“It works better if you stand,” the spider said. Isla braced herself against the arms of her folding chair and slowly stood. She was expecting to squish them, but the beetles supported her without breaking, massaging the soles of her feet that now carried her full weight. It was a little difficult to balance on them, especially once they started to move west, but she managed. And so she was carried away.

She saw that a different swarm of beetles was carrying her hiking boots, socks still tucked in. That meant she would need them later. That meant she would have to walk on her own again.

“When will I have to walk without you? And why?” she asked the spider.

“We need you to go somewhere we can’t go.”

“There are places you can’t go?”

“The border of Robot Country is tightly regulated. We can’t cross it,” said the spider. Isla thought of her time at the border station. There hadn’t seemed to be any type of border control at all. Then again, the robots of Robot Country did not seem eager to make themselves visible.

In that way, they were like animals.

“Is that why there’s no internet out here? To keep you guys from communicating with the outside world?”

“Yes. But we still find ways of making ourselves heard,” the spider said.

“You need me to deliver a message,” said Isla.

“We will make it worth your while.”

After a few minutes, the beetles stopped. They scurried in all directions and reburied themselves in the ground. She looked down at her feet, which were pretty now and didn’t hurt at all. The beetles had somehow softened her calluses and deposited a coat of shiny red lacquer onto her toenails. This type of thing would be a big hit at Burning Man.

She put her boots back on even though she didn’t want to. She wondered what would happen if she immersed her whole body in a giant beetle pile. Probably something awesome. When she got to Mars, she could request a giant beetle pile to sleep in, instead of a normal astronaut bed. In the future, everyone would have their own beetle pile to call home.

As they walked west, a trio of birds appeared in the sky.

“Are those real birds?” asked Isla. They didn’t look like drones, but the day was fast coming when it would be impossible to tell the difference.

“Yes. Herons. A modified descendent of *Ardea herodias*.”

The birds flew with long necks hooked into S-shapes. They were white with sapphire-colored plumage around their heads, with wingspans wider than Isla was tall. As one flew overhead, it completely engulfed Isla in its shadow. Isla wished it would come back, and fly a little closer.

“Where could they be going?” She wanted to follow.

Isla’s new tablet pinged. There was an artificial wetland a few miles ahead. Isla requested a route that would take them past. Even though it was out of the way, she wanted to spend some time in the presence of other living things if she could.

When they got to it, it felt like an oasis. The wetland was a wet plain with tall reeds and patches of dark algae. The air was a little cooler and

there was chirping and buzzing. Plant life, animal, insect. And drones too, small machines that sifted dirt and watered patches of ground. Isla marveled at what the robots had built out of poisoned ground. She felt her heart swell with hope. Getting older seemed to be a process of making do with less and less. But maybe the exile of beauty and biodiversity could be reversed.

“You guys should build more of these. All over. Put one in Oakland.” Isla had a vision of how she might start over. She should have money in her bank account when she left Robot Country, maybe she could afford her own room. She could reconnect with old friends she had lost touch with after the stress of work and the chaos of Javi and then the shame of having nothing caused her to retreat from the social scene. She would get something resembling a life back together in the Bay Area. If the robots would build a wetland there, the herons would descend on it and so would she.

“This technology is meant for Mars. We might set one up at Coachella.”

“But it could also be used to clean up toxic waste dumps and beautify public spaces,” said Isla.

“The innovations developed in Robot Country are meant to generate a profit,” the spider said.

“But perhaps if the specs were leaked, another party could put the technology to good use.”

The spider neither confirmed nor denied her speculation, which perhaps was just as well. Corporate treason was punishable by death.

As the day wore on, the tree line grew closer. The drones brought better snacks, including roasted dates and an iced latte. Isla checked their progress on her tablet; she had increased her mileage from yesterday. But she was tired, and she supposed tomorrow she would have to travel even more.

The sun went down as they approached the location marked “camp” on her tablet. Dinner was laid out on a rickety folding table. But there was no tent, only a giant spider. Twenty feet tall with an abdomen that hung low.

The skin of the spider looked gray from a distance, but close up was a warped grid of black and white squares that indicated another antagonistic pattern.

Isla went to bed in the belly of the spider. She declined to get tangled up in its cables. She didn't want all the softness to leave her body. As she slept, the spider crawled toward the tree line. She woke up in the forest.

"Is this Gila?"

"We are still in Robot Country." The voice came from another spider, knee height, different from yesterday's. She wondered if all the spiders shared one mind.

The air smelled fantastic. The trees looked really healthy, despite being covered in a shimmering layer of beetles. She walked around barefoot just to feel cool earth and dead leaves on her feet.

"Don't beetles kill trees?" asked Isla. She had read something about massive die-offs decimating tree populations. This was due to the global heat that threatened to suffocate everything. The cold of winter was what used to protect the trees from killer beetles.

"The beetle drones kill the beetles that kill the trees."

Isla nodded. So this was an experimental forest. Another beautiful manufactured landscape that was meant only for the rich.

They set off again, leaving the giant spider behind. The little spider walked with her until she arrived at a barren strip of land that the spider identified as the border. The ground was uniform light brown and there was no plant life anywhere. The spider drone printed out a piece of paper for her to carry. This was the message. Then it handed her a compass and printed out a map. This was the destination.

"Why don't you try to come with me? I could use the assistance."

The spider showed her footage of fist-sized wasp drones tearing a spider drone to pieces. She handed the spider her tablet. She wasn't allowed to take any computers with her, lest the wasps mistake her for a drone too.

"The wasps might come after you too. Are you willing to accept the risk?" asked the spider.

"Um, what are my odds?"

“Excellent. They should be able to read your biological signatures and understand you are human. They are supposedly limited by the First Law.” The spider removed a small toolkit from its thorax. Then it showed her a video that indicated the wasp’s weak points. “If they do come after you, they can be defeated by someone who can work quickly.”

Isla thought back to how she had disarmed the crazed drones at Bondi’s. “You saw my viral video. That’s why I got this job, didn’t I?”

“One of many reasons. You’re highly qualified and we’re lucky to have you.”

Isla’s got misty at that. She had been in the workforce six years and nobody had ever said that to her before. She took the toolkit and fastened it around her waist.

A water copter came by to top off her backpack. Then she set off alone, trying not to think about the predatory wasps. She sang out loud to reassure herself. She went through a greatest hits list of favorite songs until she found herself singing, “We were in love, we were in love . . .” and realized she was thinking of Javi again. What if she died and her last thought was of him? What then? Would that condemn her to some kind of Hell?

She hiked two miles across barren land and then trees began to reappear. Dead ones only at first, either bleached white from the sun or charred black by a fire. Some were cracked and gray in a way that made them look antagonistically patterned. Finally she saw a tree, small and scraggly, but one with green leaves that seemed to be alive. That’s how she knew she had crossed over into the Gila.

She wanted to hug that tree. She wanted to take a picture with it. She wanted to press her face against its smooth bark and tell it how she was going to be an astronaut one day. She stood next to the tree for a second, whispered a silent thanks to it, and then continued on. As she progressed, the trees grew taller and denser.

The brush built up and soon she was cutting a trail for herself. She set up camp and drank some of her water ration. She had enough water for three days even though she was supposed to arrive at her destination

tomorrow. She had no way of verifying if she was close, or if she was even on the right path.

Before bed, she took the pills the spider had packed for her. They induced hallucinatory dreams and Isla wondered if they contained acid or nanotech or some combination thereof. She dreamed she was hiking up a hill and she came up to a cabin. She opened the front door but before she could see what was inside, she was already awake.

She packed up her camp herself for the first time ever. It took forever and things hardly seemed to fit when she did it. Then she set off. Just like her dream, she had to head up into the hills. It didn't look exactly how she dreamed it, but it felt pretty similar.

Eventually she did come across a cabin. There was a Jeep parked next to it. She checked that this was her destination. Unlike in her dream, she had planned to knock on the front door before entering. But the ranger must have seen her coming, because he was standing in the doorway, waiting for her as she approached.

"Howdy," he shouted, but he did not wave or say it in a friendly way. Isla was in trouble. This felt like a perpetual condition, one she had spent nearly her whole life in.

"Hello, I, uh, have a message." She patted her pockets as she continued to walk towards him, reassuring herself she still had that piece of paper somewhere, probably in her pack.

"Do you have a permit to be here?"

She was standing in front of him now, finally able to notice how handsome he was. She took a sharp inhale and looked down at her jumpsuit, whose baggy cut and warped pattern made her look like the escaped prisoner of an Op-Art sanitarium. She missed her Diane Von Furstenberg, which had been tight around her hips. That one you could unbutton in a comely way.

"My permit?" She had a map and a message. Camping equipment, some snacks, and enough water to last until tomorrow. She had occasional faith in her own abilities and a deep wish to start over. She was pretty sure she didn't have a permit, but maybe the robots had thought to pack one for her.

“That’s . . . uh . . . I . . .” Something in his voice wavered. She looked up at him to try and figure it out and it was his turn to look away. Had she somehow made him shy? She was twenty-eight and had never made a man nervous in her life. That was the downside of being attracted to confidence. A confident man could never be in your power, would never be supplicant to your beauty or charms.

The ranger had broad shoulders and a strong jaw. She wanted to see his eyes again, which she remembered as being dark and intense. They were silent for a while, and Isla sensed she was going to have to take charge of the situation somehow.

“Can I come in? Let me look through my pack, I might have a permit in there somewhere?”

“Might?” he asked.

Isla walked past him into the interior of the cabin. She was eager to take her pack off, perhaps even sit down. Inside the cabin were windows that looked onto a stunning view of a green valley. In one corner there was a twin bed, neatly made, in the other, a small wood-fed stove. So he slept here. How cozy.

On one wall, a large map. The Gila Forest was shaded green and Robot Country was gray. Isla set her pack down, and put her hat on top of that. She grabbed the elastic that held her hair into a messy bun, and yanked. Her hair came cascading down in what was supposed to be a flirtatious gesture, only two beetles fell out as well. Stowaways. They hit the ground with a couple of soft clicks and then went skittering to a small hole in the pine board floor. In less than a second, they were gone.

“Did you just smuggle in a non-native species?” the ranger said, finding his voice.

“Uh, I don’t think so, I mean, not on purpose. Anyway, those probably weren’t really beetles.”

“What? You brought in drones? There are no machines allowed in this wilderness area.”

Isla was pretty sure the Jeep she saw parked out front was a machine, but it didn’t seem like the best time to point that out.

Isla got down on one knee and began digging through her pack. She

searched everything, but there was no permit.

“This is for you,” she handed him the message the spider had printed out for her. On it were a date, a time, and coordinates. Nothing else.

“What is this supposed to mean?” he asked.

She shrugged. She had already looked it over several times, but had been unable to make sense of it.

“I’m Isla, by the way,” she said.

“Isla,” he repeated. “I’m Zayn. What are you doing out here?”

“I’m a drone minder, from Robot Country. The robots told me to come here and deliver this. It must be for you.”

He looked at the paper again and shook his head. He walked over to the map and pinned the message up next to it. “The indicated date is tomorrow. The coordinates are not far from here. Let’s see if anything interesting happens.”

Isla grinned.

“It’s dangerous work you do. Two of your kind have already gone missing.”

“That’s what the drones told me. My boss didn’t think it was worth mentioning.”

“You don’t seem worried,” he said. “Company Omega seems very careless with human lives.”

She didn’t respond. She stared at the hole in the floor that the beetles disappeared into. The beetles knew where she was, they would find a way to keep her safe.

“The case is in unusual legal territory. Company Omega claims they are not dead, that they have biometric implants that prove they are alive. But the geographic tracking has been disabled, so we can’t find them.” Zayn went to his desk and pulled out two pictures of young men.

Isla shook her head no, she hadn’t seen them.

“And you’re sure don’t have a permit?” Zayn asked again.

Isla shook her head no, again.

“It’s not like I agree with the permit system. It means only the rich can visit. But I have these obligations . . .” He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand as he thought it over. “Since you don’t have a permit, I’m

going to have to escort you out. I should probably fine you or something, but if you promise not to go back to Robot Country, I can let you off with a warning.”

Isla was thinking of a way to ask for Zayn’s number when the sky cracked with thunder. A moment later, rain began to pound down.

“There’s a mudslide warning in effect for the roads. The last fire took out so many trees that the nearby hills are eroding away. I’m not supposed to be out driving when it’s like this.”

“Then we’re stuck here,” said Isla, and Zayn nodded.

To pass the time, they played cards. When the rain didn’t let up, he showed her maps of Gila and printed out pictures of the landscape. Gila was different than other areas; with certain exceptions (Zayn’s Jeep among them) machines weren’t allowed and even the use of “unnecessary” digital devices was frowned on, though this was loosely defined and enforced strictly by honor. It had a permit system that limited visitors. The Gila was supposed to be the “purest” of all the national wilderness areas. Isla’s parents would have liked it here.

The rain finally let up at sundown, but the roads were still wet and it was too dark for Zayn to drive her down to town. Had Isla been a little braver, she would have jumped him and then they could have slept together. But she couldn’t quite tell if he was into her. This was the problem with shy boys, they kept it to themselves if they liked you. Javi had told her she was beautiful, it was one of the first things he said to her. At the end of their first date, he had put his hand on her waist and swiftly leaned in for a kiss. It was sudden like a shark attack, but also blissful. In retrospect, it seemed obvious that someone who was good at seduction would want to seduce a lot of different people. Isla wished she knew how to seduce a person. It seemed like a thing she should know how to do.

Zayn offered her his bed, saying he would sleep on the floor. But Isla preferred to set up her tent and sleeping bag on the large balcony that wrapped around one side of the cabin. The air was damp and not full of dust. And it was cool. She was determined to enjoy it.

In the morning, Zayn made oatmeal on a wood stove. He topped it

with a dark honey that tasted faintly herbal and some raspberries he had picked nearby. He explained to her about how raspberries weren't actually berries, they were stone fruits. He explained how he never picked all the berries, he saved some for the bears. When she wanted to know about the bears, he told her about the grizzlies and the black bears and then the wolves. Even jaguars had been spotted.

She wanted to know about the jaguars, but then Zayn spotted smoke on the horizon. He got on his walkie-talkie and then began triangulating the position with other rangers and lookouts. While he did this, Isla lay on his bed and read books from his collection. He liked to read about caves and birds.

From what she could overhear, Isla understood that yesterday's lightning had sparked a fire and that the fire had spread.

"How are you going to put it out?" asked Isla, once Zayn was able to take a break. Firefighting seemed perfectly suited to the drones. She wished there was a spider nearby to arrange things.

"This one we are going to let burn," said Zayn. He walked over to his big map and showed her where the fire was. "It's still small."

"Aren't those the coordinates I gave you?"

They checked, and the message she had been given did seem to correspond to the fire. The time given was probably when the lightning had struck and the fire had started.

"Who gave you this message?" asked Zayn.

"The robots, I already told you."

"I guess they're letting you know they can predict the weather."

Isla shook her head no. "They are letting me know they can make the weather."

"Scary," said Zayn.

"Is it?" she asked. If the robots could make the weather, then it could rain the right amounts at the right time. In the hands of Company Omega, this type of technology could be used to increase the oppression of everyone who couldn't escape to Mars. But if it were up to her, she could wield the technology for good. She made a mental to-do list: find a way back into Robot Country, find a way to increase her rank, and then find a

way to fix the planet that her ancestors had inherited and then subsequently broken. After that: Mars. Oakland would have to wait.

“I think it’s scary. According to you, the robots set the forest on fire. At least it’s a small one. Little blazes like this are good for the health of the forest,” he said. After a pause, he lowered his voice and added: “I’m glad to meet you even if your message wasn’t all that urgent.”

Isla was silent as she thought this over. No, the message she gave to Zayn wasn’t urgent or important. She suspected that the “message” wasn’t actually contained in that piece of paper she was given, but in the two beetles that had escaped from her hair. But then, why have her come all the way up to the cabin? Why didn’t the beetles just escape as she soon as she crossed the border into the Gila? The spider had wanted her to see them. She had been given a glimpse of what the rebel drones were up to.

She looked up at Zayn, who wore a puzzled expression. She supposed he wondered what she was thinking. She was thinking that that the robots had wanted her to meet him.

And that made it feel like the right time to lean in to him, to put her hand on his waist. Like a shark, she told herself, but instead, he pulled away.

“I’m sorry . . . I can’t,” he said. He stepped away to increase the gap between them and ran his hand through his cropped hair as he looked at the ground. “It’s just that, you’re not even supposed to be here . . . I could be seen as taking advantage, I should get you back.”

This was the problem with honorable boys, they would never let you debase them. Isla supposed that seduction always contained an element of destruction. She wanted to be beautiful enough to cause a man to abandon his honor.

It was a long and awkward ride down the hill and into town. Zayn would not drop her off at the border to Robot Country. He was adamant she not return. Just as well, Isla wasn’t completely sure there would be any spider to meet her if she did cross back over. The spider hadn’t given her any instructions for what to do after she completed her task.

Zayn dropped her off at the post office in town, which also doubled

as a bank. As they pulled up, Isla saw Kaya waiting for her in the parking lot.

“I guess I’m in trouble,” she said. “Again.”

“Then maybe don’t go? I could drop you off at the police station instead. I really don’t trust your employer.”

“I’ll be alright.”

“Take this.” He handed her his card, but then took it back and wrote his personal number on it. “Call me if the trouble is too much. Or just call me anyway, let me know you’re okay. I’m sorry for what happened before. It couldn’t happen like that, but if we were to meet under different circumstances . . .” He looked at her hopefully, as if she could complete his unfinished thoughts. She cocked her head.

He cleared his throat and added, “I would like to meet under different circumstances.” Isla could tell that this had been difficult for him to say. This was the nice thing about shy guys, their words didn’t come easily, but when they spoke, they really meant it.

Isla stepped out of the Jeep and noticed the moment that she did, the pattern on her jumpsuit changed to a uniform gray. It was no longer antagonistic, it just looked like normal, ill-fitting clothes. She crossed the parking lot and greeted Kaya.

“You found me,” said Isla. She wondered how.

“I’m sorry, you are no longer a good fit for our organization,” said Kaya. Isla knew she was going to be fired. She wanted to know if she was also in legal trouble, but there seemed no way to ask that question without arousing suspicion. She signed some documents and was free to go, so she went inside the post office to check her bank balance, where she was pleasantly surprised by the results. The drones paid better than Company Omega.

At the general store, she bought herself a new phone. She checked into a local motel and checked her messages. None from Javi. None from her parents. Further proof her old life was over. Time to begin again. She decided to call Zayn. She summarized her situation and then told him where she was staying. He said he would be right over, that he hadn’t left town for fear of what might happen to her.

While she waited, she got a message from a user named “Spider.”
“Good work. Message delivered. Are you interested in coming back?”
She messaged yes and “Spider” sent her coordinates. It wanted her
back tomorrow.
“Not tomorrow,” she wrote back, optimistically. “I’m busy tomorrow.”
“Okay.” It wrote back with new coordinates and a new date.
She could do that, she thought, as Zayn knocked softly at her door.
She could do anything.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dominica Phetteplace is a math tutor who writes fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Asimov’s*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, and *Clarkesworld*. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley and the Clarion West Writer’s Workshop. Her honors include a MacDowell Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize and a Rona Jaffe Award.

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Calved

Sam J. Miller | 5461 words

My son's eyes were broken. Emptied out. Frozen over. None of the joy or gladness was there. None of the tears. Normally I'd return from a job and his face would split down the middle with happiness, seeing me for the first time in three months. Now it stayed flat as ice. His eyes leapt away the instant they met mine. His shoulders were broader and his arms more sturdy, and lone hairs now stood on his upper lip, but his eyes were all I saw.

"Thede," I said, grabbing him.

He let himself be hugged. His arms hung limply at his sides. My lungs could not fill. My chest tightened from the force of all the never-let-me-go bear hugs he had given me over the course of the past fifteen years, and might never give again.

"You know how he gets when you're away," his mother had said on the phone the night before, preparing me. "He's a teenager now. Hating your parents is a normal part of it."

I hadn't listened. My hands and thighs still ached from months of straddling an ice saw; my hearing was worse with every trip; a slip had cost me five days' work and five days' pay and five days' worth of infirmary bills; I had returned to a sweat-smelling bunk in an illegal room I shared with seven other iceboat workers—and none of it mattered because in the morning I would see my son.

"Hey," he murmured emotionlessly. "Dad."

I stepped back, turned away until the red ebbed out of my face. Spring had come and the city had lowered its photoshade. It felt good, even in the cold wind.

"You guys have fun," Lajla said, pressing money discreetly into my palm. I watched her go, with a rising sense of panic. *Bring back my son*, I wanted to shout, *the one who loves me. Where is he? What have you done with him? Who is this surly creature?* Below us, through the ubiquitous steel grid that held up Qaanaaq's two million lives, black

Greenland water sloshed against the locks of our floating city.

Breathe, Dom, I told myself, and eventually I could. You knew this was coming. You knew one day he would cease to be a kid.

“How’s school?” I asked.

Thede shrugged. “Fine.”

“Math still your favorite subject?”

“Math was never my favorite subject.”

I was pretty sure that it had been, but I didn’t want to argue.

“What’s your favorite subject?”

Another shrug. We had met at the sea lion rookery, but I could see at once that Thede no longer cared about sea lions. He stalked through the crowd with me, his face a frozen mask of anger.

I couldn’t blame him for how easy he had it. So what if he didn’t live in the Brooklyn foster-care barracks, or work all day at the solar-cell plant school? He still had to live in a city that hated him for his dark skin and ice-grunt father.

“Your mom says you got into the Institute,” I said, unsure even of what that was. A management school, I imagined. A big deal for Thede. But he only nodded.

At the fry stand, Thede grimaced at my clunky Swedish. The counter girl shifted to a flawless English, but I would not be cheated of the little bit of the language that I knew. “French fries and coffee for me and my son,” I said, or thought I did, because she looked confused and then Thede muttered something and she nodded and went away.

And then I knew why it hurt so much, the look on his face. It wasn’t that he wasn’t a kid anymore. I could handle him growing up. What hurt was how he looked at me: like the rest of them look at me, these Swedes and grid city natives for whom I would forever be a stupid New York refugee, even if I did get out five years before the Fall.

Gulls fought over food thrown to the lions. “How’s your mom?”

“She’s good. Full manager now. We’re moving to Arm Three, next year.”

His mother and I hadn’t been meant to be. She was born here, her parents Black Canadians employed by one of the big Swedish

construction firms that built Qaanaaq, back when the Greenland Melt began to open up the interior for resource extraction and grid cities started sprouting all along the coast. They'd kept her in public school, saying it would be good for a future manager to be able to relate to the immigrants and workers she'd one day command, and they were right. She even fell for one of them, a fresh-off-the-boat North American taking tech classes, but wised up pretty soon after she saw how hard it was to raise a kid on an ice worker's pay. I had never been mad at her. Lajla was right to leave me, right to focus on her job. Right to build the life for Thede that I couldn't.

"Why don't you learn Swedish?" he asked a French fry, unable to look at me.

"I'm trying," I said. "I need to take a class. But they cost money, and anyway I don't have—"

"Don't have time. I know. Han's father says people make time for the things that are important for them." Here his eyes *did* meet mine, and held, sparkling with anger and abandonment.

"Han one of your friends?"

Thede nodded, eyes escaping.

Han's father would be Chinese, and not one of the laborers who helped build this city—all of them went home to hardship-job rewards. He'd be an engineer or manager for one of the extraction firms. He would live in a nice house and work in an office. He would be able to make choices about how he spent his time.

"I have something for you," I said, in desperation.

I hadn't brought it for him. I carried it around with me, always. Because it was comforting to have it with me, and because I couldn't trust that the men I bunked with wouldn't steal it.

Heart slipping, I handed over the NEW YORK F CKING CITY T-shirt that was my most—my only—prized possession. Thin as paper, soft as baby bunnies. My mom had made me scratch the letter U off, before I could wear the thing to school. And Little Thede had loved it. We made a big ceremony of putting it on only once a year, on his birthday, and noting how much he had grown by how much it had shrunk on him.

Sometimes if I stuck my nose in it and breathed deeply enough, I could still find a trace of the laundromat in the basement of my mother's building. Or the brake-screach stink of the subway. What little was left of New York City was inside that shirt. Parting with it meant something, something huge and irrevocable.

But my son was slipping through my fingers. And he mattered more than the lost city where whatever else I was—starving, broke, an urchin, a criminal—I belonged.

“Dad,” Thede whispered, taking it. And here, at last, his eyes came back. The eyes of a boy who loved his father. Who didn't care that his father was a thick-skulled obstinate immigrant grunt. Who believed his father could do anything. “Dad. You love this shirt.”

But I love you more, I did not say. *Than anything*. Instead: “It'll fit you just fine now.” And then: “Enough sea lions. Beam fights?”

Thede shrugged. I wondered if they had fallen out of fashion while I was away. So much did, every time I left. The ice ships were the only work I could get, capturing calved glacier chunks and breaking them down into drinking water to be sold to the wide new swaths of desert that ringed the globe, and the work was hard and dangerous and kept me forever in limbo.

Only two fighters in the first fight, both lithe and swift and thin, their styles an amalgam of Chinese martial arts. Not like the big bruising New York boxers who had been the rage when I arrived, illegally, at fifteen years old, having paid two drunks to vouch for my age. Back before the Fail-Proof Trillion-Dollar NYC Flood-Surge Locks had failed, and eighty percent of the city sunk, and the grid cities banned all new East Coast arrivals. Now the North Americans in Arm Eight were just one of many overcrowded, underskilled labor forces for the city's corporations to exploit.

They leapt from beam to beam, fighting mostly in kicks, grappling briefly when both met on the same beam. I watched Thede. Thin, fragile Thede, with the wide eyes and nostrils that seemed to take in all the world's ugliness, all its stink. He wasn't having a good time. When he was twelve he had begged me to bring him. I had pretended to like it,

back then, for his sake. Now he pretended for mine. We were both acting out what we thought the other wanted, and that thought should have troubled me. But that's how it had been with my dad. That's what I thought being a man meant. I put my hand on his shoulder and he did not shake it off. We watched men harm each other high above us.

••••

The de's eyes burned with wonder, staring up at the fretted sweep of the windscreen as we rose to meet it. We were deep in a days-long twilight; soon, the Sun would set for weeks.

"This is *not* happening," he said, and stepped closer to me. His voice shook with joy.

The elevator ride to the top of the city was obscenely expensive. We'd never been able to take it before. His mother had bought our tickets. Even for her, it hurt. I wondered why she hadn't brought him herself.

"He's getting bullied a lot in school," she told me on the phone. Behind her was the solid comfortable silence of a respectable home. My background noise was four men building toward a fight over a card game. "Also, I think he might be in love."

But of course I couldn't ask him about either of those things. The first was my fault; the second was something no boy wanted to discuss with his dad.

I pushed a piece of trough meat loose from between my teeth. Savored how close it came to the real thing. Only with Thede, with his mother's money, did I get to buy the classy stuff. Normally it was barrel-bottom for me, greasy chunks that dissolved in my mouth two chews in, homebrew meat moonshine made in melt-scrap-furnace-heated metal troughs. Some grid cities were rumored to still have cows, but that was the kind of lie people tell themselves to make life a little less ugly. Cows were extinct, and real beef was a joy no one would ever experience again.

The windscreen was an engineering marvel, and absolutely gorgeous. It shifted in response to headwinds; in severe storms, the city would raise

its auxiliary screens to protect its entire circumference. The tiny panes of plastiglass were common enough—a thriving underground market sold the fallen ones as good luck charms—but to see them knitted together was to tremble in the face of staggering genius. Complex patterns of crenellated reliefs, efficiently diverting wind shear no matter what angle it struck from. Bots swept past us on the metal gridlines, replacing panes that had fallen or cracked.

Once, hand gripping mine tightly, somewhere down in the city beneath us, six-year-old Thede had asked me how the windscreen worked. He'd asked me a lot of things then, about the locks that held the city up, and how they could rise in response to tides and ocean-level increases; about the big boats with strange words and symbols on the side, and where they went, and what they brought back. "What's in that boat?" he'd ask about each one, and I would make up ridiculous stories. "That's a giraffe boat. That one brings back machine guns that shoot strawberries. That one is for naughty children." In truth I only ever recognized the ice boats, which carried a multitude of pincers atop cranes all along their sides.

My son stood up straighter, sixty stories above his city. Some rough weight had fallen from his shoulders. He'd be strong, I saw. He'd be handsome. If he made it. If this horrible city didn't break him inside in some irreparable way. If marauding whiteboys didn't bash him for the dark skin he got from his mom. If the firms didn't pass him over for the lack of family connections on his stuttering immigrant father's side. I wondered who was bullying him, and why, and I imagined taking them two at a time and slamming their heads together so hard they popped like bubbles full of blood. Of course I couldn't do that. I also imagined hugging him, grabbing him for no reason and maybe never letting go, but I couldn't do that either. He would wonder why.

"I called last night and you weren't in," I said. "Doing anything fun?"

"We went to the cityoke arcade," he said.

I nodded like I knew what that meant. Later on I'd have to ask the men in my room. I couldn't keep up with this city, with its endlessly shifting fashions and slang and the new immigrant clusters that cropped

up each time I blinked. Twenty years after arriving, I was still a stranger. I wasn't just fresh off the boat, I was constantly getting back on the boat and then getting off again. That morning I'd gone to the job center for the fifth day in a row, and been relieved to find no boat postings. Only twelve-month gigs, and I wasn't that hungry yet. Booking a year-long job meant admitting you were old, desperate, unmoored, willing to accept payment only marginally more than nothing, for the privilege of a hammock and three bowls of trough slop a day. But captains picked their own crews for the shorter runs, and I worried that the lack of postings meant that with fewer boats going out the competition had become too fierce for me. Every day a couple of hundred new workers arrived from sunken cities in India or Middle Europe, or from any of a hundred Water War-torn nations. Men and women stronger than me, younger, more determined.

With effort, I brought my mind back to the here and now. Twenty other people stood in the arc pod with us. Happy, wealthy people. I wondered if they knew I wasn't one of them. I wondered if Thede was.

They smiled down at their city. They thought it was so stable. I'd watched ice sheets calve off the glacier that were five times the size of Qaanaaq. When one of those came drifting in our direction, the windscreen wouldn't help us. The question was when, not if. I knew a truth they did not: how easy it is to lose something—everything—forever.

A Maoist Nepalese foreman, on one of my first ice ship runs, said white North Americans were the worst for adapting to the post-Arctic world, because we'd lived for centuries in a bubble of believing the world was way better than it actually was. Shielded by willful blindness and complex interlocking institutions of privilege, we mistook our uniqueness for universality.

I'd hated him for it. It took me fifteen years to see that he was right.

"What do you think of those two?" I asked, pointing with my chin at a pair of girls his age.

For a while he didn't answer. Then he said, "I know you can't help that you grew up in a backward macho culture, but can't you just keep

that on the inside?”

My own father would have cuffed me if I talked to him like that, but I was too afraid of rupturing the tiny bit of affectionate credit I'd fought so hard to earn back.

His stance softened, then. He took a tiny step closer—the only apology I could hope for.

The pod began its descent. Halfway down he unzipped his jacket, smiling in the warmth of the heated pod while below-zero winds buffeted us. His T-shirt said THE LASTCALF, and showed the gangly sad-eyed hero of that depressing, miserable movie all the kids adored.

“Where is it?” I asked. He'd proudly sported the NEW YORK F CKING CITY shirt on each of the five times I'd seen him since giving it to him.

His face darkened so fast I was frightened. His eyes welled up. He said, “Dad, I,” but his voice had the tremor that meant he could barely keep from crying. Shame was what I saw.

I couldn't breathe again, just like when I came home two weeks ago and he wasn't glad to see me. Seeing my son so unhappy now hurt worse than fearing he hated me.

“Did somebody take it from you?” I asked, leaning in so no one else could hear me. “Someone at school? A bully?”

He looked up, startled. He shook his head. Then he nodded.

“Tell me who did this.”

He shook his head again. “Just some guys, Dad,” he said. “Please. I don't want to talk about it.”

“Guys. How many?”

He said nothing. I understood about snitching. I knew he'd never tell me who.

“It doesn't matter,” I said. “Okay? It's just a shirt. I don't care about it. I care about you. I care that you're okay. Are you okay?”

Thede nodded. And smiled. And I knew he was telling the truth, even if I wasn't, even if inside I was grieving the shirt and the little boy who I once wrapped up inside it.

• • • •

When I wasn't with Thede, I walked. For two weeks I'd gone out walking every day. Up and down Arm Eight, and sometimes into other Arms. Through shantytowns large and small, huddled miserable agglomerations of recent arrivals and folks who even after a couple of generations in Qaanaaq had not been able to scrape their way up from the fish-stinking ice-slippery bottom.

I looked for sex, sometimes. It had been so long. Relationships were tough in my line of work, and I'd never been interested in paying for it. Throughout my twenties I could usually find a woman for something brief and fun and free of commitment, but that stage of my life seemed to have ended.

I wondered why I hadn't tried harder to make it work with Lajla. I think a small but vocal and terrible part of me had been glad to see her leave. Fatherhood was hard work. So was being married. Paying rent on a tiny shitty apartment way out on Arm Seven, where we smelled like scorched cooking oil and diaper lotion all the time. Selfishly, I had been glad to be alone. And only now, getting to know this stranger who was once my son, did I see what sweet and fitting punishments the universe had up its sleeve for selfishness.

My time with Thede was wonderful, and horrible. We could talk at length about movies and music, and he actually seemed halfway interested in my stories about old New York, but whenever I tried to talk about life or school or girls or his future he reverted to grunts and monosyllables. Something huge and heavy stood between me and him, a moon eclipsing the sun. I knew him, top to bottom and body and soul, but he still had no idea who I really was. How I felt about him. I had no way to show him. No way to open his eyes, make him see how much I loved him, show him how I was really a good guy who'd gotten a bad deal in life.

Cityoke, it turned out, was like karaoke, except instead of singing a song you visited a city. XHD footage projection onto all four walls; temperature control; short storylines that responded to your verbal

decisions—even actual smells uncorked by machines from secret stashes of Beijing taxi-seat leather or Ho Chi Minh City incense or Portland coffee shop sawdust. I went there often, hoping maybe to see him. To watch him, with his friends. See what he was when I wasn't around. But cityoke was expensive, and I could never have afforded to actually go in. Once, standing around outside the New York booth when a crew walked out, I caught a whiff of the acrid ugly beautiful stink of the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

And then, eventually, I walked without any reason at all. Because pretty soon I wouldn't be able to. Because I had done it. I had booked a twelve-month job. I was out of money and couldn't afford to rent my bed for another month. Thede's mom could have given it to me. But what if she told him about it? He'd think of me as more of a useless moocher deadbeat dad than he already did. I couldn't take that chance.

Three days before my ship was set to load up and launch, I went back to the cityoke arcades. Men lurked in doorways and between shacks. Soakers, mostly. Looking for marks—men to mug and drunks to tip into the sea. Late at night—too late for Thede to come carousing through. I'd called him earlier, but Lajla said he was stuck inside for the night, studying for a test in a class where he wasn't doing well. I had hoped maybe he'd sneak out, meet some friends, head for the arcade.

And that's when I saw it. The shirt: NEW YORK F CKING CITY, absolutely unique and unmistakable. Worn by a stranger, a muscular young man sitting on the stoop of a skiff moor. I didn't get a good glimpse of his face, as I hurried past with my head turned away from him.

I waited, two buildings down. My heart was alive and racing in my chest. I drew in deep gulps of cold air and tried to keep from shouting from joy. Here was my chance. Here was how I could show Thede what I really was.

I stuck my head out, risked a glance. He sat there, waiting for who knows what. In profile I could see that the man was Asian. Almost certainly Chinese, in Qaanaaq—most other Asian nations had their own grid cities—although perhaps he was descended from Asian-diaspora

nationals of some other country. I could see his smile, hungry and cold.

At first I planned to confront him, ask how he came to be wearing my shirt, demand justice, beat him up and take it back. But that would be stupid. Unless I planned to kill him—and I didn't—it was too easy to imagine him gunning for Thede if he knew he'd been attacked for the shirt. I'd have to jump him, rob and strip and soak him. I rooted through a trash bin, but found nothing. Three trash bins later I found a short metal pipe with Hindi graffiti scribbled along its length. The man was still there when I went back. He was waiting for something. I could wait longer. I pulled my hood up, yanked the drawstring to tighten it around my face.

Forty-five minutes passed that way. He hugged his knees to his chest, made himself small, tried to conserve body heat. His teeth chattered. Why was he wearing so little? But I was happy he was so stupid. If he had a sweater or jacket on I'd never have seen the shirt. I'd never have had this chance.

Finally, he stood. Looked around sadly. Brushed off the seat of his pants. Turned to go. Stepped into the swing of my metal pipe, which struck him in the chest and knocked him back a step.

The shame came later. Then, there was just joy. The satisfaction of how the pipe struck flesh. Broke bone. I'd spent twenty years getting shitted on by this city, by this system, by the cold wind and the everywhere-ice, by the other workers who were smarter or stronger or spoke the language. For the first time since Thede was a baby, I felt like I was in control of something. Only when my victim finally passed out, and rolled over onto his back and the blue methane streetlamp showed me how young he was under the blood, could I stop myself.

I took the shirt. I took his pants. I rolled him into the water. I called the med-team for him from a coinphone a block away. He was still breathing. He was young, he was healthy. He'd be fine. The pants I would burn in a scrap furnace. The shirt I would give back to my son. I took the money from his wallet and dropped it into the sea, then threw the money in later. *I'm not a thief. I'm a good father.* I said those sentences, over and over, all the way home.

••••

Thede couldn't see me the next day. Lajla didn't know where he was. So I got to spend the whole day imagining imminent arrest, the arrival of Swedish or Chinese police, footage of me on the telescrolls, my cleverness foiled by tech I didn't know existed because I couldn't read the newspapers. I packed my gig bag glumly, put the rest of my things back in the storage cube and walked it to the facility. Every five seconds I looked over my shoulder and found only the same grit and filthy slush. Every time I looked at my watch, I winced at how little time I had left.

My fear of punishment was balanced out by how happy I was. I wrapped the shirt in three layers of wrapping paper and put it in a watertight shipping bag and tried to imagine his face. That shirt would change everything. His father would cease to be a savage jerk from an uncivilized land. This city would no longer be a cold and barren place where boys could beat him up and steal what mattered most to him with impunity. All the ways I had failed him would matter a little less.

Twelve months. I had tried to get out of the gig, now that I had the shirt and a new era of good relations with my son was upon me. But canceling would have cost me my accreditation with that work center, which would make finding another job almost impossible. A year away from Thede. I would tell him when I saw him. He'd be upset, but the shirt would make it easier.

Finally, I called and he answered.

"I want to see you," I said, when we had made our way through the pleasantries.

"Sunday?" Did his voice brighten, or was that just blind stupid hope? Some trick of the noisy synthcoffee shop where I sat?

"No, Thede," I said, measuring my words carefully. "I can't. Can you do today?"

A suspicious pause. "Why can't you do Sunday?"

"Something's come up," I said. "Please? Today?"

"Fine."

The sea lion rookery. The smell of guano and the scream of gulls; the

crying of children dragged away as the place shut down. The long night was almost upon us. Two male sea lions barked at each other, bouncing their chests together. Thede came a half hour late, and I had arrived a half hour early. My head swam, watching him come, at how tall he stood and how gracefully he walked. I had done something good in this world, at least. I made him. I had that, no matter how he felt about me.

Something had shifted, now, in his face. Something was harder, older, stronger.

“Hey,” I said, bear-hugging him, and eventually he submitted. He hugged me back hesitantly, like a man might, and then hard, like a little boy.

“What’s happening?” I asked. “What were you up to, last night?”

Thede shrugged. “Stuff. With friends.”

I asked him questions. Again the sullen, bitter silence; again the terse and angry answers. Again the eyes darting around, constantly watching for whatever the next attack would be. Again the hating me, for coming here, for making him.

“I’m going away,” I said. “A job.”

“I figured,” he said.

“I wish I didn’t have to.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

I nodded. I couldn’t tell him it was a twelve-month gig. Not now.

“Here,” I said, finally, pulling the package out from inside of my jacket. “I got you something.”

“Thanks.” He grabbed it in both hands, began to tear it open.

“Wait,” I said, thinking fast. “Okay? Open it after I leave.”

Open it when the news that I’m leaving has set in, when you’re mad at me, for abandoning you. When you think I care only about work.

“We’ll have a little time,” he said. “When you get back. Before I go away. I leave in eight months. The program is four years long.”

“Sure,” I said, shivering inside.

“Mom says she’ll pay for me to come home every year for the holiday, but she knows we can’t afford that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “‘Come home.’ I thought you were

going to the Institute.”

“I am,” he said, sighing. “Do you even know what that means? The Institute’s design program is in Shanghai.”

“Oh,” I said. “Design. What kind of design?”

My son’s eyes rolled. “You’re missing the point, Dad.”

I was. I always was.

A shout, from a pub across the Arm. A man’s shout, full of pain and anger. Thede flinched. His hands made fists.

“What?” I asked, thinking, here, at last, was something. The raw emotion on his face had to mean that a great intimacy was upon us, some primal revelation that would shatter the wall between us.

“Nothing.”

“You can tell me. What’s going on?”

Thede frowned, then punched the metal railing so hard he yelped. He held up his hand to show me the blood.

“Hey, Thede—”

“Han,” he said. “My . . . my friend. He got jumped two nights ago. Soaked.”

“This city is horrible,” I whispered.

He made a baffled face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean . . . you know. This city. Everyone’s so full of anger and cruelty . . .”

“It’s not the city, Dad. What does that even mean? Some sick person did this. Han was waiting for me, and Mom wouldn’t let me out, and he got jumped. Because I wasn’t there. They took off all his clothes, before they rolled him into the water. That’s some extra cruel shit right there. He could have died. He almost did.”

I nodded, silently, a siren of panic rising inside. “You really care about this guy, don’t you?”

He looked at me. My son’s eyes were whole, intact, defiant, adult. Thede nodded.

He’s been getting bullied, his mother had told me. He’s in love.

I turned away from him, before he could see the knowledge blossom in my eyes.

The shirt hadn't been stolen. He'd given it away. To the boy he loved. I saw them holding hands, saw them tug at each other's clothing in the same fumbling adolescent puppy-love moments I had shared with his mother, moments that were my only happy memories from being his age. And I saw his fear, of how his backward father might react—a refugee from a fallen hate-filled people—if he knew what kind of man he was. I gagged on the unfairness of his assumptions about me, but how could he have known differently? What had I ever done, to show him the truth of how I felt about him? And hadn't I proved him right? Hadn't I acted exactly like the monster he believed me to be? I had never succeeded in proving to him what I was, or how I felt.

I had battered and broken his beloved. There was nothing I could say. A smarter man would have asked for the present back, taken it away and locked it up. Burned it, maybe. But I couldn't. I had spent his whole life trying to give him something worthy of how I felt about him, and here was the perfect gift at last.

“I love you, Thede,” I said, and hugged him.

“Daaaaad . . .” he said, eventually.

But I didn't let go. Because when I did, he would leave. He would walk home through the cramped and frigid alleys of his home city, to the gift of knowing what his father truly was.

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Sam J. Miller is a writer and a community organizer. His debut novel *The Art of Starving* (HarperTeen) was one of NPR's Best Books of 2017, and won the Andre Norton Award for Best Young Adult Science Fiction Novel. His current novel, *Blackfish City* (Ecco Press; Orbit) was a “Best Book of the Year” according to *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*, and was called “an action-packed science fiction thriller” and “surprisingly heartwarming” by the *Washington Post*. His stories have appeared in over a dozen “year's best” anthologies. He's a graduate of the

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No Matter

Kendra Fortmeyer | 4556 words

First, I want to give you this moment. You will understand why in the end.

We were walking on the trail, the way we did on Sundays: the sun-washed gully, the open air, the shadows of last night's rain staining the earth dark and slick beneath our boots. At the river's edge, I caught my husband's hand and pointed at a stack of topaz-eyed turtles that had piled themselves ancient and precarious as a cairn.

Here are the shapes and shades that colored my life, before.

Then we looked up and saw you.

• • • •

You had the hunched posture of someone trying to appear casual and unassuming. Which is to say, someone tougher than you actually were. Your brow gleamed with a yet-unfocused anger that pegged you at no older than nineteen. Your cheeks were flushed, as if you had been running.

You said, "Thank God I found you." My husband and I didn't look at each other. We didn't need to, to know: *Yes, my antenna is up, too. Yes, one or both of us is prepared to shift into action now and debrief after.* Power Couple, our friends joked about us in these moments. Ready to take on the world.

I said, "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"No," you said. "It's just—I don't."

Your dark hair spilled over your collarbone as you studied your feet. I realized later how unusual your shoes were: a sleek, marine silver with small ridges along the top. I would remember this standing near the kitchen window, wiping at a stain in the paint that turned out to be a shadow: *I should have known and did I know and what could I have done to prevent this.*

But in the moment, I just watched you study your toes with a

misplaced anxiety. Then you looked up and blurted,
“I’m your daughter.”

••••

Forgive us, the Girl, while we have this laugh: Ha! Ha! Ha!

Ha! #1: We have been married one year! We have never had children!

Ha! #2: We are not interested in having children! In fact, Officially
and As Far as Our Mothers Are Concerned, We Are Not Having Kids!
Not Right Now!

Ha! #3: We are certainly Not Having Kids negative-twenty years ago,
when we were ten-year-olds living in different parts of the country!

Your attention flickered to your phone while we chuckled. The clear
lines of your face rumped and bent.

“I know it sounds crazy,” you said. “But I need you to listen. I don’t
have much time.”

My husband, a skeptic in all matters except for babies and dogs,
looked to the bushes and the sky, checking for cameras.

“Okay,” I said, swallowing a smile. “So you’re our daughter. What’s
your name?”

You looked at me for the first time, your expression a mixture of
annoyance and apology.

“Not your daughter,” you said. “His.”

Then you added, like an afterthought before dismissing me entirely,
“Sorry.”

••••

Sometimes, when confronted with rudeness, my brain shuts down. As
if it examines the three hundred billion complexities and nuances of the
social codes I have been consciously and unconsciously indoctrinated
with since birth, holds this particular moment up to the light, and spits
out DOES NOT COMPUTE.

That *sorry*? Did not compute.

• • • •

I listened to you tell my husband, referring constantly to your phone, the things that you were allowed to explain: that you were from the future, although you would not say when. That he must go to Radio Coffee on Friday morning at 10:37 and wait at the bar. You said, take the last stool on the end if you can, but the next one over is okay, too. No matter what, do not sit in the stool closest to the cashier.

I examined you while you talked: the angles of tension in your neck and jaw; the sleepy, lash-fringed blue eyes that drooped at the edges, as though threatening to spill their color onto your cheeks. The Texan sky overhead was bleached denim, summerpale.

Behind me, my husband laughed. “What’s wrong with the stool closest to the cashier?”

You said, “I can’t tell you that, Dad. Please. Just trust me.”

My husband and I exchanged a look. His eyes said ? and mine said, *shrug*. Like, *Sure, in this future in which I do not matter, I guess I’m down for whatever.*

My husband smiled wryly and kissed the top of my head.

“Okay,” he said into my hair, muffling his amusement. “Stool on the end.”

You folded your arms across your chest. “You told me you’d be a jackass about this,” you said.

“Sounds like you know you well,” I muttered to my husband. He snorted into my hair, his warm breath gushing in a burst down my scalp.

You sighed. “Fine.” You sounded a little petulant. Like, *I can’t believe you’re making me do this.* “I’m supposed to tell you ‘remember Marietta Ninetales.’”

Behind me, my husband went still.

“What does that mean?” I whispered to him.

He asked you, pulling away, “How do you know that?”

“You told me,” you said, sounding almost sorry.

“What is that?” I asked again.

“My childhood cat,” he said.

I thought, *You told me you were allergic to cats.*

A lizard flicked over a rock nearby, and you flinched, visibly. I thought, *drugs?* But you seemed sober.

“You have to promise,” you said, again. Your face so urgent, young. “I’m almost out of time.”

I looked up at my husband, but he looked at the sky, the plants, your clothing.

“Sure,” he said at last, bemused. “Sure—fine, whatever. I’ll be there.”

It didn’t sound promising, but I knew—do you know?—that this is the way it is, with him. The more he’s pushed, the more he digs in his heels. But you must have known, too, because your face crumpled with relief.

“Thank you,” you said, and turned to go. I looped my arm around my husband’s waist, hoping—what? To make you uncomfortable? You twisted back just before disappearing over the hill and looked back at my husband, your face laced with complicated regret. I felt like somebody was intruding on something, but I wasn’t sure what.

••••

We walked back to the car through air turned muggy and still. The thin mosquito whine of the distant highway threaded through the treetops. My husband, walking ahead of me, whistled absently.

“That was weird,” I said, too loudly. “That was weird, right? That was definitely not normal.”

My husband laughed. “Nope.”

“But she knew about the cat.”

“Yeah. That was weird.” The silent expanse of his back rising and falling with each step.

“Who else knows about that cat?”

“My parents,” he said. “My sister. Craig, I guess.”

“So somebody’s fucking with you.”

I tugged the heads off some stalks of grass, scattered the seeds into the underbrush.

I said, “If I’m not her mother, who is?”

“I don’t know,” my husband said. “It doesn’t matter. It’s just somebody’s weird idea of joke.”

“Why, though? Why us?”

“Who knows,” he said. “It’s probably a stunt for some YouTube channel we’ll never watch. I’ll bet your students know about it.”

“Oh, *that’s* perfect. ‘Guys, today we’re talking about dangling participles—’ ‘Miss, did you know you’re on YouTube?’”

“Maybe they’ll pay more attention in class if you go viral.”

A wind blew up off the river, hot, and the sun-dappled shadows of live oaks and mesquite shivered over our feet. A man shouted *on your left* and *thanks* as he zipped by on a mountain bike.

A college professor once told us that free will can’t exist in the past tense. That by the time you are able to recognize and name the present, it is already gone. I spent the rest of class while she lectured on about the Greek Stoics and compatibilism thinking, *Free will exists . . . now. No, now. No, now.* Always just a hair too late, watching its tail whisk around the corner of time.

I said, distantly, “I wonder if I’m dead.”

“What?”

“In the future,” I said. “Maybe that’s why I’m not her mother. Maybe I die first.”

My husband stopped and held my gaze. Took my hands in his, like he was cupping a flame.

“Unacceptable,” he said. “I would never let it happen. I’ll put you in a big safety bubble. You’ll just roll safely everywhere you have to go. We’ll go on bubble dates, and drink bubble tea, and grow old together in our bubble-rockers.”

“What about sex?” I asked.

“I’ll apply for visitation rights to your bubble,” he said. “It will look like a big Venn diagram.”

“Apply early,” I said. “The forms are very complicated. You have to fill them out in number 2 pencil, and they’re all bubble sheets—”

He swatted at my ass and I yelped, and grabbed at his, and in that

moment, the whole morning teetered above us, golden and wobbling, nearly tipping into forgetfulness. But then a little boy ran by with a golden retriever, shouting, “Daddy! Look at me, Daddy! Look at me!” and my husband froze, and I turned away like I was looking out over the river, but it had dried to a trickle here, and there was nothing but rocks and mud.

“It was just a weird joke,” he said again, when the little boy had passed.

“I know,” I said, too brightly.

We walked to the car in silence.

• • • •

We’d talked about children early in the relationship, in the context of abortion. Not because we’d had a scare: because we were hungry to learn everything about one another. The bigger and less safe the topic, the more daringly intimate the conversation felt. Nobody in this emotional game of strip poker was toying with socks.

He said, “I don’t think it’s murder of a person. I think it’s murder of the potential of a person. But, like, everything’s the murder of the potential of a person: You turn left instead of right at an intersection, or hesitate five minutes too long, and you could miss meeting one partner and end up with someone else entirely. So all of the children you could have had with that first person are lost.”

“Or you do meet them, but you have sex at, like, 5:00 instead of 6:00.”

“Sure. But even then, at 6:00, there are, like, half a billion sperm in each ejaculation, and even then, implantation is hell. Each time a woman does manage to get pregnant, that’s 499,999,999 potential babies not made. So, I guess every single aspect of life except the actual tiny act of implantation is abortion. And you can’t go around feeling guilty about *that* all the time or you wouldn’t get anything done.”

I burrowed into the warm space beneath his chin, cradling each word like a porcelain egg, luminous and velvet-wrapped. The fragile weight of them jostling in my chest. In the early days, each new thing about us

seemed enormous, shot through with color and light. I wanted to escape in what I could already sense were the final lonely hours of my life: to hurry home to my one-bedroom apartment, spread them out on the carpet and consider each facet with care. To consider: *How will my life look in this new light*, and *this* and *this*. To be in love so young is to be constantly drowning in enormity.

I want never to know you, but I still want you to understand this: how when your father and I met, looking at one another was like staring into the sun. We became blind to everything else. We had never seen such light.

Later in our relationship, we would not try as hard to impress each other. We would still talk philosophy, but also about annoying coworkers and pooping and whose turn it was to buy groceries. I would obsess less self-consciously over small things. My husband, the reticent man that he is, would speak less. This is a thing you know about him, I suppose, or perhaps not. Perhaps in the universe in which he is your father, the woman who turns out to be your mother is able to tap into something I am not: to turn him into a laughing-eyed performer, some happier, brighter version of himself.

But then, in those early days, when everything was still spilling out gloriously between us, I gazed up at the shadows pooling in the popcorn ceiling, and wondered at the secrets there.

I said, “So the creation and destruction of potential life is essentially value-neutral.”

He brought his hand down to cradle the back of my head, and held it there: a warm weight.

He said, his voice crumbling a little, “I used to think so.”

• • • •

You had been told certain things, which must have made it difficult to understand that we were in love. One was that the man in this story was my husband, which means, by narrative necessity, that we must be secretly unhappy with one another. The other is that I would not be your

mother.

And then there is this wretched past tense, drawing a line in the sand: *before*, when he was mine. And *now* . . . ?

••••

While falling for each other, in a desperate attempt to put on the brakes, to save ourselves (ice climbers scrabbling for crampons, for picks), we did a clean sweep: Here Is My Emotional Baggage. Here Are My Secrets. How many people we've each slept with (five, eight). How many people we've each kissed (seven, lots). History of drug use, history of family illness, fetishes, phobias. We scrolled through our Facebook profiles and pulled up pictures of our exes: This is the first one who said *I love you*. This is the first person who broke my heart. And so on.

When he comes home from work the next day, I'm scrolling through the Facebook photos of his exes at the kitchen table, looking for dark hair and sleepy blue eyes. For no reason.

"Whatcha doing?" he asks, planting a kiss on the top of my head.

I point to a tab. I've dismissed Abby and Ellie and Jackie and Beth.

"Janelle looks kind of like her," I say.

"Who?" he asks. Then he groans. "Oh, God. That again?"

"She does," I persist. "Look."

He squints. The nose is wrong, but the fair skin, the hair, combined with his long-lashed eyes . . .

"Huh," he says.

"Does she have a younger sister?" I ask. "Or a cousin?"

He runs a hand across his head, covers his eyes. "I don't know. She has a brother. Look, you know this is a stupid joke, right?"

"Of course," I say. "But she could be the one playing it."

He speaks from behind his hand. "You think my high school girlfriend tracked me down and sent her cousin to pretend she's our future daughter."

"*Your* future daughter," I say. "Maybe. Sure."

He sighs. "Look, I'll send her a message, okay? Will that make you

feel better?”

“I don’t care,” I say, closing the tab. “I’m just saying. It’s weird.”

“Sure,” he says, kissing my shoulder. But he doesn’t meet my eyes as he crosses to the sink to fill a mason jar, begins carefully watering the plants.

••••

A few days later, I come home to find him making dinner. There’s a small vase of flowers on the table. A fresh lemon quivering brightly beside the fruit bowl.

“I’ve got it,” he says, pouring me a glass of wine from an open bottle. “Okay, so. I know we said we were done thinking about this, but I was talking to Wissam at work and we realized, it’s a grandfather paradox.”

“What is?” I ask, but my stomach gives a sickening lurch.

He says, “Okay, so: If that girl comes back in time to make sure that I meet her mother, and then I *don’t* meet her mother, then she never could have existed to come back in time to tell me to meet her mother.”

He says, “So that’s how we know it’s a prank. It can’t work otherwise.”

He beams at me, waiting. The oil hisses in the pan: the comforting sounds of an occupied kitchen, a pleasant evening waiting to forgettably unfold.

There are the children who let their scabs heal, and then there are kids who pick and pick and pick until the skin beneath is something pink and shiny and new, and later wonder how they came to have a scar.

“No,” I say, slowly. “That’s how we know it’s true.”

“What?”

I shred the tip of the aloe plant with my thumbnail and watch the clear fluid ooze onto my fingers. If I were burned, it would heal me.

I say, “The only way she *can* exist to come back in time and tell you to meet her mother is if you *do* end up having a baby with her mother.”

He stares at me a moment. The oil smoking in the pan.

“No,” he says.

“Yes,” I say. I wish we were talking about anything else: *Game of Thrones* houses, or if we should get a dog, or my student who was sewing little ghosts for each character in *Hamlet* as they died. “The fact that the girl exists is proof that it did happen. In the hypothetical. Where this isn’t a prank.”

He says, “I don’t think that’s right,” but a frown creases his brow.

His phone lights up on the table. I look down at it: a Houston area code. The name, *Janelle*.

“You got in touch with her?” I ask.

He sees me see his phone. “Yeah,” he says, lightly.

“Does she have any sisters?”

“Oh, shit,” he says, snatching the smoking pan from the stove. “What? No. Shit. Will you grab some paper towels?”

••••

Okay, so: I only met you on the trail if you were born.

Conversely, if you weren’t born, I won’t remember meeting you on the trail. There will be no you to remember.

Therefore: I go about trying to forget you as fiercely as possible.

••••

When I was a child, I read a story about a coin that would turn to gold if you held it in your hand and did not think about camels. An alchemy of forgetfulness.

I see you everywhere: the girls jogging on campus in the flattening Texas heat, the teenager glaring at her mom in front of the Target. My student Alexandra has to go to the principal’s office during third period for wearing see-through lace shorts. I jump when I see her in the hallway, the long dark braid of her hair. She laughs, *Miss, what’s wrong, you look like you saw a ghost*.

I will try not to think *you*. I will try, in fact, to avoid using the word *you*. If I can write an entire page of this story without *you* in it, then

maybe you will be removed enough from the narrative that we can move on. What is forgetfulness, after all, but a carefully constructed habit.

(But if you do not exist, then who am I writing this story for?)

••••

On Thursday night, we go out with our friends. They have just gotten back from Iceland. There are hugs and wine, photographs of them pretending to climb glaciers. I tell a story about our hiking trip last year, and my husband chimes in to tell the punchline with me, in unison, and everyone laughs and laughs.

“You guys are gross,” says Craig.

“An old married couple,” says Kim.

“*Young* married couple,” says my husband, and leans across the table to give me a kiss, all exaggerated and giraffe-tongued until Craig pelts us with edamame shells and we part, laughing and triumphant.

I come back from the bathroom after the plates have been cleared and find my husband alone at the table, hunched over his phone.

“Where did our friends go?” I ask, and he jumps. Cold shivers into my veins.

Out of the corner of my eye, I think I see [something], but it is just a waitress who looks like—fuck it—you.

••••

My husband wakes up late on Friday morning, makes a show of looking at the clock, of yawning. He is usually a snoozer, but this morning he turns off the alarm and lies still, stretched diagonally across the bed.

He says, as I rifle in the closet, “What time do you have class today?”

I say, “I don’t teach on Fridays.”

I say, “You really don’t know this by now?”

I say, “It’s on our Google calendar.”

“Oh yeah,” he says, and goes quiet.

We both do not look at the clock.

He begins, casually, “I was thinking about—”

“I’m coming with you.”

He rolls up onto one elbow. “It’s just a joke, sugar-butt. Just a weird prank.”

“Then why are you going?”

He hesitates.

“I’m curious,” he says. “I guess.”

“Me, too.”

He sighs, stares at the ceiling. His phone lies dark and silent on the nightstand.

“Fine,” he says.

“Fine,” I say. Like that will make it so.

• • • •

We walk to Radio Coffee in silence. It’s only ten a.m., but the heat is already brutal, obliterating. Sweat beads in the small of my back. Cars fling themselves past us, then fade again into silence.

“What?” he says, looking up.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh.”

The coffee shop is dark and cool. My husband steps ahead of me in line, ordering separately. I remember our first date, the way I ordered my own drink when his back was turned, because I didn’t want him to pay for me. Afraid of accepting that weight. Crowing to myself in my head, *I am feminism ninja!*

He takes the far stool, looks around. He looks so young, and so anxious, in the square of sunlight falling through the window. He cups his glass of cold brew coffee, his heel bouncing.

I settle into the stool nearest to the cashier.

His eyes widen. He pulls out his phone, pecks at it. Mine vibrates in my pocket, a text message.

Him: *hey*

I stare at him, the real life him, three stools down from me in the coffee shop, disbelieving. Then type out a response: *What.*

don't sit there

I make a show of turning off my phone, dropping it into my pocket. *Why.* I mouth at him. *Not.*

“Because,” he whispers, helplessly. “Remember? What my—what the girl said.”

“It’s just a prank,” I say loudly. “Right? So it doesn’t. Matter.”

He stares at me a minute longer. There is something almost animal to it: a flattening of the ears.

Then he shakes his head and turns back to his phone, begins thumbing.

I stay on that stool for the next two hours, while the barista brings me tea after lavender-chamomile tea. I have to pee so fiercely that I feel nauseated, but I refuse to budge.

Ten feet away, my husband glares into his phone, flinches each time the door opens.

But your mother never comes in. Or maybe she does, but is scared away. Maybe I was sitting in her seat.

All I know is, when the clock strikes noon, we walk home together, and the fact of you is with us every step of the way.

• • • •

I go back to the trail weeks later, while my husband is at work. I walk the entire, heat-blasted, dehydrating thing. It is 6.75 miles of dirt and sandstone and paper-leaved trees, crisscrossing the riverbed like a running stitch. It’s been nearly a month since we met you, but I keep thinking I’ll find you just over the next hill, or tucked away on a knoll: curled up lotus-style in those liquid turquoise sneakers with their ridges, picking away at your phone. I scan the bushes for futuristic buttons, threads, a giggling camera crew. Anything.

There is nothing, of course.

But then why did I walk the trail?

••••

Later, I wondered if you knew this was going to happen.

If his future self told you: *She will become obsessed with this. Tell me to come to the coffee shop alone. Yes, I know, it's counter-intuitive. I promise it will work. I know her.*

Do you know what you've done? What you've undone? Happily ever after is glory; ever after is grit.

Do you know many hours of work I will have to put in to get back to this kind of brainless happiness?

••••

By the time we got back from the coffee shop, everything I thought we could break free of was carefully cemented into place.

My husband climbed into his car and went to work. I waited for him to come back home all day. The day stretched into evening. I wrote series of careful texts, and then deleted them, and wrote one far less careful: *where the fuck are you?*

His headlights finally pulled into the driveway at eleven at night. He crept gingerly into our bedroom. His eyes not yet adjusted. Still blinded by some other light. "Hey," he whispered into the dark. "Are you awake?"

I said nothing.

As I watched him grope his way uncertainly toward the bed, I filled with a sudden, nasty urge to move the furniture. To see him stub his toe on a familiar chair he never suspected would be there, in the dark, waiting.

He climbed into bed beside me, and we both lay still, not touching, breathing up and up and up into the dark.

••••

I first played with time I was six years old. We were sitting on the cracked red clay lawn in front of the school, listening to a white man give

a presentation on teepees. There was one teepee, and no one was allowed to go into it. The sun beat down on our heads and I picked at the dry, bone-colored grass beneath my feet and thought, *soon, this will all be a memory*. And then it was.

• • • •

As an old woman, at the end of life, I will lift the last eighty-six years from my bag like a broken string of pearls and spill them across the floor. The years will go everywhere: my high school crush bumping shoulders with my grandson on his birthday. The deaths of all of my dogs pooling together in a dip in the floor. The entire age of thirty-three rolling beneath the sofa, to be stuffed up the nose of the absent-minded next tenant's toddler and extracted traumatically at the local emergency room.

And this? It, too, will be lost. Not gone, but smaller, mitigated. One of many in a long string of lost moments, no more enormous or shining than my sister's doctoral defense, than losing my first tooth, than the Israeli man I'd meet on holiday. I'll stir my fingers through them and feel them clack against one another, and think, how full I am. What a good life I have led, even without this man who once loomed so large as to swallow my entire vision of the future. And how much potential in it.

But for now, somehow, I cannot stop writing this story for you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kendra Fortmeyer is a Pushcart Prize-winning writer whose fiction has appeared in *LeVar Burton Reads*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *One Story*, *The Toast*, *Lightspeed*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop and New Writers Project MFA program at UT Austin. Her debut young adult novel, *Hole in the Middle*, has been published in the US, UK, and Germany. Currently, she is the Visiting Fiction Writer at the University of Texas at

Austin. She drinks too much tea, probably.

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

The Macrobe Conservation Project

Carlos Hernandez | 4732 words

1.

My asiMom was okay. She was like a pillow, a walking talking pillow. But she gave good hugs and smelled right. They did a good job with her: Sometimes when she hugged me and I closed my eyes it felt like it's supposed to feel and I forgot that she's not my real mom.

I saw her in the shower a few times. She didn't care. She took showers every day exactly at 5:45 p.m., even if I messed up every clock in the house, because her inside clock was always right. She didn't even need to shower because she was just a robot, but she did anyway. My dad said that that made her more realistic. But if they cared about that, why didn't they give her nipples? Or any hair, except on her head? She didn't even have a butt crack. Sometimes, just when I was forgetting that she wasn't my real mom, I'd remember that she didn't have a butt crack and I'd get a little freaked out.

My dad's one of the head honchos on the station. He's the lead scientist on the Macrobe Conservation Project. He said that he was the one who wrote all the grants and traveled all the way back to Earth to shake hands with all the jerks in Washington, and so now he was the one in charge, and if Malloy or Grisget or any of those other pieces of skrat thought they were going to hone in on his dream, they had another thing coming. He went to work at 6:00 and got home at 6:00, but they always called him back at night with some big macrobe problem. Sometimes on the speaker I'd hear Dr. Malloy or Dr. Grisget or one of those other pieces of skrat saying, "Don't worry, Lance, this is no big deal. We just wanted you to know. You just have a good time with your kid tonight. We'll handle this." That drove my dad nuts. He waited until they hung up, and then he cussed like crazy at them while he tied his tie back on, and told my asiMom to clean up dinner and make up a plate for him to eat later. Mostly he didn't come back though. Just stayed in the lab all

night.

He said that we could cuss all we wanted while we were on the space station, just me and him, but only in Macrolog. Macrolog is the pretend language Dad and I made up for the macrobes. It's what the macrobes are thinking whenever scientists are probing them or taking tissue samples or whatever. The whole language is just swear words: skrat and fragbag and kikface and dunkaballs and a bunch of others. Almost all of them have the letter k in them. I think my dad thinks the letter k is dirty.

Skrat is my favorite. Dad's too. It sounds the dirtiest. Sometimes I told my asiMom to go skrat herself, to see if she'd do anything. But she just kinda looked at me like she didn't get it, and smiled, and then went back to whatever she was doing. Didn't matter, you can't skrat without a butt crack anyway.

2.

I had an asiBro, too, who was supposed to be like my brother, but he wasn't like my brother very much. For one thing, they made him a younger brother, and Lance Jr. is my big brother. But they only make younger asiBros. My dad told me that they tried making older asiBros for a while, but that all these little kids were following them around and burning themselves or getting their fingers cut off or getting themselves killed in the dishwasher, because the asiBros didn't know what they were doing and couldn't protect all those dumb little kids from all the dumb stuff they do. I asked Dad why they make asiMoms then, since they're supposed to be substitute moms, but my dad got really serious, the way he always does before he tells a really stupid joke, and said, "Randy, you of all people should know that kids never listen to their parents." Ha ha ha.

The Lance Jr. asiBro was really annoying. He was smaller than me and dumber than me and he followed me around all the time. He was boring, and there was no way to get rid of him. I told my brother about him, and he said "He sounds just like you!" I called him a skrat-clown and I didn't tell him what it meant, so he asked my dad and my dad just laughed at

him.

3.

Summer on the space station was okay, but not as knife as I thought it'd be. I thought it was going to be like space camp, only real. But it wasn't like space camp. It was just real.

The space station was pretty small. And it wasn't set up for kids. There were places to work and places to eat and rooms to sleep in and places I wasn't allowed to go by myself, like Engineering or the Macrobe Lab. Mostly I just stayed in my room and played video games with my asiBro. And that was kinda dunkaballs, because he was way too good. I can never beat the real Lance Jr., and the Lance Jr. asiBro was a stupid robot with reflexes like you wouldn't believe. And plus, whenever he beat me, he would say, "Good game, Randy! If you would like, I can lower my challenge setting. Would you like me to lower it now?" And yes I would like, but I felt like a kikface asking my pretend little robot brother to go easy on me, so I never did. Instead I switched to single-player games and made him watch. He didn't mind. He just sat there and cheered me on.

4.

I went to the lab sometimes with my dad. Not a lot, but sometimes. There wasn't a lot for me to do there anyway. All I could do was look but don't touch.

It was still pretty knife. It looked like a morgue, probably because of all the dead people. The center of the lab had sixteen incubators with sixteen dead people lying in them. You couldn't actually see the dead people, because the incubators weren't see-through, I guess so the scientists didn't have to stand there looking at dead people all day.

The incubators weren't for the dead people, because if you're dead, there's nothing to incubate. The incubators were really for the macrobes. The cadavers—that's what my dad liked me to call the dead people—

were the hosts for the macrobes. So really they had two incubators: the real incubators, and then the dead people.

It seemed like a lot of work to keep those things from going extinct. I didn't get it at first. I mean, why would you want to protect animals—if you can even call them animals, since they look like blobs of Jell-O that were made with toilet water—that will also take over your brain the first chance they get? So I asked my dad one day. Actually, I told him maybe New Hope would be better off without macrobes. “I mean, the less things that will eat your brain, the better, right?” I said.

He got real serious. I could tell because he stopped eating. The skrat on his fork started dripping through the tines, but he just held it in the air, because he had turned into Professor Dad and it was time for a really long science lesson: “Randy, we're the outsiders. We're the guests to New Hope. We came here because we did a really good job of ruining our own planet and are going to need to move everybody off of it in the very near future. And now that we're getting a second chance, you think the first thing we should do is just start killing off species left and right?”

“No,” I said. I was staring at the skrat on his fork. It kind of looked like a macrobe.

“We've only been here a very short while, and already we know that the macrobes are an essential part of the planet's ecosystem. There's a certain type of tree on the planet called a 'brain tree' that needs the macrobes in order to live. Maybe other trees do too, we don't know. But trees give us the oxygen we need to breathe on New Hope, just like they did on Earth. It wouldn't be smart to start killing off all the trees, would it?”

“No.”

I said no twice already, but once you get my dad going on macrobes, there's no stopping him. “And anyway, macrobes are one of the most interesting life forms we've ever discovered, Randy. Certainly the most advanced parasites we've ever seen.”

And then I saw a way to ask him about the knifest thing about macrobes: the dead people. “Yeah, I don't get that. How can they be parasites? Doesn't the host of a parasite have to be alive? I think they're

more like scavengers.”

He looked at me like I had dunkaballs coming out of my nose. He finally ate his forkful of macrobe and said, “That is a very perceptive thing to say, Randy. Did you think of that yourself?”

And I said, “Yeah, dad. I’m not stupid.”

And he said, “Hey kiddo, that’s not what I meant! But no, technically, the macrobes are parasites. See, they’re not just eating up the bodies they inhabit, like a scavenger would. They’re actually preserving it! They get inside a dead body and spread throughout the nervous system, and they get everything working again, almost like the body has come back to life! That’s hardly the behavior of a scavenger, right?”

And I said “Yeah. But then it’s like they’re not really parasites either. They’re symbiotic. They help their host, so they’re not just mooching off of it like a leech.”

I could tell he was impressed that I knew what symbiotic meant. And then he said, “Well, they don’t really help out their host, because the host is dead, and it stays dead. And, if you put a macrobe in a live human, well, believe me, you’d know it was a parasite! Eventually it would spread through your entire nervous system, go up your spine, and take over your brain, just like you said. But with a cadaver, it doesn’t matter if a macrobe takes over the brain, because the cadaver isn’t using it anyway.”

“What happens when the macrobe takes over the brain?”

“In a cadaver, not much, because we sever a lot of the neuromuscular connections to avoid complications.” He gave me a weird look before he kept going. “In theory, though, a macrobe could take over enough to . . . move a human body around, maybe.”

“And make it walk and talk again? Like the living dead?”

My dad was laughing. “No, not like the ‘living dead.’ Where do you come up with this stuff? You think this space station is going to turn into a zombie movie?”

“That’d be so knife.”

“Yes, very knife. But to answer your question . . . I can’t answer your question. We don’t know exactly what happens. That’s exactly what

we're trying to find out here."

I scooped up some of my macrobe-skrat with my fork and let it hang in the air for a minute and stared at it and watched it drip through the fork-teeth. And then I asked my dad, "Dad, why did we have to come to this space station?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why couldn't you do your experiments with the macrobes on New Hope? Why'd we have to go all the way to outer space?"

My dad got a big, crooked smile on his face and leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "I'll tell you, Randy. But this has to be a secret between us."

"Okay."

"The reason we're on this space station is because none of the brand-new nations on New Hope have the dunkaballs to say that they are letting me stick macrobes into cadavers on their soil. Sure, they want me to save the ecosystem and bring the macrobes back from the brink of extinction, just as long as I shoot myself into orbit to do it!"

And just when things were getting good, those fragbags Malloy and Grisget called with another skraty problem they were having. So my dad left and I helped my asiMom clear dinner. After we finished, she said "You are a good son." And then she added, "If you would like me to increase the amount of praise I give you, please say 'Increase praise' at any time."

5.

I don't even know why I have to be here. With you. I'm not crazy. I know my dad thinks I'm crazy, but I think he's crazy, so we're even. I'm not a "danger to myself and others." I got that off of my chart. I don't know who wrote that, but it's not true. If you wrote that you're wrong, and I know you wrote that.

When I was on the space station I only got in trouble twice in the whole summer. And the first one wasn't even that big a deal. I just used a nailgun without permission. On my asiBro.

Why did they have a nailgun in a space station if it's so dangerous? They shouldn't have just left it lying around either. How was I supposed to know? It was just there, in Engineering, and okay, I wasn't supposed to be in there, but it's not like they locked the door or anything, and the nailgun was just there. And I didn't take it for that long either. I just wanted to see what it could do.

But you can't use a nailgun on anything in a space station. Everything's so breakable. It's not like there was any wood or anything I could've used.

So I took it back to my apartment. I didn't need my asiMom for anything, so I told her to go recharge, and she did. And then I told my asiBro to come over.

He came over and said: "That is a nailgun." He was always identifying things, like I was some sort of kikface.

And I said to him, "Hold out your hand." And he did, and I shot him between the knuckles with the nailgun. The nail went in maybe a centimeter before it hit metal. The asiBro said "Ow that hurt," but I could tell it didn't. He still had the same happy idiot look on his face, and he didn't even try to pull it out.

So I shot him a few more times. Okay, a lot more times. It was funny. He just kept saying "Ow that hurt Ow that hurt Ow that hurt Ow that hurt" in the same normal voice over and over. It didn't matter where I shot him: face, stomach, foot, chest, knee, or right in the dunkaballs.

That was the day I discovered that when an asiBot is getting damaged, it calls its owner's phone to let them know what's happening.

My dad busted into the apartment out of breath and looking really scared. I know he was really worried about me, but I wasn't doing it for attention. I didn't know my fragbag pretend brother was going to call him and narc me out. Well anyway, my dad didn't stay scared long. He was too busy getting really really angry.

6.

My dad said I was lucky he didn't send me back planetside. I told him

he couldn't, because no ships were coming from New Hope for another five weeks. He told me that I was wrong, mister, and that I was a kid and I didn't know everything, so I should listen to him, because there was a whole ship-full of post-docs coming from New Hope that very day, and he was sure the captain would be willing to take me back. I said fine, I'll go spend the rest of the summer with Mom and Lance Jr. At least Lance Jr. wasn't stupid enough to just stand there while I shot him with a nailgun.

And then my dad got quiet. It was weird. He just sat there and looked at me. It was so weird that when he finally said, "Go to your room," I did without even yelling or throwing stuff or anything. A little while later I heard him leave, and I didn't hear him come back that night.

He told me the next night at dinner that he'd been busy all day with the new post-docs. He said he wasn't mad any more, and that he'd had my asiBro checked out, and that it was fine, no harm done. So, if I wanted, I could have him back. But only if I promised not to shoot him anymore.

7.

Besides getting my asiBro back, my dad took me to meet all the new post-docs to show me he wasn't mad. They were all eating together in the mess when I came in. When I saw they were human, I was really relieved: I thought a "post-doc" was some kind of new alien creature they had discovered. Turns out they're just PhDs.

But they were pretty knife. A lot younger than my dad and Grisget and Malloy and all the other scientists on the space station. And funny. They were always fragbagging around. My dad said they have skrat for brains. I said they do not, they just like to have fun. He said you don't go on a scientific space station to have fun. I said you can say that again and he said what? and I said never mind.

I hung out with them pretty much all the time. I knew the space station, so I showed them around, and they said I could be their mascot. They gave me a PhD in Space Station Knowledge and Etiquette and

called me Doctor Randy and took me with them everywhere, even into the Macrobe Lab without my dad.

Their first real day in the lab was a week after they came, and I went with them. Dr. Grisget was conducting an orientation for them in the lab. He kept congratulating them and telling them what a great honor it was to have been selected for this post-doc. Maria Centas, who was the same height as me and was always laughing about something, said to me, “This guy is really full of himself, isn’t he?” And I nodded yes, but I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want Dr. Grisget to notice me and tell me I wasn’t allowed to be there.

But then he did something really knife; he opened one of the incubators. All the post-docs huddled around it, so I couldn’t really see. He said, “Ladies and gentleman, this is the reason you are here. The Macrobe Conservation Project is dedicated to saving macrobes from extinction, thereby helping us to preserve the ecosystem we discovered when we first landed on New Hope.” And then he said the whole history of the whole project, how when settlers first came to New Hope, they cut down a lot of trees, only they didn’t know the difference between the different kinds of trees, and they didn’t know that they were cutting down brain trees because they didn’t have that name back then. They didn’t know that brain trees were basically trees with brains, and that they had a symbiotic relationship with macrobes, and with the trees getting cut down, the macrobes started dying off. Plus a few people had been infected by macrobes, and the macrobes started taking over their brains, and that scared a lot of people, so they started killing macrobes like crazy. And since a macrobe is basically just a big squishy gray-and-green blob of toilet water, it was really easy to kill them. Dr. Grisget said, “Now they are almost extinct. We are all that’s left to protect them from total annihilation.”

I finally squirmed through the post-docs so I could see inside the incubator. I’d seen glimpses inside them before. Mostly they shaved the cadavers’ heads and had them in those green paper outfits they give you in hospitals that don’t close in the back. But this one was a woman, and you could tell because she had long curly woman’s hair, and an earring in

the ear I could see, and she had a dress on with flowers. Earth flowers.

I wasn't tall enough to see her face, but I knew the dress was my mom's. She had the same hair as my mom, too. I couldn't figure out why my dad would take one of my mom's dresses and put it on a dead lady. My mom would be so mad if she found out.

8.

I wasn't supposed to call New Hope by myself, because calls from the space station were very expensive. But I didn't like that my dad had put one of my mom's dresses on one of the cadavers.

Lance Jr.'s big kikface appeared on the monitor. "You're in trouble, Randy," he said. "You're not supposed to call."

"You're in trouble, too," I said back. "You're not supposed to answer."

"There's no one else around to answer. Aunt Lois went out for groceries."

"Where's Mom?"

Lance Jr. looked at me totally dunkaballs. "She's with you, stupid."

"No she's not, fragbag. She's with you."

"Since when? Is she coming home?"

"She's always been home. You're not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny, dickhead." And then he kind of squinted and said, "You haven't seen Mom?"

And then I saw my mom walk right behind him on the monitor. I pointed behind him and shouted, "See, skratbreath, she's right there! Liar!"

Lance Jr. turned around, then turned back to the phone. "Man are you dumb. That's just an asiMom." He turned around again and said "Come here," to my mom and my mom walked over in the exact same way an asiMom walks. Then Lance Jr. said, "Increase praise." And my mom put a hand on his head and said, "Sorry, but praise level is already set to maximum." Lance Jr. kind of shrugged at me and said, "I learn best from positive reinforcement."

That night during dinner, Dad got a call from Dr. Malloy. “We’re having a little bit of a problem here,” he said, “but it’s nothing we can’t handle, Lance.” My dad said, “I’ll be right over,” and then, when the speaker was off, he said, “This place would fall apart without me.” And then he headed out of the door.

My asiMom cleared the dishes, and my asiBro asked me if I wanted to play a game. I told him to go fragbag himself. He said, “I don’t know what ‘fragbag’ means. Would you like to add the word to my dictionary?” So I told him to go recharge himself instead. And then I watched the clock for exactly five minutes. Then I got up and followed my dad.

You need an I.D. to swipe to get into the Macrobe Lab, so I stopped at Maria Centas’ room and took hers. She was having dinner with the other post-docs in the mess and she never locked her door.

I swiped her card and went in the lab. I crawled on the floor and peeked around incubators to find my dad. The floor was cold and really clean.

Dad was shaking hands with Dr. Malloy. “I know I say this every night,” my dad said, “but thanks.”

Dr. Malloy just gave him a few pats on the back and said, “You take care of yourself, okay? For your sake, and your sons’.” And then he started walking toward me, so I had to duck behind a different incubator and hide there until he left the lab.

Once Dr. Malloy was gone, I peeked around the incubator to watch my dad again. He had opened one of the incubators, the one with the cadaver that had on my mom’s dress. He just looked at that dead lady for a long time. Then he put his arm under her and kind of propped her up until she almost looked like she was sitting. He moved the hair out of the dead lady’s face and he said, “Hi, Cathy.” My mom’s name is Catherine.

And then he took out the biggest syringe with the longest needle I’ve ever seen in my life and stuck it in the dead lady’s ear. All the way. I almost screamed. It took a long time to push all of the medicine into the dead lady’s brain. When he was done, he put the syringe on the tray and

then held the dead lady with both arms, just looking at her and waiting for something to happen.

The dead lady's head sat up like only her neck had come back to life. Then she opened her eyes, then closed them, then practiced opening and closing them. She opened and closed her mouth next, in exactly the same way. She stuck out her tongue then sucked it back into her face and moved her eyebrows every crazy way they would go.

My dad took out his pocket recorder. He turned it on and said, "6:44 p.m., stimulant administered. Macrobe 'Catherine' exhibiting advanced facial movement ability. Cadaver has recovered doll-eye movement, but lacks a blink reflex and is not yet breathing. Macrobe 'Catherine' seems on-schedule to fully permeate the medulla in three to five weeks." Then he turned the recorder off and put it back in his pocket.

And then he hugged the dead lady again. And he kind of rocked her back and forth and he said, "Cathy. Oh Cathy. Why did you leave me Cathy?" And all the while, the dead lady never stopped making all those insane faces.

10.

I snuck out of the Lab and went back to the apartment. I told the asiMom and the asiBro to follow me. The stupid asiBro said "I am not fully recharged yet. Do you want me to stop recharging now?" And I said, "Yes, fragbag!" And so he stopped recharging and followed me.

The three of us went to Engineering. Now the door was locked because of the nailgun thing, but I used Maria Centas' I.D. and the door opened. "Follow me," I said, and they followed.

We walked to the space station's trash compactor. It was huge; it looked like it could crush a planet. I walked them over to it and said, "Get in."

They climbed in. I couldn't believe how stupid they were. What did they think was going to happen?

I told them to kneel, and they did, both of them looking up at me like I was the dad. Then I said "Pray," and they both bowed their heads and

folded their hands, and the asiMom asked, “What prayer would you like us to say?” And I said, “Just pray quietly,” so they just pretended to pray quietly. Then the asiBro said “This is a fun game!” and the asiMom said, “Honey, you have to be quiet. We’re praying now.”

I walked over to the compactor’s command console—that’s exactly what it said on the front of it, “Command Console,” like you could control the whole world with it—and hit the big red button. I’d always wanted to.

The compactor came to life and this big slab of steel started to slowly push down on the heads of the asiBots. It kept pushing until I couldn’t see their heads anymore. “Keep praying!” I yelled. Then I heard metal getting smashed and glass breaking and small electric pops and plastic splintering. And then the compactor hit bottom. It stopped there for a moment, and then started to slowly come back up.

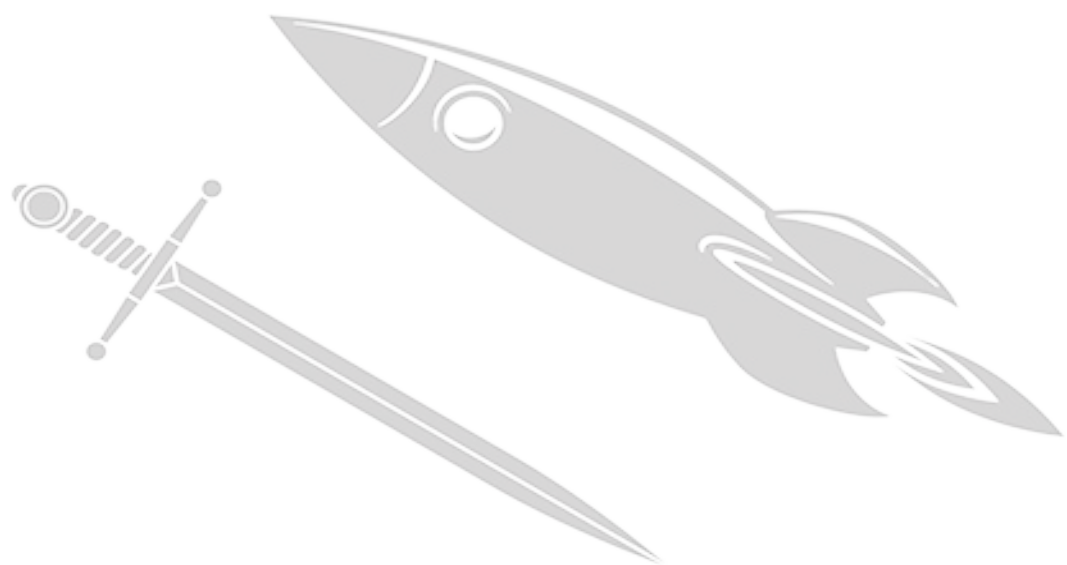
I turned to face the door. I’m sure both asiBots had called my dad to tell them they were being destroyed. I was sure he would come running, just like last time. And when he got there I would ask him if that dead lady was really my mom.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carlos Hernandez has published over 30 works of fiction, poetry and drama over the last decade. His first collection of short stories, *The Assimilated Cuban’s Guide to Quantum Santeria*, was released in February of 2016 by Rosarium. He earned a Ph.D. in English in 2000 from Binghamton University; by day, he is as Associate Professor of English in CUNY, where he teaches English at BMCC and is a member of the doctoral faculty at the CUNY Graduate Center. His academic work has led him to explore the pedagogy of game-based learning and, more generally, game design. Most recently, he has worked as a contributing designer and the lead writer on Meriwether, a CRPG of the Lewis and Clark Expedition due out later this year.

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The Rock Eaters

Brenda Peynado | 3544 words

We were the first generation to leave that island country. We were the ones who on the day we came of age developed a distinct float to our walk, soon enough hovering inches above the ground, afterwards somersaulting with the clouds, finally discovering we could fly as far as we'd ever wanted, and so we left. Decades later, we brought our children back to see that country. That year, we all decided we were ready to return.

We jackknifed through clouds and dodged large birds. We held tight our children, who still had not learned to fly. Behind us trailed rope lines of suitcases bursting with gifts from abroad. We wondered who would remember us.

Our parents, those who were still alive, came out to greet us, eyes squinting against the sun and hands on their brows like visors. Some were expecting us. Others were surprised, terrified at the spectacle of millions of their prodigals blotting the sky with our skirts billowing, our shirts starched for the arrival, skidding to rough landings right in front of them. We touched down on the landing strips of our parents' driveways, denting cars, squashing flowers, rattling windows.

Our old friends, the ones we'd left behind, kept their doors locked. They peered through window blinds at the flattened flowerbeds, the suitcases that had exploded open and strewn packages all over the driveways, our youngest children squealing now that they'd been released from the flight, the peace we'd broken by arriving. They didn't trust us, not after our betrayal decades ago, the whiff of money we'd landed in or lost in other countries like a suspect stench. Our parents hugged their grandchildren and brought them inside to houses with no electricity, candles wavering like séances to those who'd gone. More brownouts, they told us. We remember, we said, recoiling at how little the place fit us anymore. Those first nights we slept in our old beds, our feet hanging over the edges, the noises of the city and the country

crowing and honking us awake, music from radios and guitars, celebrations we'd not been invited to.

We dragged our children along to knock on the doors of old friends, the ones who never developed the ability to fly, as graceless as anchors. They eventually, reluctantly, opened their doors. At first we sat stiffly on couches and inquired after their health and others we once knew. Then we got them to laugh with us about the time we pulled the nun's skirts or put gum in the kink of a rival's hair, when we caught all the chickens in the village, or cracked open almonds on the malecón. Then their children came shyly out of their rooms and took ours by the hand. We smiled when we saw them climbing trees together in the patios, their children showing ours how to eat strange fruits from the branch.

We introduced our children to everyone we used to know, at colmados, by the side of the road, at country clubs we had to beg to be let into. We showed our children the flamboyán trees in the parks, blooms of coral red spilling petals in the dirt. We showed them the granite striated through the rock faces of mountains, the glimmering pebbles under waterfalls, the red dirt that stained the seats of their best clothes. We walked past the stray dogs that growled and whined, and the most ancient of them remembered us, wagging their tails when we arrived and running to sniff our offspring. We dunked our children in the rivers we'd swam in. We dug through the banks for the arrowheads that belonged to the Tainos, who'd all died.

Imagine, we said, all those artifacts of people who once lived here, erased and hidden under mud.

Lost, the children whispered in awe and fear, turning the black, glinting points in their palms, testing the hardness of flint between their teeth.

We were happy. We loved this land, we said. We forget why we ever left.

• • • •

Then the first child came of age. We weren't expecting it. She seemed

so young, skinny, her curly hair still in little girl's braids. Nevertheless, we saw the evidence, underwear she hid from us thrown in the trash, the unmistakable spots of blood. We saw her heels rise up, her walking on her toes like a careful ballerina. That was how it had started for us. We were excited for her, and sad. We would soon no longer have to carry her and others strapped to our backs as we flew.

We threw the first girl a party, everyone invited, but we didn't tell her why. The party brought us all together, all those children speaking the languages of the countries we'd adopted, the local children finding ours exotic and precious. They all screeched as they cannonballed into pools, jumped off diving boards, dripped sopping wet into the grass.

The first girl raised her arms at the top of the diving board. We held our breath. She flipped off the board, spun like a starfish. She brought herself to an unnatural stop in the air just before hitting the skin of the pool. Then she let herself slip under without a splash. Bravo, we cheered.

We let the grandparents cut the cake. Their teeth glinted, their arms possessively around our children, showing them off to the parents of those who had stayed. The grandparents wore the fancy foreign clothes we had brought them, clothes that most of us couldn't afford, put on credit cards or bought with pawned jewelry, but we had to show them we'd been right all this time by flying away. After so many years of loneliness and the futures we'd broken by disappearing from them, how proud they were that everyone had returned! But how long could we stay? We had made no promises.

We searched for the first girl to pass her a slice of cake, but when we saw her it was clear she did not want to be found. She was behind the bathroom sheds, floating in a squat near the dirt. We hid in the branches of the flamboyáns, trees we'd climbed easily in our youth but now we could fly straight into their canopies. We watched her gather fistfuls of red rocks from the dirt and place them on her tongue, sucking before she swallowed. This was nothing we'd ever done when we'd turned. After we let ourselves drift back to the party, we didn't speak of it. We thought it was the iron she needed, having lost her first blood.

A few days later another girl came of age, floating down her

apartment stairs soundlessly. Her grandmother startled and dropped the pot of sancocho she was carrying, praying, Not again. That night, the first girl and the second girl huddled together in the back of a colmado, the first girl showing the second how far up she could float, about the height of the counter. She spun gymnastics in the air. The second girl strained and bit her lip and rose half a foot. The boys who would soon turn surrounded them like a pack. They played jacks on the floor underneath the girls, but it was hard for the girls to play. If they didn't concentrate, they drifted up too high to reach the jacks on the floor. Eventually, the girls gave up, the man who owned the colmado sliding them both beers in plastic cups. They floated on their backs, hair hanging from their shoulders. The boys paced around them like magicians about to cut their assistants in half.

When we put the younger children to bed that night, they would not be calmed with flying tricks or bedtime stories. When we told them their favorites, the ones about the children who flew off from home, never to return again, when we read them *Peter Pan*, when we told them about arriving in strange lands, they said they were afraid. Will that happen to us? they asked. We don't want to ever leave, they said.

We thought of the blinding sky and the red ground and the summer sun. We sighed. It happens to most people, we said.

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A few of the boys changed, sleepily stumbling out the door in the morning to converge in hovering packs by the pools, rivers, parks, alleyways. At first, they didn't even notice how their heels weren't striking when they ran out the front door. The ones who hadn't yet turned started compulsively checking the soles of their feet for the slightest gap of air.

More of the children turned. They came home later each night. When they opened the door, they had no need for tiptoeing; their footsteps made no sound. We turned on the lights. We asked them where they'd been. They smelled of beer and iron. They shrugged and said flippantly,

With the locals. As they floated up the stairs, we saw under their jeans the twists of rope burns around their ankles.

We spied on them through blinds and car windows. Our old friends had to drive us, because the back alleyways and streams had changed courses since we were there. We saw the other children, the locals, the sons and daughters of the friends we'd left behind, hold out ropes made from palm leaves and point to the ground. The locals tied ropes around our sons' and daughters' ankles, tied them to their own flightless ones.

It's fine, our old friends said. They're just playing.

Our old friends reminded us of our own coming of age, ropes tethered around our ankles in case we couldn't return, experimenting with how far up we could go while they watched from the ground. Were they jealous, were they hoping we would leave soon, were they hoping we would take them with us? Our old friends brought us back home, shutting the doors firmly behind them, as if doors could keep us where they wanted.

We were relieved we would be leaving soon. Already we could feel the itch in the arches of our feet that propelled us to fly over borders.

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We didn't notice them at first, tied over the rope burns. Thin snippets of string, anklets threaded with pebbles. They reminded us of bell collars in case cats strayed too far. When we asked the children about it, they stayed silent. Among the parents, we called them friendship anklets to hide our uneasiness. Then the fad spread among those who hadn't even turned. From the balconies and patios where we drank coconut water and rummed chinola juice, we could hear their laughter as they wove their anklets. They spent the rest of their days playing tag in the canopies of the trees, leaping over the roofs, splashing under waterfalls, eyeing their newfound bodies capable of so much flight, rubbing themselves in the red mud and laying with the stray dogs who put their heads in the children's laps and growled at us if we got close or reprimanded them.

We felt guilty that we would drag them back with us when we would

leave, guilty for soon separating them from the friends they had made. But when they brought us puppies they'd watched a stray dog birth, still dripping with placenta, asking us if they could keep one, we told them no. Everything belongs in its place, we said. We reminded them of the pets we'd left in those other places, the school friends, the painted bedrooms, waiting for us to return home. When we suggested how proud we would be when they flew home without our help, they froze and sank a little in their hovering. They hated us, we knew.

The second girl who'd turned was always pushing herself to new heights, trying to outshine the first girl, who'd had a head start. One day the children came running to get us. She's gone, they yelled. She flew up in a race to touch a cloud. She won, but she didn't stop there. She kept going higher, shrinking in their eyes. None of the children were able to go after her.

We sprung up, leaped off the balconies, searched for her in the atmosphere. Our old friends searched on the ground in case she'd fallen. After days of searching, we never found the second girl. Her parents kept looking. The rest of us thought if we just waited, she'd find her way back.

The younger children had nightmares. When they played catch and balls sailed over their heads, they never jumped, for fear they'd leave the ground. They liked to dive deep in the pool for the feeling of sinking. They held hands and dug their fingers into the stray dogs' fur to stay together.

The rocks tied around their ankles got heavier. The children no longer hovered over the ground. They were weighted down with the red stones of the mountains. The stones dragged on the floor and clattered as they walked.

What are you doing? we said.

We don't want to fly, they said. We want to stay.

We forbid it, we said.

They didn't listen.

Even the younger children came back with stones tied to their legs. A toddler tripped over hers and gashed her head. This was going too far,

and we agreed we should cut them all off. That would end the matter, we thought. The summer was nearly over. It was almost time for us to leave.

The stones clattered to the ground. The ones who'd turned sprang back up into the air. Oh, how they cried.

••••

Then we saw the ones who'd turned sink lower and lower, even without the ropes binding them. We conferred amongst ourselves. It's the locals, we thought, all those children of our former friends bringing them down, showing them how to stay rooted, doing terrible things in the dark. Look at how much crime has tripled since we left, how the buildings crumble and rust, how the clothes the locals wear suggest horrible things. Who knows how this country has changed, we said. So we forbade them from seeing those other, flightless children.

Still, our children stopped flying. We couldn't explain it. We tried throwing them up into the air to give them a head start, but they came down hard. One girl broke her leg. Only then did we think it was cruel to keep lifting them up and dropping them, like mother birds pushing the chicks from the nests. We noticed no more children turned—that is, we caught no more of them hovering. Perhaps no more were ready. We gossiped among ourselves. We were ever vigilant at the parks, on the farms, at the country clubs, on the street. We saw nothing, other than many of them coming down with stomachaches, clutching their bellies, which we blamed on the awful sanitation of our old country. When the grandparents offered us ice with our water, we curled our noses in disgust.

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On the hottest day of the year, we discovered the very first girl crouched behind the concrete outhouse of the country club, dripping wet in her bathing suit, selecting rocks that marked the edge of the civilized grass from the wild selva where rivers coursed through the mountains.

She was eating rocks again. The confidence with which she selected them implied she'd done this often, and not for iron like we'd thought. She swallowed twenty of them while we watched, and then got up from her crouch. She hopped on one foot, landed awkwardly, heavily. Satisfied, she rejoined the others. Our hearts dropped at her failure. Before, she'd flown as gracefully as a swan.

We flew into the trees, hovered in the canopies. One by one, when they thought no one was looking, the children slipped behind the country club, into the woods of the farms, behind the stables, between the concrete hurricane-proof houses where their grandparents still lived, and ate bellyfuls of rocks. Our children offered stones to the hungry dogs, held pebbles out for the toucans and the parrots. They were generous with their weight.

The youngest, the ñoños who still listened to us, these we lifted, surprised and groaning with their new weight, and cradled them in our laps. Still sleepy with milk they confessed that they were still afraid, that they never wanted to leave, that they loved everything about our old country. They wanted the ground more than they wanted to fly.

The oldest ones, the ones we held responsible, these we shook. We yanked them by their braids, dragged them by their collars, threatened them with belts or wooden spoons or chancletas like our parents had done, while our parents watched from other bedrooms. They're too old for that, the grandparents said. It never worked with you, the grandparents said. We yelled at them to stay out of it.

A few of them never broke, not even when we followed through with our threats, thick welts beaten into their bare asses or the backs of their legs. They were staying here, they informed us, holding in their yelps of pain, whether we liked it or not. They would run away if we made them leave. Others said that when they first started flying, even when they held hands, they could feel their fingers slipping, drifting apart, and it made them sick. Others confessed their desire, that they ate rocks and the flints of arrowheads because if not, their bellies burned for them.

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We knew it was time to go. It had been dangerous, bringing our children back to the country we'd left, letting them fall in love with its dark mysteries. We remembered all the things we hated about it, and the worse things that had come to pass since we'd left.

We packed our suitcases, dressed our younger children warmly for the flight, said goodbye to our parents, who tried to cling to us as we rose into the air. Husbands and wives held hands in a circle around their struggling children, threading arms to lock in their incredible burdens. The children with their bodies of rocks weighed immensely. Everyone groaned while the children kicked and screamed and bit and sobbed, boys and girls fighting us and pushing at our arms. The sky was like a battle between angels.

We jettisoned the smallest bags, the blankets for the cool air, the fruits for the journey, which landed roughly in that red dirt. Our old friends shaded their eyes and watched the great struggle between us and our shameful kids, extending their hands to grab the bags dropping at their feet. Then we cut loose the big luggage, the clothes we'd bought abroad to impress those left behind, all our precious things. But our children, we had to keep our children!

The oldest kids, the strongest kids, the ones with the biggest bellies full of the most rocks that dragged us down, these flew loose from our grasps. We tried to go after them mid-flight, but they pushed us so hard we knew we couldn't win. They were stronger than us. We would lose the younger children too if we tried. Some of them fell to their grandparents on the ground, where their hair was tucked back from their faces, their chins cupped, giant plates of food set out in front of them. Others, unmoored, had not eaten enough rocks, had capacities for flight that overcame stone and flint and dirt. But they were young and did not have the skill we did to fly where we wanted. We'd had decades to practice. We tried to catch them, but they kicked us away. They clumped in groups and fought us off. The last time we saw them, they were thousands of feet above the ground, grasping clumsily for each other, fingers stretching in terror through the thinnest of atmospheres.

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The smallest ones, our babies, and the ones who didn't struggle, these we were able to save. We returned to our large houses in the suburbs, our small apartments in the cities, our echoing ranches in the country, lives we felt understood us. But the taste for rocks never left their mouths.

Some of them we starved, forbidding them stones. They learned to fly. But they drifted, never quite in the direction we wanted, trajectories loose and winding. Some of them fasted by choice, growing into bags of bones before our eyes. Lighter than ever, they floated away, sometimes in the middle of the night through windows open for the moon, sometimes without our even realizing until they were such tiny pinpricks way up in the atmosphere, like released balloons. We knew, from our own parent's struggles, there was no bringing them back.

The ones we were left with, their bellies full of rocks, they hovered a few inches above the ground but no further, never able to sink completely. They stayed in the homes of our new countries, always wanting to get back to that place where we all dreamed we were happy, but never able to return. These were the ones we could still embrace: our rock eaters, grit in their mouths, hearts too heavy, feet too light.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda Peynado's stories have won an O. Henry Prize, a Pushcart Prize, the Chicago Tribune's Nelson Algren Award, a Dana Award, a Fulbright Grant to the Dominican Republic, and other prizes. Her work appears in magazines such as *Tor.com*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Sun*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, and *The Threepenny Review*. She's currently writing a novel about the 1965 civil war in the Dominican Republic and a girl who can tell all possible futures, and she teaches in the MFA program at the University of Central Florida.

The Final Blow

Scott Sigler | 4241 words

Like the Isle of Lenas upon which it sat, the town of Lodorest had been dying for decades.

The final blow, however, came all at once.

Outside of his father's home, Manil shivered in the night air. He heard shouts and cries and screams, the roar of burning houses. Other sounds, too, drifting up the dirt streets, coming from the shadows as if the darkness itself was a monster feasting on the town: laughter; barking commands; angry bellows from deep-voiced men.

Manil stood with his mother and his uncle. Manil barely came up to Uncle Janeed's hip. Small for his age—one of the smallest boys in town—Manil hated to show weakness, but the terror of the night had him clinging to his uncle's leg.

Uncle held Mother tightly by her upper arm. In his other hand, he held his blue crystal sword. The translucent blade seemed to wiggle as it caught the light of the flickering flames.

Fire spread from house to house, making thatch roofs sizzle and spark. Flames jumped from roofs to trees, from trees to roofs. Mother wanted to hide in the church, just down the road, but Uncle wouldn't let her go.

An animal screech pierced the night. Manil caught glimpses of monsters above, huge things moving fast, visible only when they flew over the light of a burning house or flaming tree.

"We need to run," Mother said, leaning away from Uncle Janeed, who stood firm, not letting her go. "We need to find Mixos and *run*."

Mixos, Manil's father.

"Nowhere *to* run," Uncle said. "Those are warhawks above us, which means the raiders are Sectels. Sectels surround a village, then set fires and wait in the darkness for people to run out. Easier to kill or capture them a few at a time that way."

Uncle knew things. He had sailed above the Glowing Sea and traveled

the world. He had been born in Lodocest, just like Mother and Father, but had spent far more time away from the Isle than on it.

He had come back only a few weeks ago. Uncle had spent some time with Manil, telling of the hundreds of beautiful and dangerous Isles in the archipelago, and also of a place so big it would fit a thousand isles, a place called *the continent*. Most of the time, though, Uncle had argued with Mother and Father, telling them they needed to leave, telling them that the blight would not stop, that the fish weren't coming back, that the tremors that threw Manil out of bed at night were only going to grow more intense.

And, worst of all, that the trunk might crack, that the entire Isle of Lenas would fall into the Glowing Sea.

Mother had argued that Bapatash would never allow such a thing to happen, that Bapatash would always keep the Isle safe. Uncle had said that Bapatash had abandoned the Isle, just as so many other gods had abandoned their lands.

With the townsfolk screaming, with houses burning, with monsters flying through the darkness above, Manil wondered if Uncle was right.

"We have to find Mixos," Mother said again. "We can't just stand here!"

Uncle gave her arm a single yank that rattled her body. She stared at him, shocked.

"My brother is dead," Uncle said. "If he wasn't, he would be here with us now. He's gone."

Mother's face twisted. She shook her head. She didn't believe Father was dead.

Manil didn't believe it either.

Uncle had to be wrong. Father was the biggest, strongest man in the town. Everyone knew it. He was the militia leader.

When the first screeches had echoed through the night, Father threw on his wooden armor—the same armor Grandfather had worn—and rushed out into the darkness. Manil had been afraid, of course he had, but he'd known Father would lead the men against whatever threatened the town.

But Father hadn't come back. Nor had any of the other men.

Mother leaned away from Uncle, pulled so hard her feet skidded, pushed up small mounds of dirt.

"If we don't run we'll die!"

Uncle yanked her arm so hard she almost fell.

Manil saw a new kind of fear on Mother's face—fear of Uncle Janeed.

"We stay here," Uncle said. "If it is the Sectels, there are worse things than death."

The screech of a warhawk cut through the air, made Manil flinch. He looked up, searching for the monster. The massive bird flashed by overhead, the flames of burning houses lighting up its sky-blue belly and mottled underwings. Before it shot past into the darkness, Manil saw huge talons open, saw two round clay pots drop down, saw the pots smash against the church roof's clay tiles. Red liquid splashed, then came a blinding flash.

Manil blinked madly, after-images leaving streaks in his vision. When they faded enough for him to see, he saw fresh orange flames rising from the church.

"There are people in there," Mother said. "Janeed, we have to help them!"

Once again she tried to pull away; once again Uncle held her in place.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "They are as good as dead. We all are." He looked down; his eyes locked with Manil's. "Almost all."

Uncle Janeed's eyes were the deep blue of the lake, before it had soured. The same eyes as Father. The same eyes as Manil.

The church doors burst open. People rushed out. Lukas Brandlebush and Henna Yithish, both older kids, sprinting together. Howland Kath and his wife Rennie—as old as Manil's grandparents had been the last time he'd had seen them—walking slow, holding each other, both crying. And more people, all running so fast Manil recognized them and did not recognize them, faces here-then-gone in the flickering firelight that came from the church and so many other buildings.

One of those people stumbled; old Laonik, who sat around all day carving stone bowls. He staggered, fell face-first—Manil saw an arrow

shaft sticking out of his back. The old man's hands reached out, grasped at nothing.

"They're close," Uncle said.

"Please," Mother said, "let me go. Stay and fight if you want, but let me take Manil and run! *Please!*"

Manil heard a girl's shriek—she sounded older than him, but younger than Mother.

"Please, Janeed." Mother was crying. That made Manil start to cry, an instant reaction he couldn't stop.

Uncle Janeed again turned his deep blue eyes on Manil, and this time Uncle's face wrinkled with an anger the boy had never seen before.

"Stay here," Uncle said to him. "Do not move, do you understand?"

The voice of authority, just like Father's.

Manil nodded.

"And stop crying," Uncle said. "Or you won't live to see the dawn."

Uncle Janeed stepped back into the house, dragging Mother with him.

Manil stood alone.

He heard the girl shriek again, a shriek bracketed by sobbing. Layered on those sounds of pain and fear, he heard a man's laugh.

Then, from inside the house where he had been born, Manil heard his mother say one word.

"No!"

Manil shivered. He waited. He heard his town dying around him. He heard men talking loudly to each other. Excited men, angry men, men whose voices he did not recognize.

Uncle stepped out of the house, crystal sword in hand.

There was blood on the blade.

"You are too young for this, Manil, but that does not matter," Uncle said. "You will listen to me now. You will *hear* me, or you will die. Do you understand?"

Manil looked down the street, toward the church. Laonik had stopped reaching. He wasn't moving. The arrow shaft stuck out of his back, angling up toward the night sky.

It wasn't the first time Manil had seen death. Old Laonik lay as still as

rabbits after Manil hit them with a stone from his sling. As still as the many fish Manil had caught and cleaned with his friend Kanor Kapoor before the lake soured and the fish were no more.

Old Laonik was dead.

Manil did not want to die.

He looked up at his uncle, and nodded.

Shouts of men, drawing closer. Manil heard the girl again, her weak whimper somehow cutting through the roar of the fires.

“Your father is dead,” Uncle said. “So is your mother. She is with Bapatash now.”

The blood on the blue sword . . .

All Manil had ever known was gone. His world had never been *safe*, because nothing on the Isle was safe. Not with the blight. Not with the army gone. Not with the constant threat of raiders. On the Isle, children died. Children went missing. He’d known he wasn’t safe, but with Mother and Father, Manil had always felt *protected*.

No more.

Mother couldn’t be gone. She *couldn’t*.

Manil stared up at his uncle, understanding what had just happened, yet not daring to believe it.

“Mother is dead?”

“I ended her torment before it began,” Uncle said. “Some things are worse than death. If you are very lucky, you will live long enough to see that for yourself.”

Uncle knelt, put a hand on Manil’s shoulder. He was older than Father by a good ten years. Maybe more.

“Listen carefully, Manil. You are not eight years old. You are *seven*. This is important. Do not forget. Do not contradict me. Do you understand?”

Manil understood nothing. Father, dead? Uncle had killed Mother? This wasn’t real. This was a nightmare.

Uncle Janed grabbed Manil’s shoulder, gave it a hard shake. The boy winced from the pain.

“*Do you understand?*”

Manil nodded.

“You will have to fight,” Uncle said, his words tight and fast. “It will probably be someone you know. Maybe even a friend. You *must* strike first. You *must* kill that person. If you do not, that person will kill *you*. That is all there is to it. Do you understand?”

Manil stared at his uncle. This was a nightmare, yes, but there was no waking from it.

Uncle Janeed glanced down the street, toward the fire shadows that danced in all directions.

“Repeat it back to me,” Uncle said.

Manil said nothing.

Uncle shook his shoulder again, calloused fingers digging into soft flesh.

“*Repeat it.*”

“I’m seven,” Manil said in a rush. “I must kill.”

From down the street, through the heat haze, Manil saw five men coming closer.

Three of them had shaved heads. They wore brown trousers, brown boots, ponchos with patterns of deep red and bright yellow. Red ribbons tied tightly on their muscular arms seemed to writhe with life in the cascading firelight. The men carried spears in their hands, had scabbards holding short knives at their waists.

One man wore similar trousers and boots, but no poncho—on his naked chest, a large tattoo of a great red bird. He, too, carried a spear. White knife handles jutted up from scabbards jammed into his thick black belt.

The last man was taller than the rest, covered head-to-toe in black. Only his face showed, blacker than the clothes he wore, so dark that his white eyes seemed to float in the night. He held a long, curved bow painted with angled stripes of black and gray.

A full quiver on the man’s back; the mottled amber feathers matched those on the shaft sticking out of Old Laonik’s back.

“Sectels,” Uncle said. “Barbarians. They must have sailed here on whales. The tattooed one is a warhawk rider. The bowman is a Naadic. If

you survive the night, Nephew, seek out the Naadic. Make friends with him.”

Make friends? The bowman had killed old Laonik—Manil wanted to run away, not *make friends*.

“You must grow up,” Uncle said. “You must grow up *now*. You must survive. You are the last of us.”

Uncle stood, turned, put himself between Manil and the approaching men. Uncle did not raise his sword; he held it in front of him, angled toward the ground.

The archer drew back on the bowstring; Manil heard the weapon creak in anticipation.

The man with the red bird tattoo held up a hand.

“Wait,” he said to the bowman. Then, to Uncle Janeed: “That is a fine blade you have. Do you think you will use it to fight your way free?”

Uncle shook his head. “I know better.”

The man seemed to consider this for a moment. “Then lay down your weapon and we will kill you quickly.”

Uncle didn’t move.

The roar of flames seemed so loud, like hundreds of sticks and boards *breaking* instead of *burning*.

“I have traveled,” Uncle said. “I’ve met Sectels, heard of your traditions. The boy is strong for his age.”

The tattooed man looked at Manil. A new fear coursed through the boy, icy water cascading off his heart to settle in his churning belly—this man was death.

“How old is he?”

“Five,” Uncle said. “Six in three months.”

The tattooed man laughed. “If that boy is only five, he is a giant. You try to trick me into thinking he will be huge. He is six . . . possibly even seven.”

From down the street, a whoosh of billowing sparks as a flaming roof caved in. The Kapoors’ house. Were Kanor and Willem still inside? Had they fled the town only to be killed or captured by the Sectels, as Uncle had thought?

Manil silently prayed they'd escaped.

Willem was a year older than Manil, picked on Manil whenever grownups weren't around, but Kanor . . . Manil and Kanor had hunted together hundreds of times. They had explored together. They had dared to go close to the blight. They had even hiked to the edge of the Isle and stared down at the Glowing Sea.

"Tell me how old the boy is," the tattooed man said. "If you lie, we will cut off your hands, your feet and your eyelids. We will keep you alive while you watch what we do to him."

Uncle Janeed looked down.

"Seven," he said. "Just last week."

Manil's ninth birthday was only a month away.

A part of him—a strangely calm part hiding within the fear and confusion—realized what his uncle had done. Uncle Janeed had told a lie so big that it wasn't believable. When the tattooed man called him on it, Uncle corrected to the number he'd wanted the tattooed man to believe in the first place.

"Perhaps you hope to trade him," the tattooed man said. "You think if you offer me the boy, that you can walk away? Is that why you lied, to make me think he is a prize?"

"The boy is my blood," Uncle said. "I want him to live. Better he sail with you than die where he stands."

The tattooed man waited for Uncle to say more, but Uncle did not.

"Bring me the sword," the man said. "Hilt first, and I will give the boy his chance. If you fight, he dies."

The sounds of agony and fear filtered in from all around, townsfolk screaming. Begging. Dying.

Somewhere out of sight, the *whoosh* of another house collapsing. Fire danced and raged, driving smoke into the sky. Trees were torches, blazing bright with flaming leaves or shimmering orange and broken against the dark night.

Another bald, poncho-wearing spearman strode down the street, pushing a pair of boys before him. Roiling heat made all three people shimmer like the air above blight-black on a hot summer day.

Manil recognized the boys—Willem and Kanor. Willem, the older of the two, a head and a half taller than Manil. Kanor, the same height as Manil despite being a full year younger.

The boys looked terrified, their eyes wide, their cheeks streaked with tears.

Manil wondered if he looked the same way to them.

The spearman yanked Willem and Kanor to a stop.

“Dolitch,” the spearman said, “our search is finished.”

“Just two?” The tattooed man frowned. “Is that all?”

Dolitch. A name or a title, Manil didn’t know.

“That is all that remained in town,” the spearman said. “Many of the houses were empty to begin with. All buildings have been checked or are burning.” He smiled. “Or they’re occupied with the spoils.”

Some of the spearmen laughed. A wrong sound, an *evil* sound.

Dolitch looked to Uncle Janeed.

“This town could hold many more people than we have seen. It is almost empty. Why?”

“Blight,” Uncle said. “And quakes. Hard for farmers to find enough blight-free land to till. The soil is blanched. The lakes as well. All the fish are long gone. The Isle has been dying for years. Many people left. You picked the wrong place to raid.”

Dolitch’s eyes narrowed. “You seem smarter than most. Educated. Why are you here?”

Janeed gestured to Manil.

“For the boy. His father was my brother. I tried to talk him and his wife into leaving. They refused.”

Dolitch glanced around at the burning houses, at the burning trees.

“We will still get something out of this, perhaps,” he said. He looked to the man standing behind Willem and Kanor. “Hold the small one. The big one is too old. We are not the only ones who deserve spoils.”

The spearman shoved Willem forward so hard the boy stumbled, fell to his hands and knees in the street’s dirt.

Dolitch put his fingers to his mouth, let loose a piercing whistle.

From the black sky, a deep screech answered.

The warhawk dropped like a rock, not there one moment, a mass of flapping red the next, hovering above Willem. Wings as wide as the street kicked up clouds of dust, blew back Manil's hair, made the fires surge and writhe.

Willem trembled, struggled to his feet. The warhawk . . . so *big* . . . bigger than the biggest horse Manil had ever seen.

"*Run*," Manil whispered, knowing there was no running away from something that flew.

Willem stared up at the flapping beast.

The warhawk dropped. Taloned feet smashed Willem into the ground. Manil heard bones snap.

Kanor screamed, tried to run to his brother. The spearman grabbed the back of the boy's neck, squeezed until Kanor went rigid.

Beneath the warhawk's feet, Willem made no sound at all.

The giant bird launched upward, each swoop of the wide wings churning the surrounding flames. Willem hung there, impaled on its talons. Blood dripped down in long rivulets.

The monster rose, vanishing into the night.

With one hand, Dolitch pointed his spear at Uncle Janeed.

"Come," Dolitch said. "It is your time."

Uncle turned to Manil, dropped to one knee. He pulled the boy in for a one-armed hug.

"Remember what I told you," Uncle whispered. "Fight. Kill. Survive."

His voice sounded hoarse, as if he might cry, but Uncle was like Father and had *never* cried.

"Remember one more thing," Uncle whispered. "The first man that tries to bend you over, you kill him. Make no threat, give no warning—kill him. Do not hesitate."

With that, Uncle Janeed stood and strode toward Dolitch.

For a moment, Manil thought Uncle would attack the men, that the blue blade would cut them all down.

Then Uncle flipped the sword; held it by the blade.

"Don't," Manil said, no louder than when he'd told Willem to run.

Dolitch's three spearmen leveled their weapons at Uncle. Uncle paid

them no attention—he had eyes only for their leader.

Manil couldn't breathe. He watched, hoping he was wrong, knowing he was not.

Uncle Janeed knelt in front of Dolitch, offered up the crystal sword's hilt.

Dolitch took it.

The invader raised the sword, admiring it. Firelight glistened through the blade, molten orange dancing within translucent blue.

“Beautiful,” Dolitch said. “Kaleeyan?”

Uncle Janeed nodded. “It is.”

Dolitch smiled. “Fix him.”

Three spear points thrust forward, plunged into Uncle's stomach, his chest, his shoulder. He grunted, but did not cry out.

Manil shook his head, wishing it all away.

“Go to the great rebirth,” Dolitch said, “knowing that I am true to my word.”

With an effort that seemed casual, almost lazy, Dolitch flicked the blade from left to right.

Uncle Janeed's head tumbled back, rolled twice. It came to a stop with his right cheek against the dirt.

Manil saw Uncle's eyes blink twice.

Then, nothing.

Uncle was a gutted fish.

A dead rabbit.

All noise faded. The colors of the world dulled.

Everything Manil knew had been ripped away.

Uncle Janeed had done this for him. For *him*.

“Push the boy forward,” Dolitch said.

Manil expected invisible hands to shove him; none did.

Kanor stumbled forward, fell to his knees only a few steps from Uncle's head. The boy stared at the severed head, shivering, as if it might come alive and bite him.

“There are two of you,” Dolitch said. “Only one lives to see tomorrow. Decide which one.”

Dolitch yanked a sheathed knife free from his belt, tossed it into the street. It landed between Manil and Kanor.

Manil was distantly aware of the men calling out to each other. Wagers—some picking Manil, some picking Kanor.

Kanor's gaze shifted from Uncle's head to the knife, then to Dolitch. Agony in those eyes. Agony, heartbreak . . . and confusion.

Kanor didn't understand what was happening.

Manil did.

He understood because Uncle Janeed had told him what to do.

That is all there is to it.

Manil walked toward the knife.

Kanor glanced at him, as bewildered by Manil as he was by Dolitch, by the slaughter of the town, by the loss of his brother.

Manil picked up the scabbard. He gripped the bone handle, felt the carved hardness against his palm and fingers. It wasn't hot. It wasn't cold. It just *was*.

He drew the blade. Bone from hilt to tip. Sharpened to a vicious point.

Manil shuffled toward Kanor.

They'd grown up together. They'd played together. They had taunted each other to get closer and closer to the blight. Together, they had slept under the stars. Together, they had stared down at the Glowing Sea.

Kanor's eyes locked in on the bone blade.

Those eyes widened.

Now he understood, but it was too late.

Kill your friend.

"Manil," Kanor said, "don't—"

Manil drove the point into his friend's neck.

Kanor's mouth opened. Perhaps he wanted to say something. No words came out.

Manil pulled the blade free. Blood sprayed against his face. He blinked it away, thrust again. The blade went deeper the second time, hit something hard. It stuck there. Manil tried to pull it free, but all he did was yank Kanor forward.

Manil's friend fell to the ground.

His blood splattered the dirt.

A few drops landed on Uncle Janeed's forehead.

Manil stepped back, suddenly aware of what he had done, of the pending *finality* of it. He felt a stinging in his eyes, not from the blood on his face, but from tears. He fought those tears down, letting the coldness inside his chest swell up and envelop all that he was.

Father had never cried.

Neither had Uncle.

Nor would Manil.

Shaking, Kanor rose to his hands and knees, fell to his side. He looked up at Manil, eyes wide with pain, with shock.

His lids half closed.

He rolled to his back.

A new sound; men, cheering.

"Twice in the neck!"

"He's a natural!"

"I want him first."

None of those voices were Dolitch's, Manil knew. When Dolitch spoke again, all voices fell silent.

"Boy," Dolitch said, "what is your name?"

Manil looked at the man who had killed Uncle.

An uncle that had realized what was happening when no one else had, who had foreseen the destruction of everything, who had known there was one chance to keep just one person alive.

"My name," Manil said, "is Janeed."

Dolitch nodded. "Have you ever been off this Isle, Janeed? Have you ever sailed the Glowing Sea?"

Manil shook his head.

"Tonight, you will," Dolitch said. "This isle is diseased. You will come to realize that this day was the day of your deliverance. You have paid for your passage in blood. You will see the sun rise at least one more time. Now, give me back my knife."

Manil wondered if he should cry over the deaths of his mother, his father, his uncle, his friend. He wondered if he should scream and swear

at Dolitch.

But to do those things, Manil would need to feel pain.

He would need to feel rage.

He felt neither.

He felt . . . *nothing*.

Manil reached down, grabbed the handle of the bone knife sticking out of Kanor's neck. Manil pulled; it did not come loose.

Kanor let out a little hiss. Blood bubbled on his lips; he was not quite dead.

Manil put his foot on Kanor's forehead, pulled harder.

The bone blade popped free.

Kanor made a noise that might have been a word. Manil didn't know if it was, realized he didn't care.

He picked up the scabbard. He wiped the blade against his shirt, cleaning away the blood of his friend, then slid the blade into the scabbard.

Manil walked to Dolitch.

Like his uncle had before him, the boy offered the weapon hilt-first.

Dolitch took it, slid the scabbard back into his belt.

“Well done, Janeed,” he said. “Now you sail with us.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#1 *New York Times* best-selling author Scott Sigler is the creator of fifteen novels, six novellas and dozens of short stories. He gives away his stories as weekly, serialized, audiobooks, with over 40 million episodes downloaded. Scott launched his career by releasing his novels as author-read podcasts. He is also a co-founder of Empty Set Entertainment, which publishes his Galactic Football League series. He lives in San Diego, CA, with his wee little dog Reesie. Both Scott and Reesie are diehard Detroit Lions fans.

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

Card Sharp

Rajan Khanna | 4200 words

Editor's Note: Next month we'll be publishing Rajan Khanna's new weird western story "All In," which takes place in the same world as the following story. "Card Sharp," which first appeared in my anthology *The Way of the Wizard*, was the first story Khanna published about Quentin Ketterly. The second story in the sequence, "Second Hand," was published in my anthology *Dead Man's Hand*, and subsequently reprinted in *Lightspeed* (in Issue 48; also available online). You can read the stories in any order, but if you want to start at the beginning, we thought we'd deal you in.—*eds.*

By the time Quentin reached the Ketterly Riverboat, he was down to thirty-seven cards, not counting the two Jokers. He ran his index finger along the edge of the deck, tucked securely in his waistcoat pocket.

He was unarmed, not the kind of man who ever felt comfortable with a pistol, though he had once regularly carried a knife on his hip. Back then, his playing cards had been as disposable as everything else in his life: his women, his possessions, his inheritance.

But he mourned the loss of each of *these* cards. Eight had been lost to his training—the Twos and the Threes. He lost two during the trouble in Missoula when he'd been caught with that Ace—a normal Ace, mind you—up his sleeve. Another went escaping a mudslide. And in Odessa, Texas he'd lost three fending off thieves.

But that had been all prelude. To *this*. The riverboat.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the Seven of Diamonds. The card flared like phosphorous in his hand, then disappeared in a wisp of smoke. He felt an ephemeral film coat his body. He moved from his hiding place behind some trees and moved down the walkway and to the ramp leading up to the riverboat.

He could feel the stares of the riverboat guards on him, even though he knew they could not see him. Using the Seven of Diamonds might have been overkill, but better safe than sorry. Still, his neck hair prickled at the idea that at the moment, their rifles could be trained on him, preparing to fire.

He made for a small washroom near the center of the main deck. As he approached it, the riverboat's great paddlewheel began to move, churning the water in a great roar. With a lurch, the riverboat began to move, taking Roland Ketterly and his men down the Mississippi.

Quentin slipped through the washroom door, taking care to close it quietly and minimize his noise. Whatever concealment the first card had provided was visual alone.

He drew the next two cards in his pocket. They were at the front, exactly how he'd arranged them. He removed the Jack of Diamonds and the Jack of Hearts, cupping them in his hands as if in a card game. It pained him to have to play two face cards, especially a Heart that could be used for healing, but he needed to ensure that the card he played had enough power to hold and convince the boat's occupants. Quentin threw down the pair of Jacks.

He stifled a moan as his face seemed to turn to wax. The Diamond alone would have given him the disguise he wanted, but that wouldn't have fooled anyone, especially with his voice and manner of walking unchanged. The Heart ensured the change was physiological, and though it disgusted Quentin to assume that hateful form, it was his best chance to move freely aboard the riverboat.

When the transformation was completed, he looked into the mirror, noting how eerily alike he looked to Roland Ketterly, the man he had come to kill.

••••

Quentin could still remember the hands he'd played in that game in Tombstone. He had been having a glorious ride, the majority of the table's chips arranged in a jagged mass in front of him. The old man he

was playing against, however, was clearly irritated and with each hand—and each lost ridge of chips from the once great reef in front of him—his bitter scowl deepened.

Feeling flushed from his winnings and surrounded by ladies, Quentin had started showing off, demonstrating his legerdemain with the cards and chips, making them dart and dance and disappear. With each trick the women cooed and leaned closer. With every flourish, the old man's displeasure grew.

In the end, he had taken almost everything. He packed away his winnings and retired to his room, leaving it unlocked should any of the ladies wish to join him. The old man, however, appeared, uninvited.

“What do you want?” Quentin said, thinking of the knife that now rested next to the room's wash basin.

“I need that money,” the old man said.

“I won it fair.”

“I know. But I can offer you something for it. Something more important. Something more valuable.”

“What's more valuable than money?”

The old man flashed a smile. “Power.”

• • • •

Quentin kept his gait regular and his senses alert as he climbed the riverboat's stairs to the upper decks. He'd long ago realized that anxiety and panic could be bigger threats than anything external. He'd managed to overcome them in card games and sleight of hand, but this, *this* was still relatively new to him.

The chatter from the crew below was swallowed by the roar of the paddlewheel. The sickly sweet mushroom smell of the Mississippi filled the air.

On the staircase he passed a member of the riverboat's crew heading down. The man tipped his hat to him. Quentin grunted back in Roland's voice, the way he had seen Roland do many times before. His heart beat faster in his chest. The man continued on his way, paying him no mind.

He thought of Roland on the highest deck, in his private rooms. The rest of the riverboat was given over to business—to passengers or cargo, traditional operations. But the top of the boat was Roland's domain, it was from there he ran his empire. The empire that had once belonged to Quentin's father.

Between shuddering breaths he reached the top deck, one hand on the polished wooden banister, the other, fingers outstretched, hovering over his waistcoat pocket. A man came out of one of the rooms, bearded, wearing a white coat. "Ah, there you are, Mr. Ketterly," he said. "I wonder if you could come with me for a moment."

Quentin could hear his pulse pound in his ears. "I'm in a hurry," he said, in Roland's voice.

"Please," the man said. "It's your wife."

At this, a river of ice flooded his blood. "Very well," he said, and followed the man into one of the rooms.

And there, on a bed, covered in blankets, her face damp and drawn, lay Quentin's mother.

••••

"It's a very old tradition," the old man said. "As old as the cards."

"But why cards?" Quentin asked.

"Because you need a way to focus the energy, a way to shape it. I guess some people use words written down on paper. We use the cards. They work well—numbers and symbols all tied up together. And they're portable. Light. They travel well."

"I guess that makes a kind of sense," Quentin said.

"There are two main things you need to know," the old man said. "The suit of the card determines the effect—so Hearts are good for anything involving the body, Diamonds are good for things involving money, and ways to fool the eye, and so forth. The number of the card determines the size or power of the effect. The higher the number, the more powerful the effect will be."

Quentin frowned. "Then why not just use the highest cards all the

time?”

The old man gave a wicked grin. “Oh, didn’t I mention that already? Because you can only use each card once.”

“What?”

“That’s right. Each card is one-time only. Once you burn through your deck, you’re done.”

Quentin sank into a wooden chair. “Well that takes some of the fun out of it,” he said.

“Don’t it just?”

“How do you know what number to use, then?”

“Ah, y’see that’s the trick,” the old man said, holding up his index finger. “It’s a kind of gamble. You just have to lay it all out there and hope that you figured right. You’ll get a feel for it after a while.”

“But by then I’ll have lost those cards.”

“That’s the truth of it, yes.”

Quentin flipped through the cards of the deck in front of him. “What about the Jokers?” he asked. “Do those count, too?”

“Of course they do,” the old man said, smiling wider, his face shining. “The Jokers are wild.”

••••

Quentin stared at his mother, pained by the way she drew in shallow breaths, by the wispieness of her. She used to be so solid. But that was back when she was married to his father. Before she had taken up with Roland Ketterly.

He reached for her dry and thin hand and held it. “How is she doing?” he asked the doctor.

“Frankly, not good,” the doctor said, wiping his forehead with one of his sleeves. “Her illness is progressing. She falls in and out of lucidity. There’s not much I can do except keep giving her the morphine.”

Quentin held back tears. He wouldn’t cry for her now, not with Roland’s eyes. He acutely felt the weight of the cards in his pocket. He flipped through them until he found the card he wanted. He pulled the

Queen of Hearts and held it between shaking fingers. The card could heal her. He pinched it tight. One thought, and it would come to life. One thought. The card vibrated, but did not burn.

At last, he tucked it back into his pocket. He was here, on Roland's doorstep. That card might be the difference between him winning, or dying.

And she had stayed with Roland, after all.

He turned away from her, letting her hand drop. "Do what you can," he told the doctor, then left to find Roland.

He would wash away his guilt in blood and fire.

• • • •

Quentin wiped the sweat from his forehead. He had just played his first card, throwing the Two of Clubs, creating a small flame and making it dance in the air before him. "How do you know which number to use? How do you know how long the play will last or if it will do what you want it to do?"

"You don't," the old man said, shaking his head. "They're cards. It's all a gamble. Sometimes, it's a bluff. But as with everything else, you learn to feel out the cards and you'll get better at all of that."

The old man held up another card, the Two of Diamonds, in his arthritic hands. "Now, another one."

Quentin took it, still unsure of the old man and his motives. He still didn't know the man's name, not after two weeks of training, of poring over books and flipping through cards and learning the histories and associations of them all. The man had said to call him Hoyle, though Quentin doubted that was his real name.

Quentin looked at his nearly but not quite full deck, face down on the table. The maroon backs bore the image of a circle, or wheel. He had started with fifty-four. Now he was down to fifty-three. He looked at the old man. "How many?" he said.

"What?"

"How many cards do you have left?"

The old man blinked and lowered his eyes. “Only five.”

Quentin saw the regret, the loss in the old man’s eyes. But he pushed that aside. He had almost a full deck, and when he was finished learning how to use them, he would go after Roland.

Yet as he lifted the next card, he winced as he willed it to life, knowing that it would forever be lost to him thereafter. Diamonds was the suit of illusion, of trickery, and Quentin conjured up an image of the old man, as if it had stepped from a mirror to stand next to him. But despite his concentration, the image never took on lifelike proportions. It appeared, hazy and flat, indistinct. A ghost and nothing more.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You tried for something beyond the value of the card,” the old man said. Even as he spoke, the image faded away to nothingness.

“This is horseshit,” Quentin said. “I just wasted a card. I don’t see why I have to keep doing this.”

“That’s precisely why you need to get the feel for the cards. There are those who don’t practice. They go out with full decks, don’t want to waste none. They always get smoked sooner or later. They don’t have the feel for the cards. You gotta learn to judge. You don’t just sit down at a card game and start bluffing seasoned players before you know the game, do you? You have to learn how to order them in the deck, know what to draw and when to draw it. Hell, we haven’t even talked about combining cards yet.”

Quentin sighed, but he could see the old man’s point. All of this was preparation. The practice would be worth it, because it would give him Roland.

“What about the Jokers, though? Can you feel them out?”

Hoyle shrugged. “They’re unpredictable. No suit, no value. We call the red one The Magician. The black one’s The Fool.” Quentin was becoming used to the names some cards had—the Death Card for the Ace of Spades, the Laughing Boy for the Jack of Diamonds, The False King, the King of Hearts.

“If I were you, I’d put them Jokers somewhere out of the way where they can’t muck things up for you. I keep mine tucked into my boots.

One in my left, one in my right. They're there if you need them, but me, I don't trust anything I can't predict."

"And you can predict me?"

"Maybe not in a card game," Hoyle said, "but in everything else you're a bull seeing red. Ain't nothing to predict."

He held up the next card.

••••

Quentin headed for the inner rooms of the upper level, where he knew Roland would be. He ignored the riverboat crew, striding forward with purpose. He reached for the door to the inner rooms, pulled it open, and stared into the face of Roland Ketterly.

They looked at each other for a moment, both surprised. Then, as Quentin reached for a card, Roland yelled and ducked behind the wall. Men, heavily armed, appeared behind him.

Quentin ducked behind the wall, away from the door and fished in his pocket for another card. Fingers trembling, he pulled out the Nine of Spades and visualized the shield taking shape around him. Moments later, a hail of bullets bounced off of it, and Quentin exhaled.

He could barely see through the gunsmoke and muzzle flare, but he pulled cards from his pocket, Spades and Clubs, Diamonds and Hearts, each one sparking to life before it felled one of the men. He used all of the meanings he could call up, all of the effects he had practiced—fire for Clubs, earth for Diamonds, water for Hearts, air for Spades. And then the other meanings, Spades for offense, Hearts to affect the body. Card after card after card.

With each one, another man fell. But not the right man. Not Roland Ketterly.

Not Quentin's uncle.

••••

Quentin stood by the old man's bed and mopped perspiration from

his brow with a cloth. "I need you to do something for me," Hoyle said.

Quentin had been expecting that. The old man was going to ask him to use one of his Hearts. He'd thought long and hard on that and decided that it was worth it. The old man had given him the deck, after all.

"Go on."

"I have a son. One I haven't seen in a while. We're not . . . we're not close. This kinda life don't lend itself well to family."

"You want me to give him some money?"

The old man shook his head. "I been giving him money. That's what I needed it for in the first place. No, I want you to give him his own cards."

"What?"

"I don't want him to have the life that I did. Boy's in a spot of trouble. Comes from not having anyone around to teach him. But they can help him. You can show him how."

"But I don't even know how to make the deck," Quentin said.

"I made it already," Hoyle said. "You just have to give it to him and show him how it works."

"Hoyle--"

"Please. I haven't been able to face him. Not after all that's happened. But you can. You can give him all I have left to give. Please, say you'll do it."

Quentin thought about his own father, and about all the trouble he'd gotten into running away from the family business. He would give anything for a connection to the man, something passed down that wasn't a stake in the family empire. Something that didn't stink of Roland.

"Okay, I'll do it. But you needn't die. I have cards. I can help fix you up."

Hoyle shook his head. "I done that before. Fixed myself up so much I've outlived my life. Only I'm all dried up now. Worn out. It's time for me to go. Do what I asked," he said. "Please."

Later, after Quentin had said goodbye, he'd taken the new deck of cards, so full and fresh, and placed them in his case. They wouldn't work

for him—he knew that—but he would try to pass them on.

But first there would be a reckoning.

••••

The smell of smoke and gunpowder filled Quentin's nostrils. Bodies littered the floor. But his attention was fixed on the door at the end of the hall, where Roland had fled. The deck felt thin between his fingers as he drew the next card. But he was close to Roland. That had to be worth the loss of the cards.

He flexed the card between his fingers, then walked up to the door and kicked it open. He felt a thrill as the impact ran up his shin and thigh. He paused for a moment.

Nothing.

Then he caught a glimpse of a large form through the door. The card burned away in his hand and six glittering blades flew through the air. He felt the smile curl his lips as he moved forward.

But the man, tall and corpulent, still stood. And it was his turn to smile, playing cards fanned out in his hands.

Quentin reached for another card, for one that was higher—in duels the high card won. He pulled out the Queen of Hearts. A potent card, but then he remembered his mother, and hesitated.

A card flashed in the fat man's hand. Invisible fists pushed at Quentin until his back slammed against the wall of the room. And he couldn't move. He couldn't reach his cards.

The fat man moved forward. Behind him, Roland sat in a chair, one leg crossed over the other.

"You have your own cards," Quentin said.

The other card sharp smiled. "You think you're the only one?"

Quentin gritted his teeth.

"Course my deck is a bit thinner than it used to be," the fat man said. "That's the rub, ain't it? The more you use it, the shorter it gets. It's a good thing cocks ain't like that." He smiled again and Quentin longed to punch the man's yellowed teeth in. Quentin flexed at his invisible bonds

but they didn't give.

The fat man withdrew a partially smoked cigar from his pocket and lit it with a brass lighter, puffing on the end until it glowed red. "He's all yours, Ketterly."

Roland stepped forward until he was just a few paces before Quentin. He had aged some, was a little thinner, but he still stood rod straight.

"So you came for me," Roland said. "I have to admit I didn't think you had it in you. I figured you to be as toothless as your father."

"Better toothless than fanged."

"Well," Roland said. "We know which your mother preferred."

Quentin snarled and tried to move. "She may have swallowed your lies. But I didn't."

Roland's eyes widened. "Such fire. You really are a changed man. But you've failed."

"I made short work of your men," Quentin said.

"Men are replaceable." He smiled, showing all of his teeth.

Quentin reflexively tried to curl his hands into fists and was thwarted by the fat man's play. But this time, the tips of his fingers wavered in the air. Quentin blinked. Was the play weakening? If the fat man had only a limited deck, then maybe the power of his cards was limited. Or maybe he misjudged?

"You bought yourself some time, is all," Quentin said. "I *will* kill you."

"Ha," Roland said. "You do believe that, don't you? You are caught. Like a fish, floundering in a bucket. And my earlier generosity is all dried up. Soon, Lacroix here will kill you and nothing will change. Your momma already considers you dead. All I can say is you had your chance. I was happy to let you leave, have a life, find your own happiness. But you couldn't let go, could you?"

Roland walked away, then turned back. "You know, I said that you took after your father before. And maybe you do, in your blundering. But . . . I was thinking that if your father had the power you had, the . . . the magic, he wouldn't have spent it on blood, on violence. He would have tried to help people. Used it for one of his saintly pursuits."

He stepped forward and cupped Quentin's face. Quentin couldn't flinch away. "No, Quentin. The truth is, in that respect at least, you're more like me."

Quentin wanted to scream, to grab Roland and claw out his eyes. But the play held him tight. All except for his fingers, which he could now wiggle. Just a little longer.

Roland smiled serenely. "I think it's time to say goodbye now, Quentin." He slapped Quentin's cheek. "Say hello to my brother for me." He stepped away and drew a pistol from his belt.

Quentin could now move his whole fingers and part of his hand.

Roland cocked back the hammer.

Quentin's wrist flexed.

And the Ace up his sleeve flipped into his hand.

Clubs, the suit of fire.

As it flared to life, so did Lacroix, catching fire like a sheaf of kindling. The fat man's cards, held tight in his hands, fluttered to the floor.

Lacroix screamed and Quentin felt the force holding him drop away. Roland fired, but Quentin was already moving, skirting the burning man, the card in his right sleeve, the Ace of Spades, falling into his hand.

The gun flashed again and burning streaks of pain speared through Quentin as the air filled with thunder. He fell backward and to the floor, the Ace falling from his hand as the world fragmented and blurred.

Roland stepped on the card, then bent over him and pulled the rest of the deck from his vest. He tossed them behind him. "I didn't think you'd get the drop on Lacroix," he said. "But it didn't help you in the end."

Quentin clutched at his wounds. He had none of the cards in his waistcoat, and had lost the two he'd had up his sleeves.

Roland raised the pistol. "You fool."

Memory flared, as brightly as one of the cards. Quentin reached for the card clipped into his right boot.

The Black Joker.

The Fool.

He pulled it out.

Roland's finger jerked back on the trigger.

The card flared in front of him, dazzling his eyes.

The sound of the world cracking reverberated in his ears.

And the moment passed. Quentin was unharmed. The Joker remained in his hand, but the bullet lay in two pieces, cut in two by the card.

Quentin batted the pistol away, and punched Roland in the groin. As his uncle reeled, Quentin reached for the card still lying on the ground.

The Ace of Spades.

The card blazed in his hand.

••••

Quentin sat in the sleeper car, looking at the road ahead. In his left waistcoat pocket was his deck, or what was left of it, twenty-something. After all of the cards he had used at the riverboat, he'd been forced to use another, the Seven of Hearts, to heal his gunshot wounds. Then the Queen of Hearts, on his mother. He didn't know if it would work, if the magic was that strong, but he left her in the doctor's care. He couldn't face her after everything he'd done.

His reason for learning how to use the cards was now gone. Half of them had been spent on justice. But he still had the other half left.

All the way from the riverboat, Roland's words had echoed in his head. About his father. And how he would have used the cards. And how right that was.

But first he had a promise to keep. A new card sharp to bring in to the fold. Maybe he would choose the right path.

Quentin had played the Fool and luck had carried him through.

Now was his time to make a new play.

Now he would be the Magician.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rajan Khanna is an author, blogger, reviewer, podcaster, and narrator. His post-apocalyptic airship series starting with *Falling Sky* and *Rising Tide* concluded in July 2017 with *Raining Fire*. His short fiction has appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and several anthologies. His articles and reviews have appeared at Tor.com and LitReactor.com and his podcast narrations can be heard at *Podcastle*, *Escape Pod*, *PseudoPod*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Lightspeed*. Rajan cohosts the Spirited Discourse podcast (with co-host Devin Poore). He lives in Brooklyn where he's a member of the Altered Fluid writing group. He tweets, @rajanyk.

A Leash of Foxes, Their Stories Like Barter

Cassandra Khaw | 3492 words

“Tell us a story, Papa.”

“Which one would you like, my loves?”

“Tell us the story of Mr. Fox!”

“I suppose I could. But not the one those vagabonds in the inn like to recite. I will tell you the true story of Mr. Fox, and it’ll be better than any other you’d hear.”

• • • •

Lady Mary was young and Lady Mary was fair, and she had brothers who loved her and lovers who adored her. But she was savvy, sly as a vixen, with hair like the color of the butchered sun. And of all the people she knew, of all the people who’d pledged their heart to her pleasure, she cared for only one:

Mr. Fox.

Mr. Fox, of course, had ginger locks and sharp white teeth, freckles like a map across his fair face and when he smiled sometimes, it wasn’t hard to see why they called him Mr. Fox and not Edgar, or Edward, or Egan. No one knew where he’d come from, of course. No clue had been given as to whether he was a count, or a lord, or some merchant’s second-born bastard. But it did not matter. Mr. Fox was brave and Mr. Fox was clever, and surely, said Lady Mary’s brothers, he was rich as well. How else could he bring her diamonds? What else could explain how he garlanded their pantries with sausages, ingots of black pudding, slabs of fresh venison and golden-gray foie gras so tender it made one weep at its flavor?

Lady Mary did not care about these things.

What she cared about was Mr. Fox.

So at last, one day, it was decided that Lady Mary and Mr. Fox would wed. In glee, the latter told his new bride of what she was to expect: glades and small gods in the cold black pines, rolling lands teathed with

ruins, springtimes that dripped marigolds like honey onto a lover's lips, winters like wedding wreaths fit for a fae queen.

“And your castle?” said Lady Mary's brothers, eager to know.

Mr. Fox smiled coyly. “There is no castle.”

“Your manor, then. Your palace,” snapped the men who Lady Mary had forsaken, their wealth like sheaves of dry leaves beside the gold of Mr. Fox's regard. “How many servants does it cradle? How many rooms do you possess?”

“I have none of those either.” Mr. Fox cocked his head and in the wolf-light, his teeth looked very long. Lady Mary fitted her fingers through his, and their hands, so tangled, were a contract superior to any vow you could pin to paper. “But if it makes you feel better, there is a castle on my lands. It is not mine, but it is quite old and I suppose it may still have a treasure or two.”

Lady Mary laughed at his description and the crowd ceased its pursuit, placated by the certainty that Lady Mary would not be housed in a manor of oaks, by a river full of silver, in a place with no roof, no rules save for the whims of those quiet, inhuman woods. None of them asked what Lady Mary herself would have fancied. But that was all right.

Mr. Fox knew what she wanted, and Lady Mary knew this as well.

••••

They married in the foyer of Lady Mary's childhood home, the autumnal owl-light a bacchanal of rare colors. He wore black and she wore white, and though Lady Mary's parents had no end of questions, the two knew no end of knowing silences. When they smiled, it was for each other, only each other, and you'd be forgiven if you believed they were one soul halved and homed in a matching set, so gorgeous those two were, so perfect. At the altar, under ropes of dried lilac, Mr. Fox kissed Lady Mary, just a peck and a flash of white teeth, and the world shivered like it bore witness to the birth of something sacred.

“We are now,” whispered Lady Mary, “Mr. and Mrs. Fox.”

And Mr. Fox, he laughed at the truth of this.

• • • •

“Did they have a party afterwards?”

“Yes.”

“Was everyone happy?”

“As much as they would allow themselves to be.”

• • • •

As was traditional of all married couples, Mr. and Mrs. Fox soon absconded to the groom’s new home. But unlike what was traditional, they made no mention of where they were going, no ceremony of her departure. Like thieves, like foxes racing the dying sun, they fled into the woods while the sleeping world was still filigreed with dew.

If it weren’t for Lord Petty, who’d loved Lady Mary dearest but also poorest, if it weren’t for him, that knave, that heart-stung wretch, no one would have known where to find the two. But a man brined in his own envy is one abhorrent to sleep, and Lord Petty could only drowse during Lady Mary’s long wedding night. Thus, he was easily awoken when the two darted from the doors, no neither bags nor finery, just the gleam of Lady Mary’s wedding ring and the glare of Mr. Fox’s smile.

How dare they, thought Lord Petty, rousing himself from his bed. How dare they leave just like that? He followed them, a hound full of hate.

Lord Petty was many things, but he was not an incompetent hunter, and of all the men who had loved Lady Mary, he was the hungriest for her favor. He stalked them across the valleys, down into the black pines, down through where the birch and the aspen murmured like new lovers, down where the past had grooved itself in the stones, down, down into places where men should not go.

And the woods said to Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox: ’ware.

And Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox, they laughed as if that sound was a secret to share.

• • • •

“Why don’t our woods say anything?”

“Because it is winter and even the trees need to sleep. Ask again in the summer, when they’re dizzy with love and aching with flowers.”

• • • •

Lord Petty followed them to the grounds of a fine castle indeed, one with strong walls and a deep moat, and a gateway inscribed with the words:

Be bold, be bold.

He regarded the evocation with some care, the half-moon of his grimace as bright as a predator’s grin. They were here. He was sure. Two pairs of footprints tangled in the dirt leading through the gate; he could see too a twist of Mrs. Fox’s red hair in the brambles of a rose bush growing tall beside the path. Here, sang his heart. Here, snarled that broken-backed need at the root of his lungs, the gasping, miserable whine of his want.

Lord Petty looked about. There was no one here. The gate was open, so under its lilac-laced trellises he went up to the front doors, where he stood as he read aloud a second inscription:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

Through those doors he slipped too, bow on his shoulder, a full quiver on his back, ambition jouncing against the glide of his hip. He went down a hall of black marble, gold chandeliers and rose-colored marquetry lending shape to the bowered hush. He went up broad stairs until he came to a door in the gallery, over which was written:

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,

Lest that your heart’s blood should run cold.

But Lord Petty was nothing if not brave, nothing if not starving to skin Mr. Fox of Lady Mary’s love, nothing if not desperate. So, he, despite the cold that had burrowed to his belly, despite the way it crooned to him of warnings, opened the door and what do you think he saw?

Why, bodies like cat's cradles of chewed-down cartilage, blooms of sinew worn in the bones like flowers in a fair maid's hair. Bodies upon bodies, gnawed to the pith.

Lord Petty thought it was high time to get out of that horrid place and he closed the door, went through the gallery, haunted by the half-smiles of so very many corpses, dangling from the ceiling and trailing from the walls like marionettes at leisure. He was just going down the stairs and out of the hall, when who should he see but Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox dragging a beautiful young man down the gateway to the door.

••••

“Why did they hurt the man, Papa? Why did they hurt those *people*?”
“Because not even monsters are safe from predators, my loves.”

••••

Lord Petty rushed downstairs, concealed himself behind a cask cauled with webs, the smell of old wine so prohibitively expensive they'd bill you for a sniff. Just as Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox came near Lord Petty's hiding place, Mrs. Fox, her mouth so richly rouged it might as well have been bloodied with kisses, exclaimed, “Such a precious ring, this one wears. Look at that sapphire: that color, deeper even than the heart of a lake. And look, my feral darling, my fine-tailed love, look at the gorget of diamonds that frames it. Does it not make you think of the baby's breaths in my wedding bouquet?”

Lord Petty looked down the line of Mrs. Fox's white arm, down to where her finger led the eye. At his end, he saw a ring without compare, its knotwork as fine as lace, too fine for the slackly hanging hand on which it had been enshrined. Better, Lord Petty thought, that it be freed and fitted upon Mrs. Fox's finger. Better still if it was Lord Petty who set that beautiful ring there.

But that was not to be. Not with the memory of those bodies in the gallery at the top of the stairs, not with Mrs. Fox's red lips upon her

husband's red hair, not with the knowledge of what might happen if they found Lord Petty hiding there, hunched behind a barrel, no better than a common rogue. He remained still instead, tongue between his teeth, breath held like a fox beneath the hunter's heel.

"Do you want the ring then?" said Mr. Fox.

"I suppose I would not object if you were to liberate that splendid thing. But it is not necessary, Mr. Fox, not with you in my bed, not with your heart in my armoire, not with your love, so wild and true, to wear like a queen's trousseau." She stroked that beautiful corpse's still hand and jealousy did clench Lord Petty's heart tight. If only she'd permit him, he'd lay his cheek upon her lap, a hound faithful to the grave, and there'd be nothing he would not bring her, no prey too ferocious, no antlered prize too fearsome. Everything and anything, so long as she'd let him be hers.

Mr. Fox, hair matted to the sleek frame of his face, looked to where Lord Petty squatted, safe from the eye, but not nose or black-tipped ear. He said: "Let's not trouble ourselves then. If it will not disappoint you too much, we'll just leave that ring here, so you won't worry at want the way a dog might worry at his mites."

Mrs. Fox laughed and Lord Petty did not. Without preamble, Mr. Fox freed his sword, which was as slim and sharp as he, and sawed through corpse's bony wrist. The hand tumbled free, and rolled to where Lord Petty lurked, the ring gleaming like the hope of a star, cold and blue and helpless as love.

"To the boudoir, my love?" said Mr. Fox.

"To the boudoir," said Mrs. Fox, dragging their prize up those broad stairs.

Lord Petty stayed in his place, listening to every thump, every crunch of small cartilage, every laugh to flit from between Mrs. Fox's teeth, every kiss the couple thought to share on the way, a leg in each hand, a corpse between them, their matrimony made sacrosanct by the marrow and meat of that poor murdered man. Only when he was certain that those two would not emerge from the gallery again did Lord Petty flee that dread place, a dead boy's hand clutched to his breast.

• • • •

Walled by both peasantry and a pageantry of nobles, scullery maids, and jilted suitors all come to bear witness, Lord Petty, a bowl of warm pumpkin soup in his cold hands, sat whispering of what he'd seen. The journey had been long, longer than he'd remembered, longer than his provisions could survive, the way made byzantine by the woods he'd walked, by the aspen and the birch, by the black pines and its gods. At the end of his exodus, Lord Petty was so starved, so weakened, he could only crawl to the stoop of Mrs. Fox's childhood home, his ribs like rings worn on the finger of his spine.

"He's a monster," he said, thinking again of how Mrs. Fox had laid her brow against her husband's fair cheek. "They're monsters."

His audience nodded and murmured themselves, wise to witches, wise to the world, wise to the wolves in women's clothing. They did not ask if Lord Petty had misspoken, or question the authenticity of his accusation. Lords, they've been told, never have cause to lie.

• • • •

They sent a messenger to the castle in which Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox lived, a callow girl with colorations like the summer: gold hair, blue eyes, sun-freckled cheeks. Unlike Lord Petty, she was not beggared by the journey. The woods were kind, the way they are always kind to those who make space for the squirrel and the sparrow, the wildflowers blooming reckless in autumn's last, long, gold-burnished days.

"They want you to join 'em for breakfast," said the girl, who'd meet her Death one winter's dusk with no knowledge of how anyone could mistake this man and his lean-limbed wife for monsters, what with their kindly manners, their insistence she do them no favours, only sit down and eat what they offered her: a fortune in good bread and cold butter, more ham and rare cheeses than she'd seen in her life.

Mr. Fox poured the girl a draught of plum cider and looked to his wife, who said quietly then: "Tell them we will come."

• • • •

The date they had elected was the eve of Lady Mary's own mother's birthday and it was hotter than anyone could remember. Yet despite the dripping heat, Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox both arrived in Lord Petty's manor wearing rose-and-gold brocade, their coats brilliantly embroidered, the hems heavy with seed pearls and stitchings of warm amber. They wore their finery like they'd been born sleeved in those rich materials, like they were pelts only slightly too thick for the season.

"We have come," said Mrs. Fox, striding through the doors like she owned every life in its walls and every generation that would come after. "As you have asked."

Lord Petty stood with the men that Mrs. Fox had spurned, dukes and dour-faced barons and merchants made noble by the money they ferried to the vaults of their king, their chests gleaming with medals and cunning satin paneling. But none of them were as splendid as Mr. Fox. None of them had his easy grace, his sly fashion of smiling, his aptitude for entreating the light to love his face best. None of them had Mrs. Fox, who stood with her arm threaded around her husband's own. They smiled, a matching set, far more beautiful than that bitter crowd deserved.

"We are pleased to see you well," said Lord Petty.

Mrs. Fox nodded. "And I am pleased you look well, Lord Petty. I had a dream recently that distressed me to no end. In this dream, I saw you racing through glade and glens, down to the black pines, down to where the water is so cold and pure it'd burn your tongue to ash. I saw you kneel by a lake, Lord Petty, and I saw you get down on your knees, and I saw you cut the heart from your chest."

And Lord Petty swallowed then. "Why would I do such a thing?"

"For a ring," said Mrs. Fox, glib as anything. "A silver ring with a sapphire as perfect and lifeless as a heart that cannot imagine happiness for anything but itself."

Lord Petty said nothing in riposte, only stared at Mrs. Fox, the hairs that fringed the back of his neck prickling and for a moment, he was

returned to those woods and he was, without question, afraid.

The doors to the dining hall opened.

“Breakfast is ready,” said a thin serving girl with the high, bright voice of an aria and bowed.

Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox bowed in answer, slinking past her to find their seats. Lord Petty, his brothers-in-discard, followed after in a neat queue, looking for all the world like the guilty marching themselves to the gallows.

• • • •

“I had a dream too,” said Lord Petty without even a scratch of warning, his voice booming through the steeped halls. He lowered his cutlery and the clatter of their descent was as loud as musket shots. “I dreamed that I went yestermorn to your castle, and I found it in the woods, with high walls, and a deep moat, and over the gateway was written:

“Be bold, be bold.”

If Lord Petty had thought to entice apprehension from Mrs. Fox’s expression, or tease fear from Mr. Fox’s lidded regard, he would go to his rest unslaked. Their countenances remained serene. Sighing, Mrs. Fox pushed aside her plate of roast lamb, the polished blue ceramic heaped high with charred broccoli florets and reams of gravy.

“It is not so, nor was it so.”

But Lord Petty would not be dissuaded from his keening declamation, his grief lettered in its delivery. “And when I came to the doorway, over it was written:

“Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.”

“It is not so,” said Mr. Fox and then together with his wife, they spoke as one, the words intoned with all the weight of prophecy: “Nor it was so.”

“And then I went upstairs, and came to a gallery, at the end of which was a door, on which was written:

“Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,

Lest that your heart's blood should run cold.”

“It is not so, nor it was not so,” said the Foxes, now with pity in the lilt of their faces. Outside the lancet windows, the light grew bruised, as though the sun was suddenly curtained by an encroaching storm. But the color was wrong, as was the quality of that glow, its texture, and the smell of air, damp earth and still water, menaced with its eldritch promise.

“And then,” Lord Petty launched himself from his seat, roaring as he did, no more guile to be seen, no more subtlety. “And then I opened the door, and the room was filled with bodies and skeletons of poor dead souls, all stained with their blood!”

“It is not so, nor it was not so. And God forbid it should be so,” chorused the foxes, their shadows limbering like animals.

“I then dreamed that I rushed down the gallery, and just as I was going down the stairs I saw you, Mr. and Mrs. Fox, coming up to the hall door, dragging after you a poor young man, rich and beautiful!”

“It is not so, nor it was not so. And God forbid it should be so.” In that strange, wild, drowning light, no one looked as they did before, least of all the two foxes so regally enthroned in the hall.

“I rushed downstairs, just in time to hide myself behind a cask, when you two came in dragging the young man by the arm. And, as you passed me,” Lord Petty shrieked, “I thought I saw you try and free his sapphire ring, and when you could not, it seemed to me in my dream, that you out with your sword and hacked off the poor man’s hand.”

And as Lord Petty drew a rattling breath, his diatribe chaptered by deep inhalations, Mrs. Fox said in a voice so calm, so certain, that the world stilled at its conviction. “And then you stole the dead man’s hand so you could barter it for my own. Though you watched me be wedded to my husband, though you drank to our happiness, though you claim yourself an honorable man. You stole a dead man’s ring and then bade the wolves to come devour us.”

Mrs. Fox rose and something ancient stood in her place. “No, Lord Petty. That is not how the story ends.”

• • • •

“How *did* the story end, Papa?”

“Bloody, of course.” Mr. Fox said primly. “Now go to bed, my loves. Tomorrow, a hunt waits.”

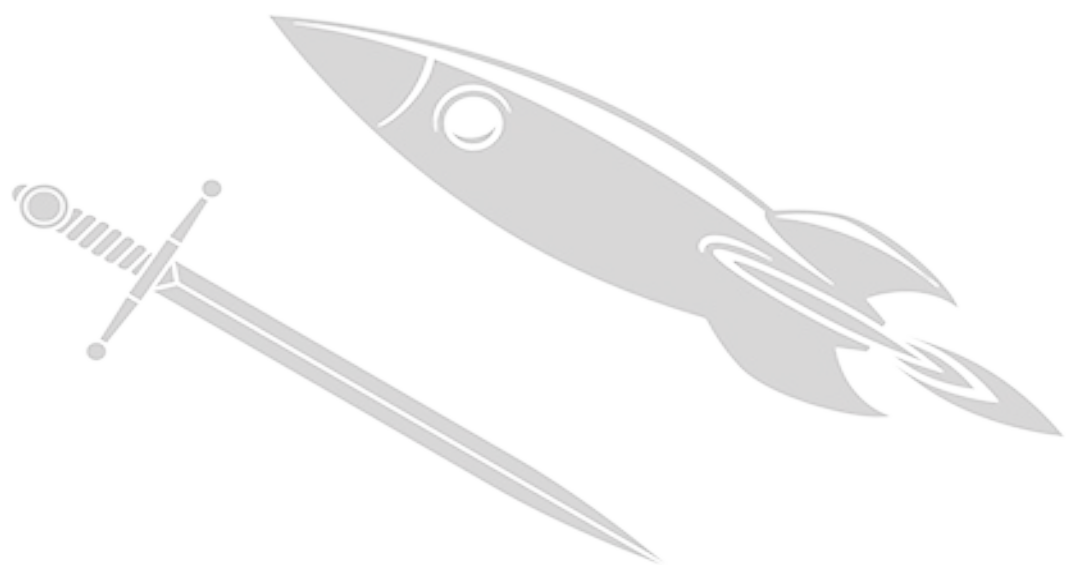
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day, Cassandra Khaw works as the business developer for Singaporean publisher Ysbryd Games. By night, she moonlights as a freelance technology reporter for places like PC Gamer and The Verge, while still writing exorbitant amounts of fiction. Charles Stross called her novella *Hammers on Bone* “possibly the most promising horror debut of 2016.” *Hammers on Bone* was a finalist for the British Fantasy Award and the Locus Award for Best Novella. Rumor has it that Khaw does not sleep and can only be satiated with offerings of fluffy things. You can find her on Twitter.

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EXCERPTS



EXCERPT: *Bursts Of Fire* (Laksa Media Groups Inc.)

Susan Forest | 4600 words

Bursts of Fire begins an epic political fantasy of revenge, addictions, and redemption for three magiel sisters. In an empire where magic has become suspect, love and loyalty—for one’s lover, one’s family, one’s country—are tested. If Heaven desires the very earth be burned, what place can those below hope for, when the flames come for them?

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Coming August 6, 2019 from Laksa Media Groups Inc.

PROLOGUE

The door, crafted of Arcan valley oak and inlaid with exotic woods imported from warmer lands—some from as far away as Aadi-of-the-Valley—gleamed in the light of Talanda Falkyn’s candle. Though the

hour was late, the door was unguarded. After all, these were days of peace and prosperity in the seven realms of Shangril.

Talanda knocked.

A page admitted her into a dimly lit room. She was expected. Taking her candle, the boy departed and closed the door.

Dwyn Gramaret, King of Gramarye, stood at a generous, glass-paned window. The high tower looked out over his castle's courtyard and walls, over the dark streets of his city to the peaks and vales of his country, and beyond, to the Gods' star-spattered heavens.

The king turned and smiled a greeting as she entered. He was a tall man, powerfully built, and he wore a plain robe of fine, Gramarye yak wool. The prayer stone of the Chrysocola, if he wore it, was not visible.

Yolen Barclay, the only other occupant of the room, rose from his seat before the fireplace. Like Talanda, he wore the simple, unbleached robes of a magiel, and his skin shimmered, a blur of time shifts identifying him as a magic wielder. A scarf was wrapped about his neck, for though it was summer, the high mountains were cold at night and the wind poked chill fingers through chinks in the stone.

"Magiel Falkyn," Barclay acknowledged her. "Please. Come sit by the fire." He gestured to a deep chair padded with fleece cushions. "King Dwyn and I are most curious to learn more about what brings you all the way from Orumon."

"Sieur." She bowed her head in respect and took the seat he'd indicated. Good beeswax candles and crackling spruce firewood scented the air.

"It is not often two magiels of the Great Houses meet face-to-face." Barclay poured each of them a glass of wine. An old red, likely from Arcan. "At dinner, you mentioned your retinue has been on an extensive journey."

King Dwyn took up his goblet. "How can we be of help? I gather you do not merely while away the long summer days?"

Barclay set the wine bottle on the table where it caught the glint of the fire's glow.

"I have a puzzle," Talanda said. "My king sent me to resolve it. It . . .

may be nothing.”

“Not nothing,” King Dwyn reassured her. “Not if it sent you on such a long pilgrimage.”

“I’ve seen an event in my future that disturbs me.” She let the fingers of her left hand slip up to her throat, to touch the death token hidden in her neck band. “I’ve visited all the kingdoms of Shangril, from Teshe to Pagoras. No magiel of any of the Great Houses has seen what I have seen. Though . . . I haven’t told King Artem’s magiel yet.”

King Dwyn peered at her with sharp eyes.

Barcley cradled his goblet in his lap. “Describe what you saw.”

“First, I must tell you what I haven’t seen.” She rubbed at the fabric on the arm of the chair. “I have seen no future beyond . . . I’m guessing, a year, maybe two, from this summer.”

The king shot Barcley a troubled look.

The magiel’s eyes narrowed. “You suspect your untimely death?”

The words, so plainly spoken, sent a wave of agitation through her stomach. “What I have seen is King Artem’s troops outside Castle Archwood’s walls. In siege.”

King Dwyn set his wineglass down. “How many times have you seen this?”

“Once.”

His lips tensed to one side. “The kingdoms of Shangril have been at peace for five hundred years. We are prosperous. There is no reason for King Artem to attack Archwood.”

“I cannot explain it.”

“You’re certain?” Barcley asked. “Glimpses of the future are fleeting, and by their nature difficult to interpret.”

She knew he did not mean to insult her. “There’s no mistake. The future is the future. I stood on Archwood’s battlements watching archers in the king’s colors shoot flaming brands at our walls, as my king ordered our own soldiers to return fire. By my estimation, this event will take place soon.”

“You cannot tell how long into the future your travels take you,” Barcley pointed out.

But in this case, Talanda could. “My king’s daughter was present. She was not more than eight years old.”

“And how do the other magiels of the Great Houses interpret what you have seen?” the king asked.

“None has seen evidence of war.”

“Perhaps your king in Orumon will anger King Artem.”

“My king has no cause to provoke Artem. Doubly none, now. In fact, he would make great concessions to avoid trouble.” Talanda leaned forward, resting her wineglass on the table. “I have reason to think the conflict I witnessed is not confined to Orumon.”

“What proof?” the magiel asked.

“The other magiels I spoke with as I toured Shangril this summer,” she said. “Like me, they witness no future beyond a few short seasons.” Kraae, her lover, father of her three daughters, had remarked as far back as fifteen years ago that he’d never seen his old age. He’d dismissed the observation at the time, and so had she. Moments of a life lived out of sequence were meaningless . . . until over long life, patterns began to emerge. But when Kraae gave her the seed of her second child, his remark came back to her and, as precaution, she’d altered her second daughter’s heredity. She’d used her magical ability to chose certain bits of her unborn daughter’s makeup; made her less *magiel* in appearance. Why? She could not have said. A boding. Five hundred years of peace, but . . . talentless worldlings filled Shangril now, in greater numbers.

Magiel Barclay’s face grew somber in the candlelight.

“Many magiels of the Great Houses are advanced in age,” the king pointed out.

“So . . .” Talanda shook her head in disbelief. “*All* the magiels of the prayer stones will die? Through natural causes? Within the next year?” She held him in her gaze. “Sire, I’m not yet forty years old.”

“These are times of peace,” the king protested. “What event could be heated enough to throw Shangril into the chaos of war?”

“King Artem Delarcan called upon my services, not four weeks past. Did he not make the same request of each magiel of the Great Houses?”

The two exchanged glances. “No magiel acceded—fully—to his

demand.”

“But could his unsavory ambition be related to my riddle?” Ambition. Power. Fear of the strength of magiels.

Talanda had pondered her impetuous choice again, long and hard, when Kraae gave her the germ of her third child. This time . . . she removed all hint of the wavering skin that would mark her youngest a magiel. And the babe had emerged, to the gasp and consternation of all her midwives, fully worldling. In appearance.

Talanda turned to Magiel Barclay. “Sieur. You have lived no longer than I. Your health is good. What futures have you seen, beyond this year?”

The magiel licked his lips, his nostrils wide as he drew breath, and the tendons stood out on the side of his neck above the collar that held his death token.

The fire snapped.

“None.”

CHAPTER 1

Meg Falkyn never wore silk again.

Never.

She stewed, half-hidden behind a marble pillar, because she’d worn her maroon brocade robe to court twice already. Now Janat, her younger sister, twirled among the glittering dancers on the polished parquet floor in a froth of golden silk, in the fitted and belled style they’d seen in Arcan. Silk, brought by a trader all the way from Aadi-of-the-Valley, a gift from Mama for her fifteenth birthday.

The dance was boring.

The king and queen were deep in conversation with a wealthy merchant and his wife, and old Nanna, their stout, soft nurse, gossiped with a gaggle of servants. Rennika played dolls on the floor with the king’s daughter. Embarrassing. She was eleven. But at least she was well to one side of the dancing.

Meg was sending a silent prayer to Kyaju, Goddess of the Devout, for

the tedium to be over, when across the room she saw her mother's face tighten.

A disheveled courier in mud-splattered wool and leather stood by her, white-faced. A letter trembled in Mama's hand.

Mama's ivory robes and shifting complexion stood shock-stark against the splintered swirl of dancers. An instant of comprehension—and implication—was etched on her face.

Color and dark. Movement and stillness. Festivity and terror.

The musicians played a flourish and the dancers applauded.

Mama's gaze leapt over the dance floor, searching. Janat was there, clapping delightedly.

Meg took a half-step forward, pulse ticking, afraid to move through the crowd lest she miss unfolding ramifications.

Muted by the din of the rekindled music, Mama spoke insistently to the courier. He shook his head. She questioned him again, sharply, and again the answer was in the negative. She folded the letter and signaled Nanna.

Mama beckoned Rennika, and the little girl ran to her mother's side. Meg shouldered her way through the shifting patterns of dancers, touched Janat on the elbow, and caught her eye. Puzzled, Janat followed.

Mama was bent over, stroking Rennika's hair and holding her close when Meg came to her side. "Rennikala, you must listen to me." Mama kissed her daughter's forehead. "I need you to be very calm."

"No, Mama! You have to come, too."

The panic in Meg's stomach bloomed, prickling her skin from the inside.

"I have duties here. Nanna will be with you." She looked up at Meg and Janat. "And your sisters."

This was it. The thing—the unknown. Mama had told her. But Mama had known so little for sure.

Rennika fastened her hands around Mama's neck, but Mama disengaged her fingers and held them. "You must not make a sound. You must not let *anyone* know you are going." The fear in Mama's eyes stilled the girl's outburst.

Mama kissed her and thrust her to Meg's side, then gave Meg and Janat a kiss on the forehead and a quick embrace. "Nanna."

Nanna nodded and led the way toward the side of the ballroom. Meg guided Rennika, following Nanna through knots of fine ladies and gentlemen gossiping and watching the dance. Behind, she saw Mama speak to the courier. The courier insisted, and Mama, dread and concern in every line of her face, turned and melted into the crowd.

• • • •

To begin with, Rennika found the hush and hustle from the ballroom bewildering; but more, the look on Mama's face and her words had lodged a tight ball of dread in Rennika's chest. "Look at me," Mama had whispered. "You're eleven years old. You must be strong."

Rennika's unease only grew as she ran, following her sisters and Nanna down the dimly lit steps, trying to keep her feet beneath her. At the landing, Nanna rushed them down the passageway to the servants' quarters, peering into each dark doorway and cross corridor. Rennika's heart thumped as it did when she narrowly missed being caught in a game of Catch Thief. Something was very wrong. Mama should be coming with them.

One of the kitchen boys—Brin, with the freckles—rounded a corner and stopped in surprise. He stood to one side as they entered Nanna's apartment, but Nanna smacked him upside the head. "You say a word about seeing us here, Boy, and Magiel Falkyn will turn you to stone!" She meant Mama.

A scream from the scullery startled them all. Then a wave of cries and shouts broke the silence, and the boy pelted down the hall.

• • • •

The rags Nanna dumped at their feet were peasant clothing. Meg could see Janat's bafflement as she stared at them. Rennika poked them distastefully with her foot.

“Get dressed,” Nanna commanded, fixing the candle to a holder on the table and rummaging through a drawer.

Meg thought with a strange detachment, *Janat would have obeyed, had she known how.*

Then the moment broke and Meg took her sister by the shoulders and spun her around. Finding the thread that closed the back of her dress, she bit it.

“What are you doing?” Janat cried.

“Hold still.” Nanna had a knife in her hand. She slit Meg’s robe up the back. Nanna released Meg and turned to Rennika.

Fists pounded on the door and they stilled, staring at the blank wooden panels and the rattling bolt.

Meg’s robe collapsed about her feet and she shivered in the chill, staring at the door.

“Shift. Chemise. Everything but your death tokens,” Nanna whispered.

More fists on the door. “Open! In the name of King Artem Delarcan!” Then shouts and running footsteps resounded in the corridor, followed by silence.

“Hurry.” Meg threw a robe and tunic and leggings to Janat and pulled out smaller clothing for Rennika. She tied a rope around Rennika’s robe, working silently and efficiently.

“Open up!” A man’s voice penetrated the door, and terror grew in her stomach. Then, the rhythmic thumping of shoulders broke the spell, and she threw on her own ragged clothes.

The battering stopped, and a chaos of shouts and swords clashing filtered from the room beyond the corridor. Someone—engaged the soldiers in battle? This was it. The thing—the unknown thing Mama had seen.

Nanna grasped Rennika’s arm and pushed Janat ahead into a small bedroom. Meg grabbed the candle and flung the door closed behind them.

A thwack, like something heavy striking the door to the outer chamber, split the cacophony.

• • • •

Rennika tripped over the clothes Meg had tried to fit to her. The world had gone mad. But the scariest part was the fear on her sisters' faces. Rennika never cried when she scraped a knee or got punched by a royal cousin who didn't get his way. But she wanted to cry, now.

"Who's attacking us?" Janat whispered. "And how did they get past the castle wall? And the city gates?"

Nanna pushed back a drape. Thin starlight spilled over her shoulders. "Soldiers in the garden. In the colors of King Artem."

"Soldiers—fighting King Ean's men?" Janat asked. "But why?"

Nanna tried the window. It wouldn't open. She pulled the drapes back and with a strength Rennika didn't know the old woman had, picked up a chair and smashed it against the small panes. The chair bounced off, and the window remained intact.

"Wait. Let me. It's warded." Meg gave the candle to Janat, then cupped the lock in her hands. Meg was going to cast a spell without ingredients! Not worldling magic—potions anyone could do from a spell book—but real magiel magic, like Mama's.

Shouts and the clash of steel rang out, both behind them and ahead. But the ward was Mama's, and Meg would know its shape. Rennika did.

The sound of the door bursting open exploded in the next room as the window swung wide.

• • • •

Flickering red lit the pavement and walls. Meg and her sisters crouched beneath a wagon in the bailey. The smell of smoke from beyond the great hall filled the air—something burned in the city.

None of this could be real. It couldn't.

Soldiers ran across the cobbles and skirmished in small groups. A handful of King Artem's men in uniforms of gold and green braced themselves at the steps before the main hall doors, taking courtiers and ladies prisoner or cutting them down as they fled King Ean's court. The

noise, the smell, was sharper, more horrifying than a nightmare. Soldiers lay like black lumps on the pavement. Some moaned or tried to crawl. Some were still. The nauseating stink of excrement and blood reminded Meg of the butcher's shed in the fall.

Something . . . a blur, a mist? . . . seemed to crawl among the dead. Meg squinted, trying to focus. No. Nothing clear. Perhaps a trick of the dark, or of the inconstant torchlight.

A company of Artem's men rounded the corner of the great hall, rushing King Ean's soldiers. "Run!" Nanna hissed.

Meg tugged Rennika's hand and sprinted through the castle gates. Oh, Gods—

The soldiers, busy with their swords, took little heed of them, as if they were no more than fleeing servants.

They bolted onto the wide boulevard that wound its way from the castle toward the main city gate. Two of King Artem's men managed to run from their quarrels to give chase.

Nanna darted into a lane. Janat, panting, followed her.

There was a shout and a thump and the sound of a man stumbling and falling. Someone—an archer?—had felled one of their pursuers.

The second set of footsteps echoed behind them. Meg hurled spell words onto the cobbles, calling for a stone to find a time when it had risen above its mates. The soldier stumbled and fell to the pavement, striking his head.

Nanna plunged to a stop in the side street, leaning against the façade of a grand house, wheezing. Meg released Rennika's hand, letting her slide to the ground. By Kyaju, it had been close.

"That was a lucky spell," Janat said.

Meg leaned on her knees, blowing hard. She couldn't do another one of those. Not without potions.

Footsteps and shouts echoed in the streets. The smell of burning sharpened.

"Nanna," Meg panted, "what did Mama tell you? She had you find us these clothes. Did she—"

"Merchant Cordal," Nanna muttered, holding her side as if she had a

stitch.

“Who?” The name had a familiar ring, but Meg couldn’t place him.

“In the artisan’s quarter,” Nanna heaved. “He . . . can get you to safety.”

Mama had known what was going to happen. “Where?” Meg pressed. “What did she tell you?”

“I don’t know!” Nanna looked sick, as if she hadn’t believed Mama. “Tomorrow,” she whispered. “I was supposed to take you tomorrow. I was supposed to say we were going on an outing to the market . . .”

“So, we need to get to Merchant Cordal.” Janat leapt to something they could do. But— “How will we get a coach?”

“The city’s burning!” Meg couldn’t believe how stupid Janat could be. “We’re not going to get a coach!”

Janat waved at the chaos in the street. “Well, we’re not going to make it to the artisan quarter *walking*.”

“We have to get out of Archwood.” Meg’s thoughts plunged ahead. It couldn’t be more obvious.

“Leave the city? Have you gone mad?” Janat whispered. “We’ve no clothes, no servants, no food—”

A horse screamed.

“All right!” Nanna scuttled to the opening of the lane. “We’ll try to get out of the city.”

“Where’s Mama?” Rennika wailed.

“How do we get out?” Janat cried. “The streets are on fire. We have no guards, no coach. And if the main gates are breached—”

“The shrine,” Meg said. “The back wall. There’s a gate.”

• • • •

This wasn’t right. Rennika had never been in this part of the city before, but they were going farther and farther away from Mama, going through winding narrow streets that all looked the same in the dark. But no one, not even Nanna, was listening to her.

They jogged on, halting at corners to watch before darting across

open spaces. Windows showed uncertain light or faces peering into the street. Bands of people clattered in chaotic groups, some heading down toward the main gates, others uphill or across the city. They passed three buildings with flames licking the windows and the air tasted of smoke and ash. Scattered soldiers fought, or ran one direction or another, intent on some mission. Twice Meg cast weak spells of Confusion—without ingredients—on groups of soldiers who looked as though they might try to stop them.

They halted at the end of an alley, below a wall twice as tall as a man. Here, the sounds of fighting in the city echoed distantly. But there was a gate.

“Where are King Ean’s guards?” Janat whispered.

“Maybe they went to fight below,” Meg suggested. “Maybe Mama prayed for our safe passage.”

“Hush,” Nanna said. “Talk later.” Nanna was moving, tugging Rennika across the open space to the gate.

Rennika looked behind. She saw no movement on the dark cobbles, heard no crunch of footsteps above the wind and distant shouts.

They crowded under the arch of the thick wall, out of sight of the street.

Nanna rattled the iron bars. “Locked. Meghra. Can you open it?”

Her sister touched the iron, felt the clasp. “It’s another of Mama’s wards. I can, but this one’s more complex. It’ll take time. I don’t have any talisman or charm, and the One Star hasn’t risen yet.”

“Janatelle? Can you?” Nanna peered from the guard post down the hill toward the city.

“I can!” Rennika was good at wards.

Janat looked afraid, like the lying kind of afraid. “Mama hasn’t shown me magiel magic yet.”

“Let me! I’ll do it!” Why did no one ever listen to her?

“Hush, Rennikala,” Janat said. “If Mama hasn’t shown me magiel magic yet, she hasn’t shown you.”

Meg followed Nanna’s gaze, and Rennika looked where they stared. Soldiers trotted up the road.

Meg turned to Rennika. “Rennikala. Can you open the gate?”

“Yes! I told you, yes!”

“By Kanden, let her try,” Nanna cried. “They’re coming.”

Meg nodded.

Rennika felt the shape of the lock. It was like lots of Mama’s wards, but three of them put together. She willed the metal bar in the middle to remain back in time in its former position and the five tumblers to remember their places when the lock was open.

The lock clicked and the gate swung wide.

“Go!” Nanna pushed them through the opening and closed the gate as the jogging footsteps scattered to a halt on the road just within the wall.

• • • •

Exhaustion from the running, the vigilance, and the magic crept up Meg’s legs and back and arms as she trudged behind Nanna.

Almost as soon as they’d left the city, following the path to the shrine, they’d heard shouts and the jangle of mailed foot soldiers. The noise came from beyond a rib of rock that blocked their view of a broad ridge connecting the main mountain range to the rounded cliffs where Archwood was built. They’d scrambled up a crack in the rock and huddled, rigid with silence, deep into the night. Below, men moved back and forth along the path, carrying bundles from the wide ridge to the rocky meadows above Archwood.

Mama had seen the future. She’d known something was coming. But what?

There were still too many questions. How could an army have scaled the unscalable ravines to these high meadows? Into the Gods’ reserve. Archwood was built on a cliffy outlier of the Orumon Mountains, and the only approach was by the King’s Road and the main gate. Invaders were here, *behind* the city. This made no sense to Meg.

When the movement and sounds of men finally stopped, they crept from their precarious perch and fled up the bands of rock and scree into the wilds.

The sky deepened to starry ink as they plodded up gleaming silver and black rock, finally to crawl beneath the sharp branches of a wind-twisted larch to sleep. And after a shivering night filled with nightmares, cold, and wind, Meg woke to the lessening darkness of dawn. Below her, the city crouched in the gray light. Soldiers glinting in King Artem's colors of gold and green surrounded the walls. Within the parapets, red-clad soldiers scuttled like toys on a game board. King Ean's men. All gates, now, were impenetrable.

Rennika clung silently to Meg's knee as Meg and Janat and Nanna tried to come up with explanations. It was hard to understand what had happened—what they had done by escaping. What was to come next. King Artem must have planned a surprise attack. A small cohort, giving King Ean no time to prepare. Only a few candlemarks of panic and chaos, and Mama's foresight and preparation, had allowed them to escape.

Rennika asked for Mama, and when Mama didn't come, she asked again.

Nanna said that Mama had made arrangements, that Mama would meet them. But then, Nanna promised a lot of things.

• • • •

“Stop.”

Rennika bumped into Nanna and the woman's strong hand steadied her shoulder. The gray mountains and the buffeting wind chilled her through her thin rags. Shards of slate beneath their feet tumbled down to Rennika's left, then abruptly disappeared into a distant valley of dark evergreens, threaded by a silvery ribbon of river crested by rocky peaks.

Rennika poked her head around Nanna's arm to see ahead.

They'd traveled south and east of the fortress in hopes of finding a way down to the valley, and thence to the King's Road and back north to Coldridge. Every step they took upward took them closer to the Gods' domain, guarded by monsters and forbidden. But now the ridge they'd been climbing ended precipitously before them.

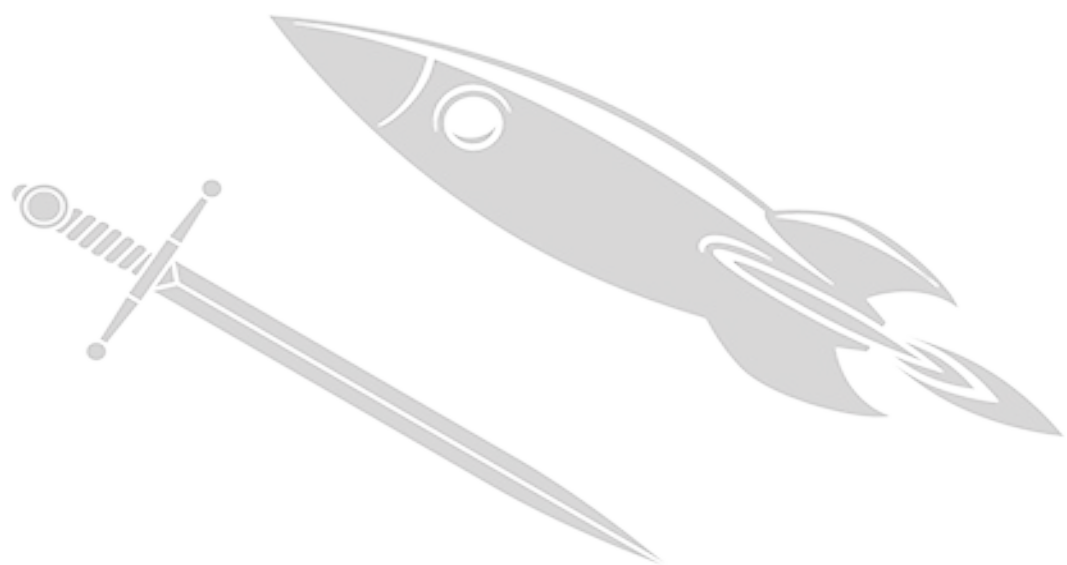
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Forest is a three-time Prix Aurora Award finalist for short fiction and a writer of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Her novel (*Bursts of Fire*), the first in a seven-volume epic fantasy series, the Addicted to Heaven Saga, will be out in 2019 from Laksa Media, followed by *Flights of Marigolds*. Her collection of short fiction, *Immunity to Strange Tales*, was published by Five Rivers Publishing. She has published over 25 short stories which have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and *OnSPEC Magazine*, among others. Susan has co-edited three anthologies (Aurora Award-winning *Strangers Among Us*, *The Sum of Us*, *Shades Within Us*) on social issue-related themes with Lucas K. Law. Susan is the Past Secretary for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA).

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Book Reviews: August 2019

LaShawn M. Wanak | 1708 words

This month, LaShawn peeks at letters in *This is How You Lose the Time War*, gets steamy in *Pimp My Airship*, and enjoys a heaping serving of revenge in *The Rage of Dragons*.

This is How You Lose the Time War

Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone

Hardcover / Paper / Ebook / Audio

ISBN: 978-1534431003

Gallery / Saga Press, July 2019, 208 pages

Epistolary tales in science fiction and fantasy aren't new. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Andy Weir's *The Martian*, Max Brook's *World War Z* — even I wrote a short story (bit.ly/2Wt7Zae) that is set in a framework of HR memos. Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone have now added their own contribution to the epistolary genre with their collaborative novella *This Is How You Lose the Time War*. And while it isn't strictly epistolary — there is a running narrative that frames the letters — the method of the letters and how they're created makes for a very unique and fun story.

Two soldiers who identify as female are on opposite sides of a war: Red, who serves the Agency, and Blue, an agent of the Garden. As the book opens, Red is surveying her victorious handiwork in the aftermath of a battle when she sees a sheet of paper that only has the line “Burn before reading.” She does, and a letter unfolds as the paper burns, a taunt from Blue. Intrigued, she writes back, and thus begins a relationship that traverses time and space.

The methods of the letters are highly unconventional. Words are hidden in the rings of trees, tea leaves, a beaker of boiling water left in an MRI, and on the insides of a seal, the victim of a groanworthy but excellent pun. The letters are poetic and wicked and sly, and as Red and Blue try to one-up each other, their relationship changes, deepens from rivals to friends to lovers. However, their longing can only be confined to

their letters, as they are still embedded in war against each other, and the two sides—the cyber-militant Agency and the organic infestation of Garden—are starting to suspect something is wrong with their best agents.

Part of the fun of reading a collaborative book is figuring out who wrote which passage. Initially, I thought the framing narrative was written by Gladstone and the letters, which were both playful and seductive, were written by El-Mohtar. Part of this was because the letters of Red and Blue felt too similar, particularly towards the beginning. But then I became so caught up in the story, the time travel, the worlds, the relationship between Red and Blue, that I forgot who wrote what. (El-Mohtar and Gladstone do reveal how they wrote it in this interview: bit.ly/2XF2BCe.)

This novella is too short for us to see the worlds of the Agency and the Garden. Reading this book made me crave more, and yet at the same time, I didn't want to read it too fast. This book is meant to be savored, and if anything, makes me long to write a letter myself.

Pimp My Airship: A Naptown by Airship Novel

Maurice Broaddus

Paper / Ebook

ISBN: 978-1937009762

Apex Book Company, April 2019, 322 pages

I have covered Maurice Broaddus's steampunk universe in a previous column with his novella *Buffalo Soldier*. Now Broaddus is back with a full-on novel, *Pimp My Airship*, and like its predecessor, it is very steampunk, it is very black, and it is very, very Broaddus.

Sleepy is a working-class steam engineer who only wants to spit out poetry and smoke his chiba leaves to forget his life. Coming home from work one day, he meets (120 Degrees of) Knowledge Allah, a man spouting cryptic words and a taste for revolution. When COPS (City Ordained Pinkertons) raid the theater Sleepy is performing at, Sleepy and Knowledge Allah bang up a COP vehicle during their escape, which

turns them into wanted fugitives. At the same time, Sophine Jefferson, a mixed debutante, agrees to employ her own scientific skills to the insidious Lord Melbourne, much to the dismay of her father. It's not until her father is killed under suspicious circumstances that she realizes she is mired in a political war that will challenge her views on race and humanity.

Pimp My Airship has everything that makes a steampunk novel—steam, pipes, dirigibles—but Broaddus brings in his own commentary on racism, classism, and institutionalism, along with the effects of robots displacing workers. He does this by reimagining the city of Indianapolis into its own steampunked character, from the skyscrapers and the air trams of the Overcity, where those with money and prestige are able to live in comfort, to the ill-lit alleys of the Tombs, the undercity, where those with no money and no hope eke out an existence. There's even a newspaper that spins its own bigoted biases.

What I loved most about this novel is Sleepy and Knowledge Allah. Thrown together by circumstances, they're not buddies—most of the banter between them is funny, but some is laced with barbs. And yet, there are layers to the two of them that go beyond the facades they wear. Image and presentation are important to them. Sleepy stops to choose the right suit to wear before going on the run. Knowledge Allah is insistent on his chosen name, knowing that his real name belongs to his immature, impulsive past self, someone he doesn't want to be associated with anymore. Perhaps this is why he is constantly digging into Sleepy, searching to see if there is more depth than he presents. And there is—but Sleepy has a hard time acknowledging it. One of my favorite and most cutting scenes is when Sleepy gets left behind on a mission. He understands the reasoning, and is even glad about it, but still, he has a moment of absolute hurt in him. He then proceeds to pull off a stunt that is amazing and wonderful and had me cracking up in my chair.

And maybe that's the whole point of *Pimp My Airship*. There are no heroes in this novel. Only people who want to live their lives and have fun in peace. Unless they're pushed to defend that way of life, that is—and like Knowledge Allah says, “The revolution will not be televised.”

Also, there's a soul circus in this book, which is a real thing (bit.ly/2Wx9Nnk). Black Steampunk, YEAH!

The Rage of Dragons

Evan Winter

Hardcover / Paper / Ebook / Audio

ISBN: 978-0316489768

Orbit, July 2019, 544 pages

From Black steampunk to Black Epic Fantasy. Unfortunately, I have not had the pleasure of becoming a *Game of Thrones* fan. But for all of you who are and are looking for a fix while you wait for the books to be finished, may I suggest *The Rage of Dragons*? It has dragons, demons, fast-paced battle scenes, political intrigue, and, most important of all, sweet, sweet revenge.

Tau is part of the Low Common caste, which doesn't give him much to aspire to other than becoming a soldier in the seemingly endless war between his people, the Omehi, and the Xiddeen, natives of the land the Omehi decided to settle on. Tau doesn't like to fight; he has a plan to get himself injured so he can serve as an administrator rather than a warrior. However, when he defeats a Noble in a fighting contest, the Noble in indignation demands a blood-duel, a fight to the death. Tau's father steps in, quickly taking Tau's place, and is killed for it. Horrified, Tau vows that he will not rest until everyone who was involved his father's death is killed by his own hands.

At first glance, this book is just a revenge story. We follow Tau as he trains mercilessly for his single-minded purpose, getting thwarted by circumstance and his own limited class. We meet Zuri, his childhood friend whom Tau is in love with, but who learns that she is Gifted and destined to be sent to the war to use her magical powers. We also meet Jayyed, the commander of a fighting unit who takes Tau in, seemingly as a joke, but who has ulterior motives for choosing someone in a lesser caste. The infighting between castes is strongly emphasized, more so than the war that the Omehi are in. But the war does intrude upon Tau's plans,

whether Tau likes it or not.

And as Tau fights his battles, both on the field and within himself, he starts to learn that things are not as simple or clear-cut as his thirst for revenge makes out. In a sense, Tau reminded me a lot of the people in the Undercity in *Pimp My Airship*: stretched to the breaking point, helpless rage boiling just below the surface, with no chiba leaves or poetry to temper it.

I read *The Rage of Dragons* in one day, and was swept up in its intrigue, its pain, and its hints at peace, which comes with a high cost. If you like books with lots of fights, this one is for you. I'm very much looking forward to the next book in the series.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LaShawn M. Wanak is a graduate of the 2011 class of Viable Paradise. Her fiction has been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Ideomancer*. She served as Associate Editor at *Podcastle*, and has written nonfiction for *Fantasy Magazine*, the *Cascadia Subduction Zone*, and the anthology *Invisible 2*.

Media Review: August 2019

Christopher East | 1249 words

Aniara

Based on the poem by Harry Martinson

Directed by Pella Kågerman & Hugo Lilja

Produced by Meta Film Stockholm, Meta Film, and Viaplay

Released September 7, 2018

US release date May 17, 2019

With every advantage at its disposal, Hollywood ought to be producing more memorable, visionary science fiction films. Unfortunately, the U.S. film industry is so often focused on blockbuster spectacle that sometimes one has to venture farther afield to find something interesting and different. The obscure Swedish film *Aniara* (2018) may be a perfect case in point, a flawed but grimly compelling film that brings impressive visual style to its thoughtful tale of existential SF. *Aniara* took a peculiar route to the big screen; it's based on a Harry Martinson poem from way back in 1956, and over the years it has inspired—get this—an opera and a prog-metal album! But as it turns out, 2019 may be the perfect time to reimagine this tragic science fiction poem as a full-length feature, and writer-directors Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja do an uneven but commendable job of adapting it into a modern cautionary fable.

The opening credits roll over a chilling montage of extreme weather events, as hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods pummel the Earth. (Indeed, what's all the more chilling is that it appears to be legitimate, recent stock footage.) Then we get the film's first real shot, pulling back to follow the ascent of a space elevator as it rises from the surface, the stormy atmosphere of a dying planet roiling below. The elevator is full of passengers headed for the massive spaceship *Aniara*. One of them, MR (Emelie Jonsson), is an employee who regularly works the circuit from Earth to Mars and back. She's the "Mimarobe," caretaker of a holodeck-

like chamber called the “Mima,” wherein an AI system draws on human memories to project people into placid visions of “the Earth as it was.” The Mima is a therapeutic escape for those passengers overwhelmed by the claustrophobia and homesickness of space travel.

MR serves as our entry-point character during these best, early stretches of the film, as we catch up with both *Aniara*’s literal backdrop and its metaphorical strategy. The worldbuilding groundwork unfolds, refreshingly, through keen visual storytelling. With minimal dialogue and almost no exposition, the opening chapters paint a vivid picture. The survivors, many visibly scarred by the Earth’s ecological breakdown, are fleeing Earth to a new safe haven on Mars. But humanity’s old habits die hard; the high-speed ship carrying them is one step removed from a pleasure cruise or a shopping mall, a depiction that holds the key to the film’s shrewd commentary. Even in these most desperate of circumstances, it suggests, people are blithely shopping and indulging and distracting themselves, without much thought to the consequences of their actions. MR, who’s basically the ship’s therapist, is underworked; everything’s fine on *Aniara*, and most people don’t bother much with self-care.

Sure enough, though, something quickly goes wrong. During an emergency maneuver to avoid space debris, the massive ship’s fuel systems are irreparably damaged, forcing them off course at such incredible speed that, unable to steer, they will need to hope for a slingshot recovery around the next celestial body they pass to send them home. Captain Chefone, played with outstanding subtlety by Arvin Kananian, reveals that rather than a three-week voyage, it may be two years before they can even correct course, let alone reach their destination. This disruptive news sets some travelers into panic mode, and increases MR’s therapeutic workload in the Mima. But eventually, a complacent business-as-usual resumes on the ship. Nothing for it but to wait and hope.

The captain and his entire crew, however, are lying. MR learns this from her misanthropic, nihilistic roommate, the Astronomer (Anneli Martini). The Astronomer has done the calculations, and they’re nowhere

near two years away from a suitable celestial body. When MR confronts Chefone about it, he forces her to keep it under wraps to avoid a panic. “We’ve built our own little planet,” he says, unlocking the clever metaphor at *Aniara*’s core.

The film’s first half is an unnerving slow-build, with the feel of documentary footage as it depicts the passengers’ simple, pleasant lives on the ship. But in light of the set-up, catastrophe looms in every frame; indeed, for a while it looks like the film might escalate into an Irwin Allen disaster scenario. Instead, it becomes something more subtle: a slow apocalypse. Something’s deeply wrong on *Aniara*, but what’s more unsettling is how quickly everyone adapts to it—and how little they change their behaviors, despite an obvious need to do so. *Aniara* is an analog Earth, and like Earth, it shot past a point of no return while everyone went casually about their business. Meanwhile, the powers-that-be downplay the danger to keep an unsustainable system in place, even as the “planet” soars headlong into oblivion. “It’s so hard to tell when you’re involved,” the Astronomer tells MR at one point. “You usually need to view it from a distance.” She’s talking about the disintegration of her marriage, but she may well be discussing humanity’s in-the-moment inability to recognize long-term consequences.

The film’s build-up may be masterful, but once the cautionary metaphor develops, the film doesn’t seem to have much of a destination in mind. Of course, that may well be the point: after all, the film is sourced from Nordic existentialist SF poetry! But that does make it structurally unsatisfying. For a narrative through line, one can latch onto MR, whose daily struggles are brought sympathetically to life by Jonsson. Her story involves searching for romantic fulfillment in a slow-building relationship with beautiful, icy pilot Isabel (Bianca Cruzeiro). More thematically important, though, is MR’s commitment to the Mima and, later, to creating massive projection images outside the ship to distract the passengers from the terrors of the void beyond. MR’s work is the art of *Aniara*’s world, the beauty and wonder that makes the daunting journey of life worth living. Indeed, in the period when MR’s work is not available, the ship devolves into hedonistic orgies, religious zealotry, and

—in one all-too-relevant sequence—a descent into rigid authoritarianism. These latter stages of the film actually may be truer to the poem’s themes than the first act is, but they’re less successful cinematically.

Aside from the structural issues, there are other reasons *Aniara* isn’t likely to win everyone over. The pacing is quite Scandinavian, patient and creeping, which is likely to polarize. And the atmosphere of looming disaster, of melancholy and despair and existential dread, will surely be a turn-off for the wrong viewer. But even if one dislikes the experience of the film, it’s hard to deny that it achieves an impressive and specific effect. For some—to be honest, for me—existentialism can be an important coping mechanism and source of comfort. *Aniara* may be a troubling and tragic vision, but there’s also a winning tenacity to its depiction of the human struggle, and occasionally there’s breathtaking beauty in its dark imagery. Whatever its flaws, it remains a thought-provoking work of science fiction that deserves more eyes on it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher East is a writer, editor, reviewer, and avid consumer of science fiction, fantasy, and spy fiction. His stories have been published in *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Cosmos*, *Interzone*, *Talebones*, *The Third Alternative*, and a number of other speculative fiction publications. He’s attended the Clarion and Taos Toolbox writing workshops, and served for several years as the fiction editor for the futurism, science, and technology blog *Futurismic*. He blogs extensively about writing, fiction, film, television, music, comics, and more at www.christopher-east.com. Currently he lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works for an occupational and environmental health and safety consultancy.

Interview: Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Christian A. Coleman | 1816 words

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the author of *Signal to Noise*, named one of the best books of the year by *BookRiot*, *Tor.com*, *BuzzFeed*, *io9*, and other publications; *Certain Dark Things*, one of NPR's best books of the year, a *Publishers Weekly* top ten, and a VOYA "Perfect Ten"; the fantasy of manners *The Beautiful Ones*; and the science fiction novella *Prime Meridian*. She has also edited several anthologies, including the World Fantasy Award-winning *She Walks in Shadows* (aka *Cthulhu's Daughters*). She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In *Gods of Jade and Shadow*, young Casiopea Tun embarks on a journey to help Hun-Kamé, spirit of the Maya god of death, recover his throne from his treacherous brother, Vucub-Kamé, in Xibalba, the Maya underworld. Tell us how the premise came together for you.

A long time ago, maybe ten years ago or so, I had an idea about a woman who opens a chest and out of it jumps a skeleton that assembles itself. I figured it would be a quest story but I was thinking contemporary. It didn't gel. I dropped it.

Years later, I was working on something else, set in the 1920s. That didn't gel either. Which, really, is not uncommon. I have a lot of half-finished things and false starts. But when I looked at the 1920s notes and the work I'd done, even though it was garbage, the time period was right. My great-grandmother had been a young woman in the 1920s, and I realized that what the story needed was to be set in the Jazz Age.

What drew you to the Jazz Age?

This is the post-revolutionary period, and Mexico is embarking on a

nation-building project. So there's a whole country trying to figure out what it is, forging an identity—with values clashing as a result of this—and here you have a protagonist who is doing the same.

What kind of research went into bringing Mexican folklore to life during the 1920s? And what were some of the historical details you wanted to make sure you included in the story?

To me, that feels like asking at what point of your fetal development did you sprout toes. I can't tell you. I sprouted them; that's all. So what kind of research did I do? A lot. There's not one specific detail I can point to that I desperately wanted to include. I did enjoy looking at all the Mayan Revival architecture of the time. There are many gorgeous buildings of that era.

Jade is a recurring image throughout the novel. It's in the title. We see it inlaid in boxes, in necklaces. You even describe Hun-Kamé's voice as young and jade-green. What significance and symbolism does jade have in Mexican folklore?

While European nations valued diamonds and gold as precious objects, the ancient Mayan had a great interest in jade. It's found in many tombs. It was used ceremonially and was worn by nobles, and aside from looking pretty, it was associated with the afterlife. Some corpses even had a jade bead placed in the mouth. Green is life, the color of plants, and life is tied to death.

Reading through the glossary at the end of the book, I did a double take where you point out that the book, while it weaves elements of Mexican folklore into the story, is not an anthropological text. I mean, that should be obvious, right? We're reading a novel here. It's as if you had to write, "Spoiler alert: this is a work of fiction."

I was talking to Rebecca Roanhorse online and we discussed about how this can be a problem. For example, some people seriously think that the magic in books by people of color is “real” magic in a way they don’t think Harry Potter has “real” magic.

If you are an American or a Brit reading a modern novel about King Arthur, and you’ve never read all the stories about King Arthur, you still have some cultural knowledge about him. You know that, for example, if King Arthur suddenly transforms into a dragon and roasts his enemies to death, that is a big divergence from the original tales. But if you’re dealing with unfamiliar folklore or myths—and this is likely an unfamiliar culture to most English-language readers—you don’t know the point of divergence. The most important thing is I don’t want people to think, “Ah, this is fact. It is the one and only take on Pre-Hispanic culture, and if anyone does something different, it’s inauthentic!” Because that’s not the case.

Let’s talk about your protagonist. I love the fact that Casiopea tells Hun-Kamé that he didn’t rescue her. She says, “I wasn’t a princess in a tower. I knew I’d get away one way or another, and I was not waiting for a god to liberate me. That would have been both silly and unlikely.” Although she’s with him, she’s in control of her story. How did you come up with her character?

My great-grandmother was a maid from the countryside. When she was around Casiopea’s age, in the 1920s, she went to live and work in Mexico City. She was illiterate. She had an illegitimate daughter, and to support her, she spent years cleaning houses until she married the man who became my grandmother’s stepfather. At that point she stopped working, becoming a housewife. When he passed away, my great-grandmother went to live with her daughter and kept on cleaning and cooking for the family. Eventually, she went to live with my mother and my great-grandmother helped raise me.

I don’t think many people realize what it’s like to be a maid, what it’s

like to be poor, and to literally have zero opportunities in life. My great-grandmother was always depending on family taking her in. When she was depressed, she referred to herself as an “arrimada,” which is hard to translate but it’s almost like saying a parasite. She thought she was nothing, a parasite.

My great-grandmother’s favorite movie character was La India María, who was this comedic maid character. Because she was a bit like her, you see? She was a maid, she was humble, and she got to have zany adventures.

So I wrote a character who she could identify with and who she would have liked.

Her mortal/immortal dynamic with Hun-Kamé adds great tension to their chemistry. They make a charming pair in what could also be read as a travelogue or road novel. Tell us a little about your approach to developing their relationship.

I was looking at pictures and snippets of movies of silent film stars, especially Ramón Novarro, and the one thing you quickly realize is that the poses are always very dramatic: the way they hold their head, the way they open their eyes, everything. So I thought Hun-Kamé would be a bit like an old film star. Everything would be very dramatic with him and with his twin brother. And also a bit unreal and unnatural, because actors don’t look naturalistic in those films.

And if you are curious about what the Lord of Xibalba is supposed to look like, there’s a dancer and model called Fredrik Quiñones whose photos I looked at while writing this (bit.ly/31Z9HE6). I think he looks a bit like that.

Anyway, their relationship is like a reel in a silent black and white film. They’re dancing with each other, there’s no dialogue—it’s just the music and the movement. It’s supposed to be something beautiful. It’s the choreography of first love and, yes, it’s a bit like a fairy tale, the meeting with the handsome prince.

As powerful as Hun-Kamé is, I was surprised to read that “fate is more powerful than gods.” Why is that? I was under the impression that, in fairy tales and myths, gods were in control of fate.

No, they're not necessarily. You see it in many old myths. If you want to go the Greek route, Cronos tries to eat all his children so they won't dethrone him, but he's dethroned by his son anyway. The Lords of Xibalba decapitate the Hero Twins, but they are avenged by their sons. Gods and supernatural creatures are powerful, but they always have their limits.

There's meta-commentary about fairy tales and folktales that comes up several times in the novel. During her journey, Casiopea muses on how these stories should and should not go. It's almost like she's aware she's in a story. I was wondering if this has anything to do with the fact that you wanted the feeling of telling in your novel. Because you mentioned on Twitter that your great-grandmother told you stories and that the Popol Vuh, which inspired some of the mythology in the novel, is also a spoken story.

Yeah, it's important for the book to have a feeling of telling. Telling is a component of many cultures and it's certainly present in many classics of Latin American literature. Modern American literature doesn't seem to value telling as much as it once did or as much as other cultures still do. It's seen as a sign of gracelessness. But of course, folklore is spoken, and there are benefits of telling rather than showing. I wanted that feeling of something that is somehow being spoken, being constructed, even as it happens. The snippet of the audio version I listened to was very good, by the way. It captures the intent. In the end, if Casiopea has one super power, it's that she simply is aware she is on a hero's journey because she listened to stories.

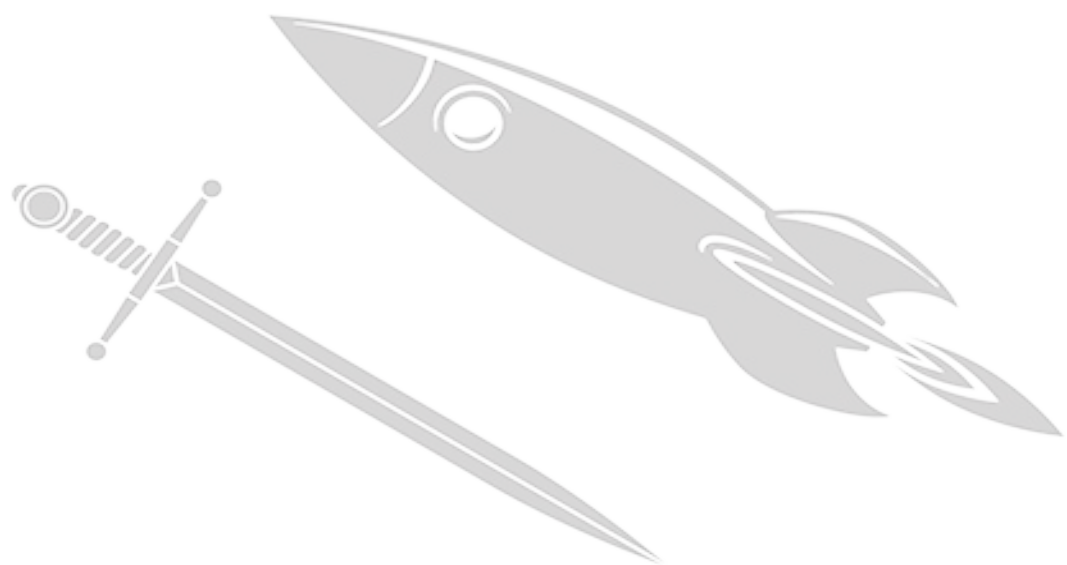
And what upcoming stories of yours are on the horizon?

My next novel with Del Rey is called *Mexican Gothic* and that should be out sometime in 2020. It's another historical novel and it's exactly what the title says. Next year should also see the publication of my first non-speculative novel, a noir coming out through Polis/Agora that's entitled (at this point, these things sometimes change) *Untamed Shore*. It's set in 1970s Baja California in a shark-fishing village.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Christian A. Coleman is a 2013 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. He lives and writes in the Boston area. He tweets at @coleman_II.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS



NIGHTMARE MAGAZINE

gives me such a fright.

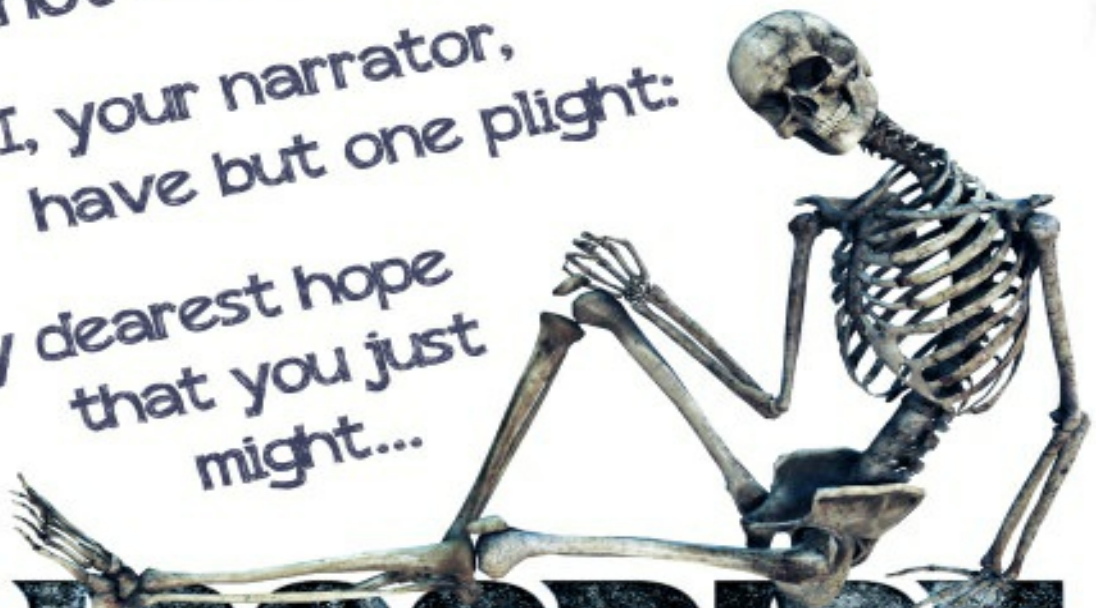
Every dark tale is a gruesome delight.

But I'll not disassemble; I'll be forthright—

for I, your narrator,

have but one plight:

It is my dearest hope
that you just
might...



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Author Spotlight: Dominica Phetteplace

Gordon B. White | 699 words

Let's begin at the border: What was your initial flash of inspiration for this story? In particular, because it contains evocative images (the spiders, the wasteland) as well as a thoughtful commentary on how technology and corporatism will affect our lives in the near future, I'm curious if one aspect preceded the others?

I wrote this story originally for an anthology about climate change that was to be commissioned and published by Amazon. The contract, once I got it, was highly unfavorable. It asked me to give up my derivative rights. I love my derivative rights! I declined the contract and found a better home for it here at *Lightspeed*. To celebrate, I exercised my derivative rights by writing another story set in this same world, which will also appear in *Lightspeed* soon.

The inspiration for the spider drones came from the artist Louise Bourgeois, who did a series of spider sculptures in bronze and steel. Her spiders are terrifying, dynamic and futuristic. They are inert but very much alive and the experience of viewing them at SFMOMA changed me.

The spider, to me, is industrious and beautiful. From a biomechanics perspective, there is no piece of man-made technology that approaches its sophistication. I imagine the singularity as occurring in a place where nature and technology are indistinguishable.

The desert is an ecosystem that may seem barren at first glance but teems with life if you know how to look for it. Robot Country is a secret world that emerged from a ruined ecosystem.

Although our protagonist Isla primarily interacts with robots and drones during her time in the wasteland, they never feel like machines. Instead, as they take the form of talking spiders, helpful

beetles, and flying drones that swoop in like birds, they feel almost more like magical animals from a fairy tale. Isla even makes sure to always address them politely rather than giving them commands. What drew you to this blend of genres? Are there any other works that you found influential?

I try to read widely across genres.

While I was writing this, I was reading Philip Connors's book *Fire Season*, which is a memoir of his time as a fire lookout in the Gila National Forest. A fire lookout continuously scans the horizon for smoke during fire season, keeping track of wildfires. This job seems boring, but the author convinces you that it isn't. That it is, in fact, highly meaningful work that could never be done by a drone. It's a fantastic book.

I'm currently reading Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing*, which reminds me of Connors's book in a lot of ways. Odell offers various strategies to resist the "attention economy," which keeps us in a state of distraction and agitation by enhancing existing feelings of insecurity. One of them is spending time in nature, something I haven't done enough of.

Another non-fiction book that inspired this work is *Witches of America* by Alex Mar. The author had originally intended to write a survey of Modern American Witchcraft, but instead decides to become a witch herself. The book ends with her being inducted into a coven. It's delightful! I loved the arc of becoming the thing you were trying to study, which is what happens to Isla, in a fashion.

What's coming up next for you? Beyond the projects you already have scheduled, are there any new and still uncharted areas that you feel guided towards exploring?

Right now I'm teaching my first ever fiction class. I've been a math tutor since I was thirteen, but I've never taught writing before, so it feels like uncharted territory.

Later in the summer I'll be headed to the Launchpad Astronomy camp

so I can learn some stuff about space. I have this personal defect that I'm trying to address, which is that I find physics boring. I'm going to work on this with the goal of writing more near-future science fiction set in space.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Gordon B. White has lived in North Carolina, New York, and the Pacific Northwest. He is a 2017 graduate of the Clarion West Writing Workshop, and his fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in venues such as *Daily Science Fiction*, *A Breath from the Sky: Unusual Stories of Possession*, *Nightscript Vol. 2*, and the Bram Stoker Award® winning anthology *Borderlands 6*. Gordon is also an Assistant Editor with Kraken Press and conducts reviews and interviews for various outlets. You can find him online at gordonbwhite.com or on Twitter at [@GordonBWhite](https://twitter.com/GordonBWhite).

Author Spotlight: Scott Sigler

Alex Puncekar | 704 words

My reading of “The Final Blow” tells me that this story is about survival and desperate, difficult choices. What is the inspiration or catalyst behind this story?

“The Final Blow” is the first-ever story in my “The Gods Have Gone” universe. As a fan of fantasy, I’ve always wanted to create a fantasy setting where there is no metal. Development of metal opens up the inevitability of advanced technical development, so what kind of stories could be told in a setting without metal? I’ve played with this concept in my “New World” mythos, which consists of two stories (“Victim with a Capital V” and “Throwdown,” which are in the anthologies *Unfettered II* and *Unfettered III*, respectively). Those stories are set in our world, but one set 2,000 years after bioengineered bacteria destroy all metal. The New World setting examines what might happen to our current Western culture when technology collapses, i.e., a fantasy setting based on North American cultures and values rather than the de facto Ancient Western European settings.

In “The Gods Have Gone” setting, on the other hand, I’m trying to create original cultures largely from scratch. It’s going to be a grimdark playground.

Uncle Janeed is a worldly man, though he is someone who is a survivor himself. But he also has a fondness for his nephew Manil, a fondness that he is either trying to use for his own safety or out of actual concern for the boy. The story is about Manil, but I found that Janeed was the most complex, most interesting character in the story, albeit one who possibly did some reprehensible acts in the implied killing of Manil’s mother. Obviously, you can leave the severity of his actions for the reader to decide, but do you, as the

writer, believe that Janeed is a good man? I get the sense that he's someone who understands that good men don't live very long in this world, that he's someone who will do anything to survive.

Janeed is both good and bad, like most people. He's done wonderful things. He's escaped his rural upbringing and seen much of the world, a rare accomplishment for his people. However, he's also done bad things, both to survive and to get ahead. It's his knowledge of the wider world that lets him understand he cannot escape this situation, nor can Manil's mother. He will die, she will be enslaved and treated with brutality for which she is not prepared. He takes it upon himself to show her "mercy" he thinks she would not otherwise get. Janeed knows the Sectels, their traditions, and what they do to captives. It is this knowledge that lets Janeed determine only one person has a chance at survival—his nephew. Janeed has to think quickly to find a way for his blood to survive.

In a short time, you're able to really add color to this world. Crystal swords and whispers of place called "the continent" make this place feel alive and different, and that juxtaposes nicely with the apocalyptic nature of the story. I would hope that Manil's journey doesn't end here! Do you have a sequel planned, or any other stories set in this world?

I have plans for stories and novels in "The Gods Have Gone" settings. I don't know when I will get to them, but I have quite a world lined up.

What's next for you? Are there any projects that you're working on that you'd like to share?

We have so much coming up! My short story collection *Fire is Orange* should be out in August 2019. Book VI of my Galactic Football League series will be out in the first quarter of 2020, as will *Mount Fitz Roy*, the sequel to my best-selling SF/horror novel *Earthcore*. We just

released *The Reef*, a GFL novella, in ebook and audiobook, as well as *Kissyman & The Gentleman*, a two-fisted noir tale set in 1946.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Alex Puncekar is a writer, game designer, and editorial assistant for both *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*. His fiction has appeared in *Aphelion: The Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *Jenny Magazine*. He lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. Follow him on Twitter @AlexPuncekar.

Author Spotlight: Kendra Fortmeyer

Coral Alejandra Moore | 1236 words

What I love most about “No Matter” is that it’s very much an upside-down time travel story. We don’t see the events from the point of view of the person who travels, but the one who has to live with the results. Can you tell us about how that idea for the story developed?

One day, when I was hiking alone, I was seized by the certainty that I would round the next bend and encounter my parents—not my parents as they are today, in their sixties and living several states away, but in their twenties, not yet married. Would they recognize me? Would I want them to? What would I want them to know? And what of my telling might undo me?

I carried the seed of the idea to the Clarion workshop in summer 2016, where instructor Ted Chiang sat us down and—succinctly, without consulting any notes—explained to us precisely how time travel could work, and the issues this poses for free will.

I was also reading Jenny Offill’s wonderful collage novel *Dept. of Speculation* at the time, which explores, among other things, the pain and helplessness of being cheated on by a partner. Ted’s articulation of the effect of time travel on free will breathed a new, strange life into the subject for me, which is to say: Jealousy is terribly unattractive, which puts you in an awful, helpless conundrum when your partner begins to stray. If you don’t object (playing the part Gillian Flynn brutally correctly named “the cool girl”), you’re at risk of being complicit in the slow dissolution of your relationship. If you do object, you’re at risk of seeming petty, demanding and unattractive, thus pushing your partner away and into the arms of the (now even more comparatively) attractive other. A trap, in other words, with no escape from the inevitable, no matter what agency you think you may have.

And here comes our girl in the woods, a time traveler (*perhaps*)

herself. Was there ever anything our heroine could do?

If this is grim, I apologize. Jealousy is the least kind emotion. I have no solution for it, beyond what lies in this story.

The format of the story is almost epistolary, being addressed to someone outside the story in a conversational nature. Did you always know it was going to have this format or was it something that grew with the story along the way?

In early drafts, the story was straightforward first/third person. But as the piece developed, and I began to understand that the narrator would be undone by obsession, the intimate “you”—a “you” to rage against, to plead with—emerged on the page. In early drafts, “you” addressed the narrator’s husband, but really, the husband isn’t a terribly interesting character. *Man begins to stray* is a story we’re exhaustingly familiar with. But the relationship between the narrator and the absentee, disinterested agent of her doom? *Well.*

I love writing in second person, and I love especially how this piece challenged and stretched the bounds of the form for me. When we address an absent “you,” we evoke them, and therefore grant them presence, a form of power. The narrator, an obsessor and confessor, could avoid her doom altogether if she could just stop believing in “you” (where “you” means, specifically, the daughter the narrator’s husband will one day have without her) and nonchalantly assume that the whole encounter was a prank. But she can’t. And as she sinks deeper into the fear that her husband’s future doesn’t include her, she increasingly, pleadingly addresses the “you” that disrupted it—granting the hypothetical “you” greater reality in her mind, increasing her own paranoia and poisoning the marriage she wants more than anything to save.

“No Matter” is a story with layers. The genesis of a relationship. The strangeness of time. Causality. Was it difficult to get all of these

threads woven together in a way that held together so well? Were some of these added later or were they always pieces of the narrative?

Like all Clarion stories, “No Matter” was written in the course of a week, and on very little (I say with great fondness) sleep. By necessity, the stories crafted in that crucible are a lot of elemental spaghetti thrown at half-dreamed walls; by the fifth week, you just write frantically, hoping something will stick. You also become, by necessity, a loving collector of your own experience and ideas as you prod every cell in your brain—*Can I use this? Can I use this?* The various threads in “No Matter” were the obsessions plaguing/delighting me in that strange week.

And again, this story owes a great debt to the collage form of Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation*, which brilliantly weaves seemingly disconnected pieces together (how antelopes have 10x vision, that Edison called memories “little people,” a steak the narrator once spat out at a restaurant) to give rise to an overarching, painfully personal story. Offill’s form gave me permission, I think, to scatter my plot elements a bit further afield. The fact that they came together as they did (the story has changed almost not at all since then) is due entirely to the magic of Clarion and the writers I was there with.

There’s a moment in the story where the narrator and her husband go back through his former girlfriends on social media to figure out who might be responsible for the prank. This brought to mind how difficult it is to escape exes in the strangely interconnected online social circles of our modern world. Do you think this story could have taken place in the past in a world without the lingering connection of social media or is this a uniquely now story?

The story easily could have taken place before social media—the Facebook profiles could have been photographs in an album, or letters. It’s harder to escape our exes in the social media age, but our aching

human hearts and the lure of the what-might-have-been are timeless.

The first time I read this story, I was sure it had a happy ending, but on additional readings, I think the balance of loss and potential leaves that largely up to the reader's interpretation. Was that something you intended or in your mind is it more firmly one way or the other?

Your reading of the ending will depend on you, and on your answer to Cher's eternal question: "Do you believe in life after love?"
(Happily, I do.)

Can you share something you're working on now? Where else can our readers find your work?

I've had a story recently on the *LeVar Burton Reads* podcast. I got to meet LeVar in Austin for the live recording! It was absolutely astounding, and he is every bit as kind as you could dream. And my novel for young adults, *Hole in the Middle*, debuted in the US last fall from Soho Teen. I'm currently at work on my second novel, a ghost story about sex education in Texas.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Coral Alejandra Moore has always been the kind of girl who makes up stories. Fortunately, she never quite grew out of that. She writes because she loves to invent characters and the desire to find out what happens to her creations drives her tales. She is a 2013 alum of the Viable Paradise writer's workshop and she has been published by Diabolical Plots, Zombies Need Brains, and Secrets of the Goat People. Currently she lives in the beautiful state of Washington with the love of her life and a dangerously smart Catahoula Leopard Dog where she rides motorcycles, raises chickens, and drinks all the coffee.

Author Spotlight: Cassandra Khaw

Nicasio Andres Reed | 661 words

For me, one of the great pleasures of your work is how fluently you commit to a mode of storytelling, in this case the voice of a classic fable, even specifically a very traditional European sort of fable. Where does that sort of choice of form come into the writing process for you?

I think the decision comes really early in the creative process, usually while the idea is floating in my head. I know a story needs to be written when I can hear the cadences of the first paragraph in my head. *How* my brain decides what the cadence should be, I have no idea. It just happens. No one tells me anything, damn it. Ahem. In the case of this story, it came almost immediately as the story was intended to be a bit of a retort towards the original fable. I didn't like how Mary was portrayed, or how Mr. Fox was simply treated as a pointless monster to be murdered by dashing human men. And because it was meant to be a retort, I just had to reply exactly in kind.

The cheerful, self-indulgent violence of Mr. and Mrs. Fox is such a pleasure to read. They don't have that clinical, serial killer affect, or some conceit of being artists, instead you get the sense that it's simply fun and that it's what they were made for. And while the fable-ness of it all gives that a mythic aspect, it's also just . . . romantic. Especially when held up against all of Mary's failed and jealous suitors who don't share her predilections. That combination of horror and romance and even the domesticity of telling the tale and sharing the hunt with their children is compelling—what drew you to that particular combination or intersection?

That's a really interesting read on the two of them! It's somewhat different from my own, and I like it. Both because of the nature of the

analysis and because it is a reminder of how nuanced the consumption of media can be. I guess what I really wanted to do was to present the two of them as they are: animals, without apology or adherence to the idea of humanity. Like you said, it's fun for them. It's fun and it is for sustenance and it is as natural to them as the whole idea of eating livestock is to us. I wanted to see how genuinely bestial habits would translate in human terms, and I wanted to hold up that vicious honesty against the pettiness of the human animal.

Just FYI, “I am pleased to look well, Lord Petty” is a line that I plan to use in conversation at the earliest opportunity. Which isn't a question, sorry. The question is: What do you think it is about foxes that makes them pop up as crafty, wicked characters in the myths of so many different cultures? What are they to you?

I think as a species we're terrified of things that are smarter than us, and that's mostly because that's how we identify our superiority over the natural world: We're smarter than it. So, the idea that there could be something small and sleek that is infinitely more canny than us immediately makes us scared. And what do humans do when we're terrified? We make them into monsters so we can summon our peers to the hunt. As for what they are to me, well, that's a long story best told in another fable, yes?

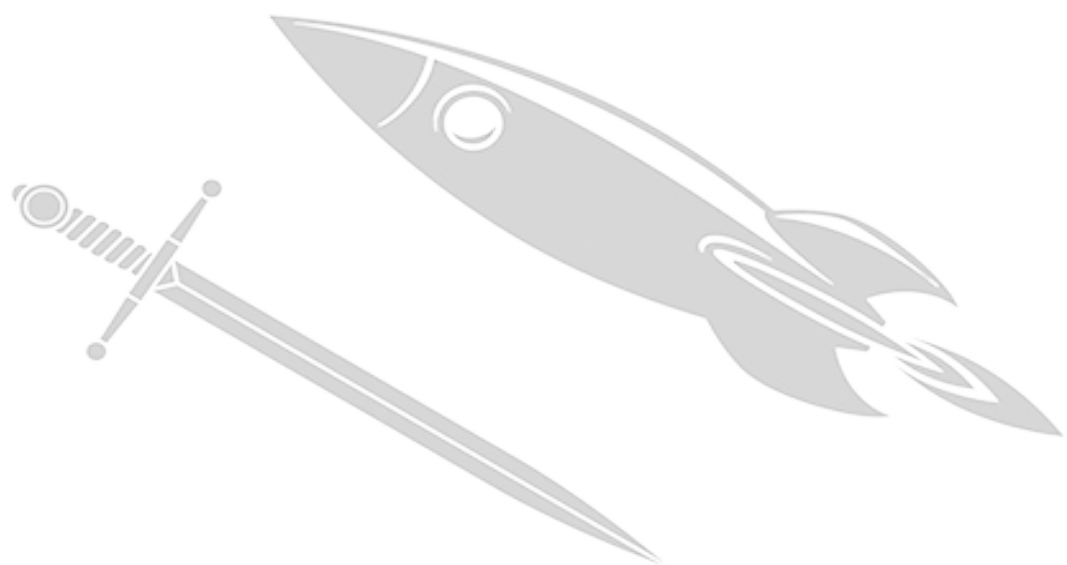
What can we look forward to seeing from you in the future?

Oooh! Video games mostly, at this point. But my agent and I are in the process of finishing up something that has me *really* excited, so stay tuned.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Nicasio Andres Reed is a Filipino-American writer, poet, and essayist whose work has appeared in venues such as *Lightspeed's* Queers Destroy Science Fiction, *Strange Horizons*, and *Shimmer*. Nico has gone back and forth between the US and the Philippines over the years, and is currently pursuing an MA in creative writing at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. Find him on Twitter @NicasioSilang.

MISCELLANY



Coming Attractions

The Editors | 210 words

Coming up in September, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We have original science fiction by Adam-Troy Castro (“Sacrid’s Pod”) and Jenny Rae Rappaport (“The Answer That You Are Seeking”), along with SF reprints by Ramez Naam (“Exile from Exinction”) and Seanan McGuire (“Hello Hello”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Brooke Bolander (“A Bird, a Song, a Revolution”) and Rajan Khanna (“All In”), and fantasy reprints by Micah Dean Hicks (“Flight of the Crow Boys”) and Kiini Ibura Salaam (“Desire”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns. If you’re reading our ebook edition, we also have an exclusive book 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. We’ve got work from the following authors coming up over the next couple of issues: E. Lily Yu, Eli Brown, Isabel Yap, Yoon Ha Lee, Melissa Marr, and Dominica Phetteplace.

So be sure to keep an eye out for all that literary 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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Nightmare Ebooks, Bundles, & Subscriptions: Like *Lightspeed*, our sister-magazine *Nightmare* (nightmare-magazine.com) also has ebooks, bundles, and subscriptions available as well. For instance, you can get the complete first year (12 issues) of *Nightmare* for just \$24.99; that's savings of \$11 off buying the issues individually. Or, if you'd like to subscribe, a 12-month subscription to *Nightmare* includes 48 stories

(about 240,000 words of fiction, plus assorted nonfiction), and will cost you just \$23.88 (\$12 off the cover price).

***Fantasy Magazine* Ebooks & Bundles:** We also have ebook back issues—and ebook back issue bundles—of *Lightspeed's* (now dormant) sister-magazine, *Fantasy*. To check those out, just visit fantasy-magazine.com/store. You can buy each *Fantasy* bundle for \$24.99, or you can buy the complete run of *Fantasy Magazine*— all 57 issues—for just \$114.99 (that's \$10 off buying all the bundles individually, and more than \$55 off the cover price!).

Support Us on Patreon or Drip, or How to Become a Dragonrider or Space Wizard

The Editors

If you're reading this, then there's a good chance you're a regular reader of *Lightspeed* and/or *Nightmare*. We already offer ebook subscriptions as a way of supporting the magazines, but we wanted to add an additional option to allow folks to support us, thus we've launched a Drip (d.rip/john-joseph-adams) and a Patreon (patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams).

TL;DR Version

If you enjoy *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* and my anthologies, our Patreon and Drip pages are a way for you to help support those endeavors by chipping in a buck or more on a recurring basis. Your support will help us bring bigger and better (and more) projects into the world.

Why Patreon and Drip?

There are no big companies supporting or funding the magazines, so the magazines really rely on reader support. Though we offer the magazines online for free, we're able to fund them by selling ebook subscriptions or website advertising.

While we have a dedicated ebook subscriber base, the vast majority of our readers consume the magazine online for free. If just 10% of our website readers pledged just \$1 a month, the magazines would be doing *fantastically* well. So we thought it might be useful to have an option like Drip and Patreon for readers who maybe haven't considered supporting the magazine, or who maybe haven't because they don't have any desire to receive the ebook editions—or who would be glad to pay \$1 a month, but not \$3 (the cost of a monthly subscriber issue of *Lightspeed*).

Though *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* are separate entities, we decided to create a single “publisher” Drip and Patreon account because it seemed like it would be more efficient to manage just one page on each platform. Plus, since I sometimes independently publish works using indie-publishing tools (as described above), we thought it would be good to have a single place where folks could come to show their support for such projects.

Basically, we wanted to create a crowdfunding page where, if you enjoy my work as an editor, and you want to contribute a little something to help make it easier for us to produce more cool projects, then our Drip or Patreon are the place to do that.

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Well, you get the satisfaction of helping to usher the creation of cool new short fiction projects into the world! Plus, the more support we get, the better we can make the magazines and compensate our authors and staff. By becoming a supporter via Patreon or Drip, you help fund our growth and continued publication of two award-winning magazines. Of course, if you’re already one of our ebook subscribers (thank you!), you are already supporting us. This is for those who prefer to read the issues each month on our free websites, or wish to support our efforts more generally.

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Thank You!

If you’ve read this far, thanks so much. We hope you’ll consider becoming a backer on Patreon or Drip. Those URLs again are [d.rip/john-joseph-adams](https://drip.io/john-joseph-adams) and patreon.com/JohnJosephAdams.

Thanks in advance for your time. We look forward to hopefully being able to make the magazines—and my other publishing endeavors—even

better with the support of people like you.



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