

Heartlines Spec

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Editorial

by Rebecca Bennett

OFTEN, in stories, relationships are precarious. They are at the end stage: a death, a divorce, a cheating spouse who needs to be brutally murdered by a husband who's just misunderstood. Or, they are at the beginning: a first tentative touch, a longing look, a sudden jolt of a love potion making its way into your veins.

When I hit my 30s, I started craving works that featured a more long-term view. With characters settled into each other (often the 3rd book in a series). Older, wiser, and maybe a little tired of everyone's bullshit. It was rare to find stories with older protagonists, especially those who had a strong relationship to lean on. It took me years to forge my own friendships and I wanted more in my fiction.

In my teens and early 20s, I didn't have long-lasting connections. I wish I had today's language back then, words like gray ace or demisexual were concepts I would have loved to explore in a supportive environment. Rather than rummaging through them inside my own mind, wondering what was wrong with me.

I had made friends easily, keeping them was harder. By my 20s, I discovered there was a three-year-limit to friendships. Once that third year rolled around, people tended to let go of me. Or I let go of them. I spent years working on that, being a more active participant rather than letting a friendship begin its slow fade. I still left friends behind. Didn't reach out for years, still haven't. Anxiety

and depression can alter your mindset, making any missteps seem like unclimbable mountains. The inaction of not answering a text immediately, became never answering that text at all.

This year though. This year I celebrated my 16th anniversary with my partner. This year I celebrated an 18th anniversary with a close friend. These aren't numbers I expected to see when I was younger.

The friendships I have now are few, but measured in decades.

Heartlines Spec contains the challenges, and joys, and frustrations that come with those long-lasting connections. It's a mother you never understood, a friendship that's fierce but changing, the quiet gratitude of sipping champagne with someone you love.

In palmistry, the heart line is a representation of the depth, longevity and complexity to the relationships in your life. Our *Heartline* features partners, families, lovers, and friends. The relationships in our first issue are varied but strong.

To all our readers: trust us with your heart, know that we will keep it safe. We hope you stay with us for years to come, until opening this book feels like greeting an old friend.



Rebecca Bennett writes speculative fiction with small town flair. Her short stories and poetry have been published in *Translunar Travellers Lounge*, *Strange Horizons*, *Bourbon Penn*, *Luna Station Quarterly* and other literary locations. She is Managing Editor at *Heartlines Spec* and also wields minor power as a Senior Editor at *Apparition Lit*. You can follow her occasional tweets at [@_rebeccab](#)



Redline

by A.D. Sui

Red·line

/ˈredˌlɪn/

verb

informal—North America

1. Drive with (a car engine) at or above its rated maximum rpm.
2. To cancel, abandon or discontinue something planned.

.....

THE climbing was the easy part.

Seo-Jun slowly shimmied her way up the rock. The scales along her soft suit glistened like snakeskin against the Martian night. The successful terraforming efforts had developed the Martian atmosphere to something closer resembling the tip of Everest rather than hard vacuum. There was no need for stiff, bulky suits.

The climbing was easy, straightforward. The more difficult task was keeping quiet about the Ganymede Greenhouses contract she found on Ari's kitchen counter—signed. Ari was a coward, and she was leaving, and there was nothing Seo-Jun could do about either. Ten years of working side-by-side, fifteen years of friendship, gone with a single stroke of ink.

But for now, Ari was below her as her trusted belayer, ready to keep her safe for yet another pitch. In total, Redline consisted of seventeen pitches—stretches of rock long enough to climb on a single rope. At every pitch they would rest and switch places. Seo-Jun climbed this pitch and Ari would be the next.

“Do you think Marty’s is still going to be open when we finish? I kind of want a beer.” Ari asked, the beam of her headlamp racing across the wall. They were making their attempt to summit during the night. This way, the ice stayed ice and didn’t melt where outer layers of their soft suits grazed along extraterrestrial rock. When the sun rose and the ice melted, what little friction was would be gone. “I think they’ll stay open. I told them to expect us late.”

“Yup,” Seo-Jun pushed out through clenched teeth, and shifted her weight enough to rest and shake out her forearm. Climbing in one-third Earth gravity was a surprising challenge. Much of the traction between the climber’s fingertips and the rock was created when they applied downward pressure. Less gravity meant that less pressure was to be applied to press off a small rocky chip on the side of the cliff. Less friction meant less stability.

“Crack is coming up in four moves,” Ari said.

When Seo-Jun reached for the first opening, the rope tugged at her harness. “Quit short-roping me,” she hissed.

“I’m not.”

“I can’t go any higher if you don’t let out more rope.”

“I’m trying.”

“Try faster.” The anger stained Seo-Jun’s tone before she could reel it back. She’d have to apologize for it soon enough.

“Sorry.” Some shuffling below her and then the rope sagged far enough that Seo-Jun was able to reach the crack. Crack climbing was one of the hardest forms of climbing back on Earth. Cramming knuckles, fists, forearms, and entire shoulders into deep cracks in the rock left climbers with bruises across their backs and long bleeding gashes on their forearms. Here on Mars, gashes depressurized the suits. Killed people if they were out for more than a couple minutes. The first time Seo-Jun attempted crack climbing, she had jammed her shoulder into the opening, quickly tearing her soft suit in a fraction of a second, giving her a nasty frostbite. She since modified the suit with extra armour where her body pressed into the rock.

With a final stretch, Seo-Jun shoved her shoulder in the widening crack. She was slender enough that once her shoulder passed, she forced the rest of her body in as well. By pushing against the opposing wall, she was able to finally release her hands and let them dangle by her sides.

With frozen hands she hammered in the pin and tied off the rope. Ari would complete the pitch on top rope, only having to unclip the rope from the carabiners as she went. They'd done this routine nearly every day for the past decade, just the two of them. They argued, joked, confided in one another, but always *here*. From her vantage point, Seo-Jun watched the settlement off in the distance, pinpricks of warm lights in the otherwise pitch-black world. They would reach the summit together or not at all. It wouldn't count if they didn't both reach it.

Seo-Jun waited, and waited, and waited, but the rope remained slack below her. The silence grating at her nerves, she wanted to ask Ari about why she was leaving and why she had failed to tell her (deliberately chose not to tell her). She wanted to know what she'd done wrong (being too self-absorbed) to push her friend to a distant corner of the Solar System after so many years together. Had things grown stale (too much focus on rocks, too little on people)? "Did you freeze to death?"

"No, I'm fine." Ari's voice was small against the vastness of the Martian night. "I'm coming." Slowly, she started her way up, one handhold at a time.

"Well, I'm freezing, so hurry up."

"I am." They were at pitch ten and still had a long way to go. Without much of a warning, Ari yelped into Seo-Jun's earpiece and instantly the rope went taut, pulling Seo-Jun's body into the wall. Silence, and then, a quiet, "I fell."

"I can see that. I'll lower you and you can start over." Seo-Jun said, the trembling of her voice betraying her otherwise calm tone. She checked the ropes herself; they were in good shape. But even so, seeing your friend disappear into the black wasn't light on the nerves.

Each pitch had to be cleared in one go, those were the internationally agreed rules on Terra and Seo-Jun was adamant about enforcing them here. If one climber fell, she would have to repeat the pitch until she did it fully, only then they could move on.

Once Ari stopped swinging, Seo-Jun lowered her to the starting point and she tried once more. But when Ari reached the transition below the crack, she fell again. She cursed loudly this time and kicked the wall. "My hands are frozen."

"So are mine. Try again."

"I don't think I can," Ari said, and Seo-Jun nearly shouted at her for being a twice-over coward, for giving up on both her and the summit. But the route was punishing, and they were both tired, and she couldn't spend their last climb angry with Ari, no matter

how much she wanted to be. Seo-Jun called on her anger to carry her through the night, but the cold and the fatigue were draining all the rage from her. At her core, more than the cold, more than soreness, was hurt.

“Do you want to go home?” Seo-Jun asked. It was disappointing to end the night on pitch ten, but she needed Ari if she wanted to claim the summit.

“No.” The ray from Ari’s headlamp focused on Seo-Jun. “I know you want this.”

“You said you were freezing.”

“I can climb freezing.” Ari laughed softly, and gestured for Seo-Jun to lower her. She fell five more times before she finished the pitch. The only silence that reached Seo-Jun were soft sorrys every time the rope tightened by the pull of Ari’s weight.

Finally finished with the pitch, the two women sat back on their ropes and stared above at the sheer cliff. They had seven pitches to go and four hours to cover them.

“I think Marty’s is going to be closed,” Ari said.

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re distracted.”

Seo-Jun looked away. She wouldn’t start the conversation now that they were a little more than halfway to the top. There was no need to sour the already strained mood, to stress Ari out even more. She always did get stressed far too easily. No. Tonight they would climb. Tomorrow, if Ari was even still there in the morning, she would bring it all out in the open. “Ready when you are.”

It was Ari’s turn to belay, and she moved to assume the position. “Oops.”

“What?”

Seo-Jun listened to Ari struggle against the rock, then a soft screech reverberated through the wall. “Air tank is stuck in the crack.” She struggled some more. “Yup, stuck real good.”

Seo-Jun brought her headlamp to the high edge of the crack. The dark outline of the air tank disappeared into the crack. Seo-Jun yanked on it gently, and a soft screech resonated through the rock. “It’s stuck real good.”

“That’s what I said.”

There was no way to negotiate with a stuck air tank. At best, Seo-Jun could try to wiggle it free and puncture the outer lining in the process. At worst, she would create a small spark that would blow the whole thing up. Instead, she unclasped it from Ari’s thigh altogether. “Just leave it be.”

“But I need a spare.”

Seo-Jun handed Ari her own spare tank. "I can supplement with my filters. It's not a big deal."

"It's totally a big deal if you run out of air." Ari gestured at the barren atmosphere around them.

Seo-Jun figured that this was a poor time to tell Ari about her experiments of holding her breath raw, oxygen mask down low around her neck, timing how much time passed between when the first frost settled along her nostrils and when her lungs screamed out in agony. "I'll be alright. Don't worry."

"I worry."

They were going to have a fight, weren't they? They were going to say things they couldn't take back and throw away fifteen years of friendship. Seo-Jun couldn't have that. She pulled herself upright against the wall and started off again. She couldn't fight with Ari if she was a whole pitch ahead of her.

The first stretch of the eleventh pitch, Seo-Jun made in silence. They had practiced each pitch individually many times over, but the wall remained unforgiving. She had been dreaming of the pitches, the choreography across the rock for many years now. Every so often, Ari would inquire about Seo-Jun's status as she let out more rope, and Seo-Jun would reassure her that it was alright, despite the clattering of her teeth, and the frost nip forming along her cheeks.

They quickly made it past the eleventh pitch, and then the twelfth, and then so on. Neither woman was talking now, only exchanging the occasional hand sign. When they rested, they rested in silence, passing between them a single half-eaten granola bar that neither wanted to finish. The rests stretched out longer as the pitches came faster. Yet, Seo-Jun remained stoically mute.

"Hey," Ari asked softly. "You okay there?"

Seo-Jun rested her face in cold, sore hands. She wasn't okay, she was in fact nearing tears from both physical and emotional exhaustion. They had two pitches to go, and then Ari would get on a ship and leave to the other corner of the Solar System, and any joy Seo-Jun experienced from the summit would be rendered irrelevant. "Yeah," Seo-Jun whispered. "I'm just resting."

With a groan, Seo-Jun pushed off the rock and reached for the first hold on the roof—pitch sixteen. She willed herself present, willed her heart into a manageable rhythm. Slowly, she inched her fingers towards the upside-down jug, a hold large enough that she could sink her entire hand into it. One hand. Second hand. She pressed her feet into the opposing wall and pushed as hard as she could.

The cold, oxygen-poor air from the filters burned her lungs as she reached the next hold. The key to roof climbing was to keep tension

in the body at any cost. Relax, and your body would sag away from the rock, pulling you off. She was three holds away from the edge of the roof when Seo-Jun noticed she couldn't pull on the rope anymore. "Give," she ordered.

"I am."

Seo-Jun yanked again, and the rope slowly followed up in her hand. It was so heavy, and she was already at her limit. She needed to rest again, but if the rope kept dragging, she wouldn't reach the next proper rest point in time. Lodging her knees between the overturned jug and a smaller hold she let her arms go and relaxed into a hang. There were only two options here. One was to give up. The other was far too dangerous, far too *stupid* for her to even contemplate. And yet—"Ari, I know you're leaving," Seo-Jun said, watching the soft light of Ari's head lamp dance along the wall below. Better now than never.

At first, all Seo-Jun heard was Ari's breathing, and then, "You're mad."

"Only that you didn't tell me."

"I couldn't. You would have talked me out of it."

Seo-Jun would have tried. But now, hundreds of feet above ground, the entire premise seemed comical. "Why?"

"It's a good opportunity."

"*Bullshit*. There are good opportunities here. What's the real reason?"

Ari was quiet for a moment. "I think I need to go out on my own. See if I can do this."

It was Seo-Jun's turn to be quiet. The rock jabbed at her kneecaps painfully, yet she was still biding her time of precious rest. "And you need to go to Ganymede to figure that out?"

Ari didn't say yes. She didn't say anything at all, but Seo-Jun already knew the answer. She reached for her oxygen mask and pulled it from her face. There were two options. One, she could give up. Two, she could ease the drag and keep her hands free by clenching the nearly frozen rope between her teeth. Of course, with the oxygen mask gone she wouldn't be able to breathe and the chilling air that currently registered at minus sixty would turn her skin and lips to ice in minutes, but Seo-Jun wasn't in the mood to give up. As long as the climb went on, Ari had to stay.

"What are you doing?" Ari asked, hearing the wind in her earpiece as the microphone inside of Seo-Jun's oxygen mask dangled around her neck. There was no response. But the rope hadn't gone taught nor slack, so Ari kept letting it out in equal intervals, hoping for the best.

When Seo-Jun's lungs couldn't stand any more strangulation, she briefly tugged on the oxygen mask to cover her mouth and nose,

dropped the rope, and took a gasping breath. "I'm fine. Everything is fine," she said quickly, one arm dangling off the roof. Her lips were nearly frozen solid, her lungs ached from the cold and low atmosphere, but she was so close. "I'm not mad. Everything's fine."

"You're going to wreck yourself and I'll have to haul your frozen body back home," Ari protested.

"I'm fine. I'm fine." But what she wanted to say was that she was not fine, and for her to be truly fine Ari would have to swear that she would stay. This would make Seo-Jun a terrible friend, something she battled with the entire duration of her and Ari's relationship. Sometimes being there for someone meant letting them leave. That was the grown-up decision, regardless of how much it made Seo-Jun want to cry. "I don't want you to go. I've been mulling this over since I found out." She pressed hard with her feet, her body taugth and flat against the roof of the cliff face. "I thought if we did this, you'd stay. But I get it. I need to finish this thing with you. I don't know why, but this has to be your send-off." There it was, as coherent of a goodbye as Seo-Jun would ever muster. Having taken a deep breath, Seo-Jun pulled down her oxygen mask, and bit at the rope with aching teeth. It was now or never.

She pivoted around the hold so that her feet were leading her over the lip of the roof. She stiffened her foot and caught the edge. Seo-Jun reached around the lip and pinched an indentation in the rock. If she were to look down, she would see nothing but the open Martian plane. She twisted her foot so now the heel was atop of the edge and pulled inwards. Her entire body screamed out in protest. But climbing was never about strength or endurance. Climbing was about how much pain you could bear and for how long. It was about faith, first and foremost, in yourself. In one continuous pull, Seo-Jun shifted her weight onto her foot and pushed up, stretched, until she was once more upright against the cliff. The remainder of the wall lay ahead of her: barren, flat, and welcoming. With wavering strength, she pulled the rope from her teeth and clipped it in. Once the oxygen mask was over her mouth and nose again, Seo-Jun said, "It's all you now."

Maybe she needed to be on her own too. Too many days were spent in Ari's kitchen while her own went unused. Too many nights crashed on Ari's couch because the night was cold, and she was far too drunk to go back to her own dome. It could be good for both of them. And Seo-Jun reassured herself that Ari would return. She *would*. She didn't want to entertain any other option.

Ari climbed the final pitch first. She moved softly, quickly, against the paling sky. Seo-Jun watched her friend climb over the edge of the cliff.

“Don’t go,” Seo-Jun said on instinct.

“What?”

“Don’t just leave me hanging, I mean.” Maybe she’d find the right words later. But for now, everything she said was rigid, awkward, much like her climbing was. Seo-Jun finished the last pitch with none of the grace she had begun the climb with. By the time she pushed over the edge, her suit was thinning at the elbows and her oxygen was at ten percent. But then it was Ari’s hand that grabbed her and yanked her away from the edge. Ari’s arms pulling her close against her friend’s tiny frame. Still gasping for air, Seo-Jun rested her chin on top of Ari’s head.

“We did it,” Ari’s voice was quiet, but jubilant. “What are you gonna call it?”

Finally, Seo-Jun wrapped her arms around Ari’s shoulders. It was finished. The illusive summit they’ve been chasing for nearly a decade was behind them. Ahead of them was nothing but the unknown. It was dreadful and empty, and lonely, and simultaneously promising. “Redline.”

“Why?”

Seo-Jun managed to smile through the swelling tears. “Because it was hard.”

“If only there was someone here to make a record of it. Make it official.”

Seo-Jun shrugged. “I don’t care much for it being recorded. I just wanted to see if we could do it. We can always go again and make it official.”

“Maybe one day.”

“Uh-huh.” Seo-Jun freed herself from Ari’s arms and dusted off her soft suit. Her oxygen was sitting at nine percent now and she was stiff from the cold. But the day was coming, and the temperature would rise, and the filters were pulling oxygen from the thin atmosphere well enough. She gave Ari one quick hug and pushed herself away. “I’ll see you at Marty’s in a bit. You go ahead.” If only she sounded cheerful enough, Ari wouldn’t suspect a thing.

“So, you’re not mad?”

Seo-Jun headed off away from the path down. The slump of her shoulders was enough to make Ari pause, but not enough to stop her. “Nah,” Seo-Jun said and turned off her receiver. Behind her, dawn became day, and the flickering lights of the settlement shut off. Somewhere, someone was rotating the solar panels to meet the faint

solar rays. And in a few hours, she'd be drinking with Ari again, and they would be laughing, and she would be a great friend and encourage Ari on her distant voyage. It would be a proper send off with beer and peanuts, and jokes, and happy memories. But for now, Seo-Jun walked out into the Martian desert, tears freezing along her full cheeks.

"I'm not mad," she said to herself. "I'm just sad."



A.D.Sui is a Ukrainian-born, queer, and disabled science fiction writer. She holds a Ph.D. in Health Promotion and spends most of her time being a stuffy academic of all things digital. Her writing has appeared in *Augur*, *Etherea Magazine*, and others. When not writing convoluted papers that nobody will ever read, she's tweeting into the void as @TheSuiWay or blogging on www.thesuiway.com



And In The Silence After

by C. J. Lavigne

BEHIND the great stone walls, the city is celebrating.

From the hillside overlooking, this revelry is visible only through the glow of lights. The soft hint of coloured lanterns spills above the balustrades in shades of crimson and blue. The occasional sparkling explosion of golden fireworks lights the dark, illuminating tiled roofs and spires and the massive tower at the centre, its windows gleaming with too many candles.

Cheering comes intermittently, fragile and drifting in the night. It is just enough to reach the forest, where the trees gather close and a single rider follows the path up toward the little house at the edge of the bluff. Here, only soft sounds venture: the rustle of the breeze in the leaves, the chirp of a cricket, the soft thunk-thunk of the horse's hooves and the creak of a leather saddle. The rider's breath frosts, but only a little. It is not so cold.

His disguise is poor: an ostensibly plain cloak still too richly furred to be anything but noble, thrown haphazardly over fine thick silks. There's embroidery on his gloves, and his horse is too high-spirited and long-limbed. Still, in the dark, there is no one to know him, or that he should not be here.

No light escapes the black lump of the cottage. Slumped in tall grasses where the trees taper and the path ends, it is mostly detectable through absence, a void blocking the stars. The horse shies at a trickle of pebbles beneath one foot before its master murmurs.

The rider dismounts, tying the horse to the post outside, and he does not pause or fumble in the night. The latch on the door gives way before him; he jiggles it lightly and pushes with his left foot in just the right spot so that the tricky wood will shudder open.

Inside, it is warm enough, and the rider shuts the door against the night and the distant revelry before taking five short steps to the fireplace where dying embers still very faintly glow. There is a pile of wood already chopped, waiting in a basket by the hearth; it is the work of a moment to throw on more logs and breathe the flames back to life.

The rider pushes back the hood of his furred cloak; the soft gleam from the hearth traces the fine planes of his features, strong nose and furrowed brow, a well-trimmed beard and a gold band that glitters across his temples. He is a large man, his gloved hands deft with the poker; he grunts when he straightens, and rubs ruefully at his thighs. There is enough light now to see the interior of the cottage, small but well-kept, more solid than it appears and simply but nicely appointed: heavy curtains, a low table and chairs, a shelf creaking with books and pots and jars. The carpets that cover the floor are rich and thick. The bed, heaped with blankets, is occupied.

“Your fire was almost out,” notes the rider, low-voiced.

There is a pause, during which the pile of blankets does not move, but eventually it responds, “Good thing you’re here.” The pile sounds muzzy, dream-disturbed, but its tone is amiable enough. The blankets themselves are like the carpets—expensively made, warm and plush.

The rider only moves far enough to sit, dropping a touch heavily at the mattress edge. The bed creaks beneath him.

The bed observes, “You’ve been drinking,” and the rider snorts.

“Obviously.”

“Shouldn’t you be out there waving?”

“The parading is done. They’re all carousing in the streets now, and no one needs me for that.” The rider tugs off a glove and places his hand on the blankets; his fingers are short and broad, without adornment. “Can you get up,” he asks, gently. “I wanted to show you.”

“It’s late,” murmurs the pile of blankets. “Your intentions, my lord—are they honourable?” A heavy fringe of wool shifts, though, and a slender hand emerges, ashen and veined. “My slippers.”

The rider has already reached for the slippers where they are tucked at the end of the bed, and he nudges them closer, placing them for two delicate feet as they emerge trembling from the covers. The

rider's broad hand takes the other's ankles, gently, one by one, and slides the slippers on, mindful of crooked toes. "It's chilly. I'll get your cloak."

"Hn." The man who finally emerges from his cocoon, hair wild and sallow face unshaven, only drags two of the blankets over his thickly-robed shoulders. "These are already warm." The fire etches his face in deep shadows; the lines of him are carved harshly but not cleanly. He is shaking.

"Unfashionable, though."

"I'll survive."

The rider opens his mouth, and the man in the bed says, "Don't," and then the rider slides an arm around the other man's shoulders and helps him to rise. The thin man is taller, swaying beneath the weight of his blankets. He coughs once, his hand clenching around the rider's wrist.

"Have you eaten?" murmurs the rider. "Do you need anything?"

"I already have a nursemaid, and she'll be back at dawn."

"Hm. She should be here now."

"She has a family, Rafe."

"Then I'll hire two more."

"Don't you dare. Look, I was sleeping. I was fine. Why are you here?"

"You should see." The sturdier man keeps his arm around his companion's shoulders, and his other hand at the thin man's elbow. They move together easily, mindful of the darkness. "Watch your step. Tell me if it gets too cold."

"Mn," says the thin man—and he coughs again, short and dry, but he does not complain. He only braces himself, the blankets pulled closer before the rider opens the door and the two men can step outside to where the chill nips at their fingers.

The horse is waiting, which merits a delighted, "Hello, you old bastard," from the thin man—who consents to lean against its broad chestnut neck, stroking, while the rider sweeps the furred cloak from his own shoulders and lays it out a little ways away, over the grass. The horse whuffles and nudges at the thin man's shoulder.

"You haven't unsaddled him?"

"I can't stay. They'll be yelling for me soon—I'm supposed to be anointed with a frankly astonishing variety of oils in order to properly receive the sublime provenance of the people, or... something like. It sounds messy." The rider returns to escort the other man to the spread cloak. "Sit. Have a look at the city. Can you still see it?"

"I can hear it well enough." The tall man, blankets held tight, lets his companion lower him to the furs; his long legs fold carefully, and

he cranes his neck in the direction of the distant walls. "I can see the fireworks, a little. Is it as late as I think?"

"Probably." The rider sits himself down at the edge of the spread-out cloak, and angles himself just so, so that the thin man can lean back against his shoulder. The thin man makes a discontented sound, extending the blankets and holding them open insistently until the rider shares them, burrowing under and tucking one arm around his haggard charge. "Sorry. I shouldn't have woken you." He is abashed now, with their breath clouding and the horse stamping an impatient foot as it shifts in the chill.

"No. It's good. They sound like victory." The thin man smiles faintly, the lines of his mouth pulling deep, and he lets the rider take his weight. His gaze drifts across the distant city, unfocused save when a glitter of sparks catches his attention. "They sound happy."

"Hm." The rider shakes his head. "They should be happy," he clarifies, "but they're toasting my name. It should be yours."

The man in the blankets makes a small sound at the back of his throat. "Oh, no thank you. Ysolde, though."

"Ah, they won't forget Ysolde. I've put a statue up for her." The rider surveys the city, then extends his free arm, tightening his grip around his companion's shoulders as he leans in, pointing along the walled skyline. "Just there, under that gold flash, in the main square. It's twenty feet tall and she'd hate every inch of it."

"She's going to haunt you."

"Your pedestal is waiting next to it. Ten pedestals. All around the inner gates, and the biggest just outside the tower."

"I am *begging* you not to."

"Then you'll need to be here to stop me." The rider is infinitely mild.

"Ah," says the thin man. "Well, then."

The rider pulls the taller man more snugly against him, and buries his face in the other's hair. He inhales, slowly, and says nothing.

The slender man, too, is silent. The horse whickers. For a while, there is only the sound of the distant celebrations, cheering and the pop of sparkling explosions, and the wind in the trees and the very soft sound of two men's breaths frosting in the air. The thin man is content to lean against his companion, blankets tucked snugly; his eyes are half-lidded, but he tilts his head, alert to each wave of raucous celebration. It is the rider who slouches a little further and a little more comfortably with each slow exhale, his chin descending to the other man's shoulder. "Was it worth it?" murmurs the rider, finally.

“Hmm?” The swaddled man smiles slightly. He turns his head, leaning his cheek against the rider’s, and he extends one hand to trace a long finger over the hammered gold circlet that rests on the other man’s brow. “Yes.” His hand spasms, and he draws it back, burying his fingers in soft wool. “I see you here. I listen to them singing. The choice was easy; the bargain was good.”

The sound the rider makes is noncommittal. He wraps both of his arms around the taller man, holding the other closer still, and he looks out at the city, his head lifting. “Twenty pedestals.”

“Alright then, no. It wasn’t worth it, after all.”

They only sit then, warm against the evening frost, the thin man held snugly in the rider’s arms. The horse pulls at the grass; the fire crackles in the cottage; the city, in the distance, rejoices.

When a low, rumbling wheeze drifts in the night, the thin man turns his head, snorting indulgently at his snoring companion; he lifts his hand again, extending one slender finger as he traces the gold band once more, nudging it up on the left to straighten it across the rider’s brow. Tugging the blankets more securely around them both, he slouches against the rider’s side and turns his unfocused gaze back to the silhouetted walls. A shower of red sparks blooms behind the tower, followed by distant cheers; the man’s lips curve. Whether there is a hint of wryness there, or regret—he is smiling.



C.J. Lavigne is the author of the urban fantasy *In Veritas* (NeWest Press, 2020). Her short fiction has been published in venues including *On Spec*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Augur Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *PodCastle*. She lives in Red Deer, Alberta. Find her online at www.cjlavigne.com.



Quintessence

by Laura Chilibeck

FAMILY members, carrying holographic flowers and crystal teardrops, pour into the hospital room. Their outfits are vibrant, multicoloured like aviation light signals at an interstellar spaceport. When we were first admitted, I brought a new game, poster or toy every few days, but as his illness progressed and more monitors were brought in we quickly ran out of room. Now, I barely remember to change my clothes let alone leave the hospital. I swallow past the lump in my throat and clutch my son's jaundiced hand tighter.

They aren't here for us.

The matriarch in the other bed has only been here for three days. She never woke, and these are her last few hours. She has an unusually large family; They've come to witness the last of her life.

Whispers float past the hazy contamination fields that separate the hospital beds. "Do you think she'll share a memory of mom as a baby?" The young child's voice is full of energy, the way Dusan's used to be.

"Well, your Baba Orenda had three children and people can only share one moment. I think she might surprise us with something from her life that was special to her, that she'd want us all to enjoy," explains a man with a melodic voice.

A tingle runs along my skin—the older woman is dying. She's choosing to share her quintessence with me. It seems that most people are eager to share joyful memories with everyone they can reach, spreading love as they go. Gentle as a breeze, her thoughts float into my mind like a daydream.

In the memory Orenda is sharing, she's youthful and vibrant, possibly younger than my thirty years, with wavy copper hair. She steps onto a wooden stage into a single bright light and before her, the room is dark and nearly silent. She sucks in a lungful of air and sings the perfect first note of a familiar song. I shut my eyes and, in my mind, I'm the singer. Lavender smoke wafts around the stage, and the black gems on my dress catch the spotlight and glitter like stars as the vibration of the drum and guitar ring through my body.

Applause erupts the moment the performance ends. Exhilaration shivers through my limbs, and tears line my eyes from the pride spilling out of my heart. Above it all is pure joy. It's too intense. I open my eyes, shaking my head to clear it. My chest tightens and tears stream down my face. Memories at the end of life are a gift, but it's not enough when the person dying is only six years old.

Dusan's little fingers are half the length of my own; his hand sits loosely in mine. The illness has made his hair thin, and he won't let me cut it—it's sparse and matted around his face. His dark lashes flutter and I hold my breath. Last night he was squirming in pain. I don't want to experience that again. He sighs and I inhale.

The people on the other side of the screen murmur, hug, cry, and laugh. I catch snippets of comments; some of them are paying respects via hologram and missed the experience of Orenda's quintessence and now want to know what it was. Sometimes a child peaks over to our side but is quickly whisked back to their family. They've dimmed the lights on their side to an evening glow, where ours blends to a soft blue—a reflection of the sky outside. With so many people moving around us, I try to keep our space separate and our own, very few things interest me past Dusan's bed.

The flow of patients and visitors have become a background hum to our stay here. Lives end, people grieve but keep moving forward. Dusan and I remain.

.....

Sharp light pierces my eyes, and I blink. It's coming from beyond the window. I leave the shading transparent to get as much natural sunlight as possible, because Dusan misses going outside. Leaning against the wall, and peering around the five story parkade full of

hover cars, the memory trees stand, now in full bloom. The crystal teardrops hanging from the branches shine as bright as the sun.

The trees are a constant reminder of life and death, easy for anyone to pick from and bring a piece inside to a loved one.. I tap the switch and the window tint grows three shades darker. When Dusan and I arrived, the trees were covered in onyx buds. That was two months ago.

Hugging my arms to my chest, I watch Dusan from beside the window. My stomach twists in knots and I tighten my jaw. Somehow it feels both like yesterday and years away. Work has always been my passion, and I'd been so focused on writing the code for the launch of our new product I hadn't noticed the subtle changes in Dusan. I spent hours away or at my desk, and didn't think twice about his disinterest in his meals. I only realized the hue of his pale skin had changed when the whites of his eyes became a terrible shade of yellow.

Alarms ring and lights beep on his monitor. I dart to his side, clasp his frail fingers in mine. The lights above us brighten until every bit of shadow disappears. Two nurses rush in. The tall sturdy nurse with rich umber skin and curly magenta hair commands the sound off. She flips her visor down, clasps Dusan's wrist monitor and begins to scan. Sweat prickles on my forehead and under my arms. Stats run along the clear plastic while she scowls at it.

The younger nurse with copper hued complexion and dramatic teal eyes opens a tray that clanks as he sets it down on the bedside table.

Dusan's chest barely rises, his body is limp. I bite my lip, ball my hands into fists and glare at his small form, willing him to live.

"Five cc's of Elphelarine." The woman holds out her hand and within seconds the young man has the needle prepped.

She clasps Dusan's jaundiced arm and inserts the needle.

Time has no meaning. My vision has narrowed to Dusan. Breathe, take a breath and open your—

Dusan sucks in a lung full of air, grunts and squints around the room.

"Did you feel me Mom? I almost had my powers." A half smile pulls at the corner of his dry lips. There's a spark of joy in his dull hazel eyes. He sits up, revealing his protruding abdomen.

I swallow and smile. "Not yet, sweetie."

He must have slept through the old woman's quintessence. He thinks that the ability to share memories at the end of life is like a superpower. Death—it looms, always present, a shadow in my mind. I shove the thought aside and lean forward to give him a kiss.

“Mom.” He rolls his eyes and pulls away.

My chest tightens. I bite the inside of my cheek to try to stop the tears from falling and clear my throat. I know he’s being himself, being a kid, but all I want to do every day is hold him tight and tell him I love him. Smothering won’t help or change anything, and he deserves as normal a life that I can give him right now. I straighten the bed and avoid eye contact with the nurses.

“Since you’re awake,” says the nurse with bright pink hair,. “wWould you like something to eat?” Dusan’s vital signs run in teal and red lights along her clear visor. Dr. Santi told me it can scan to the micro level. I’ve tried to understand when the doctors, nurses and technicians explain the medical technology and Dusan’s disease, but it’s all over my head, and my thoughts lead me back to my wasted hours at work when I could have been with him instead.

“Root beer float?” he asks, batting his eyelashes before he starts coughing. I clasp my hands and try to keep my face neutral.

“Nice try, kid.” The nurse with visor twists her wrist, a ruby red hologram pops up listing times and appointments. She flips it closed again, pulls out her screen, and taps it a few times before sliding it back into her pouch. “How about a protein loaf and a green smoothie?” She checks his tube, monitor, and temperature, before gesturing at the ceiling to dim the lights to a soft evening glow, then gives me a brisk nod and leaves.

The younger nurse whispers, “I’ll see if I can find you a pudding, okay?” He winks at Dusan and gently squeezes my shoulder. My eyes tear up.

“He’s nice. I bet people share their superpower memories with him all the time,” Dusan says between coughs.

“Most people know not to overwhelm the staff with their quintessence.” I hand him a tissue. “But you’re right, he’s very thoughtful.”

Dusan adjusts himself in bed, wincing with every movement. “Mom, last night I had the best dream.”

I tuck the microfiber blankets around his legs, “What happened in it?”

“I was climbing huge rocks and when I looked down, there were clouds and waterfalls and I was floating! Just like in my movie.” He stops and swallows a few times, “So Mom, when I’m better, can we go visit the Floating Islands?”

I lick my lips. Only Off-Worlders can afford to go there, but I will promise him a trip to the Three Moons if it gives him hope and something to live for. “Of course.” I force a smile.

“YES!” He pumps his fist in the air like someone who has just won a sports game. Then he begins to cough, huge body- wracking coughs. When they subside he lays back in bed, his face more pale than before the shimmer of joy in his eyes gone, replaced by reality. “I’m bored. Can I play my game?” He lets out a rattling sigh.

I nod and hand him the console before joining him on the small bed. He smells like salt and medicine. I miss the hint of grass on him, my little explorer, from when he used to spend hours outside. I whisper, “I love you, Dusan.” I want to pull him close but instead I lean back and watch him play.

.....

“Ms. Metz?”

I jolt upright and wipe the drool from my lips. Dr. Santi’s midnight eyes search mine. Despite asking her to call me Wendy, she insists on formalities. I can’t complain, not when she’s at the top of her field. We’re lucky to have her trying to help us.

Dusan has headphones on and is staring up at the ceiling where a projection plays his favorite movie: *The Adventures of Blake Zumbria and the Floating Islands*. I didn’t know I’d fallen into such a deep sleep. I get out of bed, giving her my full attention.

“Yes, Dr Santi. Sorry, I didn’t know you were visiting today.” I run a hand over my short hair, hoping it’s not a tangled disaster and twist my wrist. A small indigo hologram pops up letting me know it’s the fourteenth hour of thirty-second day of the fourth month—no scheduled appointments. “I lost track of time.”

“I have good news.” Dr. Santi hands me her circular screen.

It’s an image of a liver with a long list of blood types below the name of Dusan’s disease and other medical terms that I’m not familiar with.

“Using samples from you and Dusan, we synthesized a new liver and enough new blood for an entire transplant.” She tucks a stray hair behind her ear causing her onyx earrings to swing. “This would be the first time we’ve tried something like this for Vobora disease. It would be a medical breakthrough.” Her eyes shine with excitement. I know part of the appeal of our case is because Dr. Santi wants to advance medicine and knows we’ll try anything. “If I’m right, this will save his life.” She takes the screen back, swiping it closed before sliding it into her long green vest. “We can do the surgery this afternoon.” Her eyes are full of hope and in the corner of her mouth she’s holding back a grin.

“This afternoon?” I’m struggling to focus on her and the words she just spoke. “I have to sit down.”

Her firm hands grasp my arms and she leads me to a chair. “Is that better?” she asks.

He could live. The minuscule seed of hope wedged between my ribs for the past two months blossoms.

Dr. Santi’s warm hand rests on my back, and I meet her gaze. “I heard there was another quintessence in the adjoining room this morning. I know they are gifts, but it can become overwhelming. I’m sure you noticed most of the staff wearing these.” She flicks her earrings. “They help disrupt the telepathic connection and make it easy for us to choose to participate or not. If it would help, I can give you a pair.”

I shake my head no. “Dusan calls quintessence a superpower.” My voice catches in my throat. “I don’t want to risk missing...” I bite my lip and take a breath. “What would a six-year-old even choose?” She’s probably experienced thousands of quintessence, but this is my child.

She fixes me with an intense gaze. “You might not have to experience his for years. It’ll be hard but, if the surgery goes well, and his body accepts it... then you and Dusan will have a chance at many more joyful moments together. A full life to choose a quintessence from.”

It’s easy to get wrapped up in her optimism and excitement, but I have to do what’s right for him. “What are the risks?” My throat tightens and fear nibbles at the edges of my mind.

“Blood clots, infection, and if he rejects the new liver there is no going back.” Her tone is matter of fact, almost dismissive. I have a hard time telling if she’s cavalier or confident. I shift my gaze from her intelligent eyes to Dusan’s small sallow figure struggling to breathe in bed. He’s absorbed in the movie, but it’s a shadow of what he was like before, climbing rocks pretending he was the hero of his own adventure.

“I give you my permission.” It’s what Dusan would want, and the only chance for him to have a full life.

.....

I remember this place.

I was here sixty years ago, but now Dusan’s hand engulfs my wrinkled one. The tube attached to my arm doesn’t bother me anymore; the medication flowing through it allows me to forget the pain. The hospital is different from when Dusan was ill. The walls once glowed the same shade as the sky, but now they glitch and the edges near the ceiling have a constant black line. Everything ages.

The warm fingers holding my hand tighten and I refocus on Dusan. There are lines near his bright hazel eyes. I still glimpse a

hint of yellow around the whites of his eyes, but when I blink it's gone, a nightmare from our past playing tricks on me. The scruff on his face has bits of gray mixed with the brown. No matter his age, he'll always be my sweet Dusan.

"I was an idiot to think it was easy for you on this side of the bed." He squeezes my hand again. He pulls his lips together like he did when he was little, trying not to cry.

"You were six, Dusan." Talking is hard. I suck in a slow breath. I've had a lifetime of adventures since he was a sick child. Three different careers, including running my own business. More than a few partners along the way and joy in my life, things I could never have dreamed of while exhausted, stressed and depressed when he was ill. Dr. Santi won an award for her work with us, and I send her a card every year on the anniversary of his surgery.

The machine next to me hums, the rhythm slow, steady and soothing. Even the beeping and chatter from the hallway is a distant din when I focus on Dusan. Crystal teardrops hang near the window creating light that dances around the room. If the trees still grow near the parkade, they must be twice as thick now.

I let out a long slow breath. "It looks like I'll be getting those superpowers first." I force my dry lips into a smile.

He returns it but it doesn't reach his eyes.

"I don't want you to go, Mom." His voice catches on the last word and the muscle in his neck is strained.

Tears run down my cheeks. The medication numbs my physical pain, but seeing him so distraught breaks my heart. I shut my eyes, because it's hard to keep them open.

"We had a lot of time." I try to swallow, but my tongue is thick and heavy. I take a long inhale and breathe out. "Floating Islands."

Once Dusan recovered, I chose to cut my hours and work part-time. It took longer to save money, but it gave me more moments with him. We went to the Floating Islands for his twentieth birthday, and they were as magical as we both hoped.

The bed sinks as he sits next to me and lays his head on my chest. I hold him in my arms before I tire and let them drop. His breathing is slow and steady, allowing me to anchor my presence on him—on us. My body is heavy, gravity holds me to the bed making moving next to impossible. I expand my chest and suck in air, but it's not enough. Nothing feels right anymore.

At last, I let go.

Dusan is warm like sunshine. The scent of grass and salt surrounds him and we're back in our living room. The tall windows let in the afternoon light. Outside speeders zip by, our small window

box of orange and yellow blossoms bathe in the sun, oblivious to the noise. The multitude of ceiling fans whirl creating consistent air flow, keeping our small apartment at a comfortable temperature, although Dusan would love if I allowed it to get hot and humid like he thinks it will be at the Floating Islands.

In my vision Dusan sits at the narrow table, but I know that he's right beside me, sharing this moment now. He's seven years old, and he's healthy. His hair is long and wavy, the freckles on his nose are bright, and there's a hint of sunburn coloring his pale cheeks. Warmth radiates through me, knowing he's going to have a long life.

The two glasses of homemade root beer floats chill my palms. I put extra ice cream in his and the foam is running over the edge and along my thumb. He sets his playing cards face up and takes his from me. I sit next to him and wait until he takes the first long sip from the striped biodegradable straw. "We should drink these when we go to the Floating Islands, Mom!" His smile reveals a hint of a dimple in his left cheek and reminds me of my grandfather.

"Definitely." I nod and take a slow sip of my own cold drink. It's too sweet, like liquid candy, but I'm happy to enjoy it with him. My heart is light. He's living and I'm here, sharing this moment.

The memory slowly fades. I can't feel Dusan in my thoughts anymore.

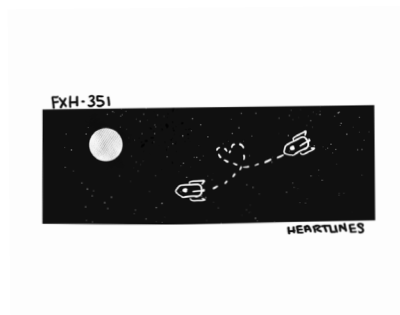
I'm separate from the body I wore for so many years. Gravity no longer holds me down. I'm weightless, but still me. Nothing looks the same and yet it is. Instead of human forms there are bodies of light, and around them are shadows of things I could once touch and feel.

Dusan is a warm glow. "I love you, Mom," he whispers.

Words aren't the same anymore. Instead, I send him the feeling of my love for him and the world brightens.



Laura Chilibeck (she/her) is a bi/pan West Coast Canadian who writes magical and moving short stories and novels, often centred around connection and the invisible threads that bind us. A finalist in the 2022 Dream Foundry writers' contest, her story "Quintessence" in Heartlines Spec is her first published work. Being a mother to three children and losing her own mother at the age of eleven means this story is close to her heart.



FXH-351

by Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko

One-way link established. Begin outgoing live transmission.

27:19:38 Central Naval Academy Standard Time, 2275/13/26

—**NOW** it's working. I think. The light's blinking. That means record, right? I don't know why R&D thinks we all want to waste time learning light codes. Everything else has a sensible fucking interface.

Okay, I know, language. I'm sorry. Blame the stress. Plus I just lost the first version of this recording, and it was perfect and heartfelt and a little bit badass and now I have to do it again and I just know it won't be half as good.

Deep breaths. That goes for you as well, Cadet Angelica *Perfectionism* Nguyen. You're probably even more stressed than I am. And I'm sorry about that, too. I'm sorry about a lot of things.

Starting over.

I'm three hours out from the Academy.

Two hours since I realised the FTL drive on this ship was out for maintenance. I did check, by the way, but someone didn't log the maintenance request. Six months I planned this, and I'm screwed over by a filing error. Fucking typical.

One hour since your ship turned up on sensors. I know it's you, because the Commandant is a sadistic bastard and he knows how much it hurts that you're the one chasing me down. Even if he wasn't, he'd send the best and, credit where credit is due, Angelica, you're the best.

Plus the transponder reads FXH-351, and that's your favourite ship. Maybe you think I don't know that, because you're careful not to take it out too often, but I do. We used to call it Skyhopper, until Colonel Mannerheim had that rant about personifying ships and how it gets you killed and/or makes you soft. Yeah, that's right, I remember the designation of the ship we trained in when we were, like, twelve. See? I pay attention. To you, anyway. Not to Colonel Mannerheim.

I don't know why I'm avoiding the main thing. You're never actually going to hear this message.

So.

I ran away.

Deserted.

Whatever we're calling it.

Now that I'm out here, and the plan has blown up in frankly the most anticlimactic possible way, I'm having some second thoughts about how I went about the whole business, but I want you to know I'd do it again. No second thoughts about that. You know what broke me? It was after the skirmish at Barnard's Star, when we overheard Mannerheim talking to one of the commanders. "Good work," he said. "Now we have a pretext."

Look, I've always known that's how the Navy operates. The flimsiest excuse for war, right? I don't know why that time was different. Maybe it was how he said it, like he didn't even have to pretend. Or maybe it's because graduation was less than a year away. It's like, for the first time, I realised I would be out there soon, creating pretexts.

Or maybe it was an accumulation. Deep down, maybe I knew I should have left a long time ago.

Once I made the decision, I couldn't prop up the status quo an hour longer than I had to. I couldn't keep telling myself I was the good apple in a barrel bursting at the seams with rot.

.....

And, fuck, I should have told you.

It seems so obvious now. Hindsight is twenty-twenty and so's failure. I couldn't get past the fear that you'd turn me in if I asked you to run with me. Six hours ago, that possibility felt like the end of the world, and not just because I'd, you know, be in a cell somewhere

waiting for the court martial. You get that, right? It wasn't the *maybe getting caught* that was the issue. I've *maybe been getting caught* for like a month now, because—and I really cannot stress this enough—stealing a Navy scout ship from the Academy is *fucking hard*. When you bring me back, maybe they'll be super impressed with my initiative and transfer me to Intelligence.

Haha. Funny joke. I'd rather take the court martial.

No, it wasn't about getting caught. I could handle a cell. I think. It's not like I'd be any worse off than I am now. Knowing you'd put me there, though... I mean, I don't think they have private bathrooms in Navy prison; and the only way I know to work off a broken heart is to spend so long in the shower I have to mooch off your water rations for the rest of the week.

And, yeah. Call me a pessimist, I'm ignoring the other option. Maybe you'd have said yes. Maybe we'd both be *here*. Except here would be a ship with a fucking FTL drive, because you wouldn't have committed the rookie error of trusting standard filing procedures. Maybe that would have been worth the risk.

.....

The thing is, I'm not sure you would have come with me. I think you're too good for that. Too loyal, too selfless. I think you're the best person I know, only you've let them convince you that *good* means *good for the Navy*.

Maybe I didn't ask you to come because I'd rather die thinking you might have said yes.

.....

Hey, here's a joke: what's big and black and not as empty as I was hoping? Space!

It's funny because you're in a ship, coming to kill me.

.....

I don't want to die, Angelica.

More than that, I don't want you to kill me.

I don't know if I'd rather you do it yourself or take me back for court martial. I guess it's the same thing either way.

I don't want any of it.

.....

Space travel really isn't suited to a high-stakes chase, is it? We should have gone for hovercraft over the salt flats again. Remember

that? The day they caught Sato trying to defect? It took you approximately three milliseconds to realise something was bothering me. Only time you ever got sent to see the Commandant, and it was because you wanted to cheer me up.

The sky was so big that day.

Fuck, Angelica, that wasn't even a year ago.

I guess we're stuck with the slow-motion chase. It's another three hours until you catch up. I've got it all nice and plotted on the main screen, one little blip for you and one for me. Mine's in red and yours is in pink, which isn't great for telling them apart, but I think we deserve a splash of favourite colours right now. And anyway, I don't need colour to tell them apart. Yours is the one that's chasing mine.

You'd think in three hours I could figure out how to do something other than talk to myself.

I don't think humans were built for inevitability. I want to fight. I want to run. But there's nothing to fight, and I'm already running as fast as I can.

The trouble is you're faster.

.....

Proximity alert: strong gravitational field detected

Hold on. The ship's talking to me.

Reroute to avoid relativistic effects

Wait a minute.

.....

I'm still here. Just thinking.

Fuck.

.....

I think I've figured it out. A way for both of us to get out of this. Or at least, a way for me to be no more screwed than I already am, and for you to go back to base, mission accomplished. More or less.

A way that doesn't involve you killing me, I mean. Is it just me that's hung up on that? I don't think so. I'm going to believe that you want this way out as much as I do.

.....

Sorry, I was running the numbers. It'll be close. Like, minutes close, margin-of-error close. But I think I can get to the point of no return before you catch me.

Let's review Plan A:

steal ship,

sail ship to far side of sun,

engage FTL drive where the sun gets in the way of your sensors.

Two out of three steps completed, too bad, sixty-seven percent is a fail, try again next time.

Here's an extra credit question to make up your grade. What's on the other side of the sun?

The goddamn black hole.

.....

I think you've figured out Plan B. You always did love all that stuff. You know working through time dilation physics problems for fun is weird, right? I'm standing by that, even though I wish I'd paid more attention. I wish I had you here to look over my shoulder and check my maths. I wish I had you here, period.

Sorry. Back to the plan.

There were humans around a thousand years ago. No reason we won't still be here a thousand years from now. Maybe even in this system. Plenty of interesting stuff here. One Naval Academy, for starters. Or preferably the ruins thereof, full of pacifist archaeologists. I hope. Well, whatever. If there's no one there, I'm no more dead than I am now. If there is—maybe it's what I'm looking for.

A new start. Away from everything. In the future. Hey, I'll be the oldest human ever! You'd love that, Miss I'm Eighty-Three Days Older Than You And Never Letting You Forget It.

Ten hours subjective time should do it. A thousand years for you. I think I'll set the autopilot and sleep through it. I'll go to bed in a couple hours and wake up next millennium.

You'll be dead.

I'm sorry, Angelica. For everything. Please, please, don't give the Navy what they want. Don't give them the best parts of you. Don't give them stolen hovercraft under a red sky. They don't deserve it.

If you could hear any part of this message, I'd want it to be that.

.....

One more thing.

Last year, the night after our hovercraft escapade. You recorded a message for me, which you never ended up sending. I know about it because you weren't actually recording, you were transmitting.

An accident. Or maybe not. Accidents are unlike you. But so is uncertainty, and you sounded so uncertain. Who knows. Maybe you were hoping I'd hear and answer your question, maybe you weren't. Either way, I heard, and here I am, answering your question.

The answer is I don't know. I don't know how love can exist, for me, in a place built for death. It's not a 'yes' or a 'no', it's a 'not applicable.'

.....

And the answer is maybe, someplace else. Where we could exist on our own terms. Someplace like that hypothetical other ship with its hypothetically functioning FTL drive.

.....

And the answer is yes, *obviously*, frankly I'm insulted you had to ask. Even though it's easier to say that now I know I'm never going back. Now that love is just a theory. Now that I don't have to think about the how or the why.

I love you, Angelica. Of course I do. I wish I could have told you that sooner. I wish we'd lived lives where that was possible.

But we didn't, and in two minutes it'll be too late to turn back, and you're so close to catching up the blips on my screen almost overlap entirely.

I'm sorry, Angelica.

I'm sorry I'm going somewhere you can't follow.

Thank you for keeping me sane. I couldn't have done this without you.

Cadet—no, former Cadet Ellie Thackeray, signing off.

Outgoing transmission ended.

05:19:32, Central Naval Academy Standard Time, 2275/13/27

.....

Error: star charts out of sync.

Re-calibrating.

*Adjusted time: 11:32:02, Central Naval Academy Standard Time,
3313/11/18*

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*Incoming live transmission.**11:36:49, Central Naval Academy Standard Time, 3313/11/18**Origin: FXH-351*

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Eat Cosmic Jello

by Emily C. Skaftun

ACCORDING to Mom, she started her life on this planet as a chipmunk. It was about the right size for her, fresh out of her “larval stage.” She quickly cycled through roadrunner, dinnerplate tarantula, armadillo, and chicken, as she roamed the American Southwest, before becoming a human infant.

“That’s not even a lateral move,” I’d tease her. “Why not an eagle or a river otter? Or a treasured housecat? I’d rather stay an armadillo than be some stinky baby.”

Mom wanted to belong. She wanted to be rocked in Gramma’s cushy bingo arms, have nonsense syllables cooed in her face. “After all,” she’d tell me. “I had to learn English the same as any baby. Nobody in Oklahoma spoke Galactic Standard.”

Of course they didn’t.

She stayed friends with the chickens, the hens anyway. For the longest time, she thought their eggs could hatch into anything they wanted, just like she had done. So she went out to the henhouse and read to them, fantastical stories, to give them ideas. But the eggs all ended up scrambled anyway. Still better than what became of the roosters. She’d shudder, then launch into the tale of how she almost became an entrée instead of a daughter.

I don't know what real-world trauma Mom's confabulation was meant to cover, but it did stop me when I started feeling sorry for myself. At least I'd been adopted within a few days of birth by parents who wanted me. And, if Dad had stopped wanting me a few months later, well, that was okay. I had Mom. And she knew what it was to be different.

As a young alien stranded on this planet, she'd chosen to look like the woman on whose doorstep she left herself. She allowed herself to grow and age, always mimicking those features. "How else could I look so much like her?" she'd say, pointing to a picture of her mother. Adjusted for age, they could have been twins. The resemblance only deepened the older Mom got.

I thought that with Gramma dead, and me alive, it would only be fair for Mom to shift to look more like me. If she really was a shapeshifter, that is.

"I can't risk blowing my cover," she'd say.

Mom's devotion to "not blowing her cover" extended to copying her own mother's weird fingernails. They had thick and thin vertical streaks in them. Some chipped easily and some were too thick for the strongest clippers. Not that I ever saw Mom clip her nails. She probably would have eaten the trimmings, just to "prove" that they were a living part of her she couldn't do without.

Her ugly fingernails were all the proof I needed that Mom was human, through and through.

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She told a good story, though.

The army men who'd discovered the wrecked alien spaceship back in the 40s didn't even notice Mom. She was just a little waxy sphere at the time, in "larval stage," and blended in with the rocks when the stasis chamber burst, freeing her and the other "message spheres."

The army men had been more concerned with the dead bipedal aliens—"Yusofors," Mom called them. They were stereotypical aliens. Big eyes, little bodies; you've all seen the cheesy autopsy footage.

To her, they were slavers. All aliens were, but it wasn't their fault. They didn't know any better. No alien suspected the message spheres were alive, any more than the army men did.

See, Mom's race of aliens had been subjugated for use as a communications system because they could control where they'd reincarnate—and therefore so could the comms machine. Because reincarnation was instantaneous, Mom's species could deliver messages across distances that the speed of light rendered

impassable. Now that she was free from the machine, next time she died Mom could be reborn on her species' secret home planet, and stay there for the rest of her eternal lives.

Because that makes a lot more sense than my theory that her (human) bio-mom abandoned her on Gramma's doorstep. Or that Gramma really *was* her bio-mom.

Before Mom died, I tried to get the truth out of her. I was a 40-year-old woman, with my own life and my own (biological) daughter, and I argued that I could handle hearing about whatever early-life trauma Mom was repressing better than I could live with her lies.

She stonewalled. Worse. She became irate for one of the only times I'd ever seen in my life, thrashing her weak limbs and yelling and finally weeping and clawing at my clothes and begging me to remember the thing she'd always told me.

The thing. A song. Some stupid jingle from some stupid product midwestern housewives fed their children in the 50s. "Eat Cos-mic Jell-o; the taste is out-ta this world!" That was what she wanted me to remember while she was shrinking into her deathbed, diminished by her own stubbornness. "I'm going to be singing that when I die," she told me. "Even if it's only in my head. Remember it. It's important."

Really, Mom?

But it was, to her. She'd always been a decent pianist, always kept a piano. Before she got sick, she'd wander past it several times a day, idly tapping out that stupid jingle on the keys. Her piano was in my house now, and the first thing Mom taught Ronnie to play on it was that tune. Ronnie, pest that she was, learned she could reliably get a reaction out of me with those 12 notes. So now it was my daughter tapping out "Cosmic Jello" a few times a day.

Ah, the cycle of life.

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When Mom grew up, she became a nurse. "I needed to learn human anatomy," she claimed. Not, *it was one of the only options available to women at the time and I didn't want to be a teacher or a nun*. Surely it had nothing to do with her older sister and mother both being nurses. "My outsides looked human, but I had no idea how to structure the inside."

I never understood why she'd bother. So what if she was indeterminate alien goo inside? That would only matter if she got cut open.

Sometimes she'd get sad. "I wanted to have a baby. Not that you aren't the best daughter I could have hoped for, biological or

otherwise, but everyone wants to pass on their genetics, to leave a legacy.”

Mom’s biggest regret was scampering off as a chipmunk without checking to see what the other message sphere aliens were becoming as they came out of larval stage, where they were going. She’d been so focused on the escape, she hadn’t thought about the loneliness that would follow. Had they even survived? She didn’t know.

She was lonely for others of her kind. All adopted kids know that feeling.

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When Mom got sick, it made her delusions worse. Despite her long career as a nurse, she was pathologically averse to seeing a doctor. “They’ll see what I am,” she said.

It didn’t explain why she’d never taken me to doctors, not even when I thought I broke my leg falling off a skateboard. “You’re fine,” she’d told me, forcing me to look away. “And anyway, I know as much as the doctors.” She’d been right. She sang me extra songs to distract me from the pain, and before I knew it, my leg felt good as new. Barely even bruised.

But between me and Mom’s nurse friends and her doctor friends, and a brilliantly employed guilt trip from Ronnie, we forced Mom to get checked out. It did take the various specialists a curiously long time to come to a diagnosis, but in the end they agreed she had a rare and hereditary form of lymphoma.

The same rare and deadly lymphoma that had killed Gramma.

Of course, medical science had come a long way since Gramma’s death, but also of course, Mom had waited too long. By the time they diagnosed her, the oncologists agreed that only palliative options remained. Mom refused even these, on the grounds that any medical intervention risked exposing her kludged-together fake human body.

She really did sing that song while she died. “Eat Cos-mic Jell-o; the taste is out-ta this world!” She sang it for the better part of her last week, just to be safe.

“Remember the song,” she told me. “If you sing it, you can come home too.”

As though I could ever forget it.

Mom passed away peacefully enough, a smile on her seemingly human face, the word “Cosmic” lingering as her last breath dispersed into the room.

And for months I jerked awake at night with that cursed song echoing in my head, my heart having skipped a beat.

I’d catch myself humming it, then ugly cry until my face ached.

Ronnie still tapped it out on the piano, but now only when she thought I couldn't hear. I didn't have the heart to tell her to stop. We all grieve in different ways.

The things I didn't know about Mom's life felt as vast as the galaxy she claimed to have criss-crossed as a message sphere.

I threw myself into the task of going through her things, the more personal the better. Maybe she'd have a journal in a shoebox in the back of a closet that would tell the true truth of her origins. Maybe she'd written me a letter with all the things that for whatever reason she'd been too afraid to tell me outright.

If those things existed, I never found them.

Instead I found evidence of strange obsessions. Astronomy correspondence course materials, star charts, letters from SETI researchers. Scrapbooks full of conspiracy-theory clippings about aliens, including an entire three-ring binder full of news stories from Southwestern states that to her indicated the presence of a shapeshifter. FOI requests from Roswell and Area 51, heavily redacted.

She'd also kept a collection of horrifying food ads from the 1950s. I was sure I'd see something about Cosmic Jello in them, but though many of the recipes used gelatin, the brand was never mentioned by name.

I sifted through these nonstop, feeling the dried-leaf brittleness of each sheet of decades-old paper. My hands desiccated until my skin felt just as brittle, and my fingernails started to crack and snag on the weirdest things.

I dug through box after box of photos.

The silvery portraits of Mom as a little girl made me cry. The almost psychedelic Polaroids of her as a young woman made me smile. The ones with my dad in them made me shake my head. Shaggy-haired and bellbottomed, the pair of them grin in front of natural wonders, Route 66 roadside oddities, and the Very Large Array back when it was only medium-sized.

And then, in a blink, Dad had put on a suit and shaved all the shaggy away and stopped smiling, as though that other life had always been a disguise. And then he'd gone. A very small part of me wondered what had become of him, why he hadn't returned, even now. Mom's adopted siblings had died before she did, which left Dad as the only one who'd known her before I was born. He might have had the answers to some of my questions. But if so, he'd taken them with him wherever he'd gone.

The picture that made my blood run cold was labelled October 1978. It was taken in Farfar's old house, and Farmor was in it, so the

date couldn't be off by much. She died in January 1979. Two months after I was born.

In the picture, Dad is making goggle-eyes at a woman's very pregnant belly. The woman's hands are folded primly atop her shirt, which is bunched into one hand to display the unmistakable fleshy fact of the bun in her oven. Her face wears a perfect Mona Lisa smile. And the woman is Mom.

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I considered the possibility of photographic fakery, but it appears to be a genuine Polaroid.

I thought maybe the date was wrong, but there are other snaps from that day, with the same cast of characters in the same house, wearing the same clothes, all labelled October.

It's real. Real proof that either:
Mom lied about me being adopted.
Or she really was a shapeshifter.
Or both.

I flipped photo album pages furiously, looking for something, anything. Evidence. Some last piece that would explain her to me. I dug through her desk drawers and clawed fragile documents off the bottom of an antique trunk.

My fingernails cracked and split.

Which is normal, right? Except one of them, my left middle finger, the one Mom had called the "driving finger," split in a weird way, vertically up into the nailbed. On closer examination, it had split along the divide between a thick and thin band, an almost imperceptible striation in the keratin of my nails that I'd never noticed before.

I checked my other nails, and several were starting to show the same patterns. They didn't look like Mom's had before her death. But I couldn't recall what her hands had looked like at my age, and it was easy to imagine these small differences in thickness becoming more pronounced over the next decades.

I had the same weird fingernails as Mom and Gramma, even though officially none of us were related. What were the odds?

Because we lived, even then, in a modern age, I sought an answer from science. I learned that testing someone's DNA from hair without roots was still considered science fiction. It took weeks to find a lab willing to give it a go, and they wouldn't guarantee the results. I reluctantly packaged up the lock of Mom's hair I'd kept and shipped it off along with a sample of my own saliva.

In the meantime, I made a halfhearted attempt to find my bio-mom. Mom had always wanted me to meet her. She said all I had to do was to ask the doctor who delivered me; they'd worked together and remained acquainted after his retirement.

But I'd waited too long, and he'd already passed away. Maybe there was a trail through his closed private practice or government records, but honestly I'd never wanted to meet my bio-mom, and that hadn't changed.

Mom was always Mom, and that was all I needed. And maybe I really was her biological daughter. I alternated, sometimes several times a day, between being certain that it was and wasn't true. The evidence suggested it was, but my heart couldn't quite believe it.

Why would Mom lie about something like that?

But then again, why had she clung to her "I'm a shapeshifting alien" story?

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Inconclusive, the lab said. That was to be expected with poor samples like Mom's hair, but the woman who called me added that *both* samples had shown irregularities.

"The same kind of irregularities?" I asked.

Similar. Not similar enough that they'd go on record as saying it was a genetic match. But of course that's what I inferred.

Concern was evident in the woman's voice. Along with curiosity. She strongly encouraged me to have more tests done.

"Is there something wrong with me?" I asked.

"That's not for me to ... I'm not a doctor," she said.

I hung up the phone fully intending to get right on another call with a doctor. I guessed I could start with the GP we'd sent Mom to at first, since I didn't have a regular doctor. I doubted Ronnie's pediatrician would see me.

Why didn't I have a doctor? Why hadn't Mom ever taken me to a doctor?

I had been an unusually healthy child, but that wasn't a good enough explanation.

I looked out into the front yard, where Ronnie was sitting with her sketchbook, drawing the people, cars, and animals that drifted past our house.

Mom had shared a lot of opinions on parenting before and after Ronnie was born. She was horrified by my choice to deliver in a hospital, and hovered like a vulture until the nurses handed our new little Veronica back to me. She was adamantly against me taking Ronnie in for checkups and getting her vaccinated, but of course I did

those things, because, not being a lunatic or a cult member, that's just what you do.

What was Mom's problem, anyway? Her own aversion to doctors was part of her "I'm not human" story, but if I was adopted then neither I nor Ronnie have any secrets to hide from medical science.

If I was adopted.

I put the phone down.

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For the first time since Mom died, that night I told Ronnie a bedtime story of intergalactic aliens. Or, more accurately, she told it to me. I'd long ago tuned out what I thought of as Mom's delusions, but Ronnie had been listening. She reminded me of the beauty of Mom's mythical homeland, a planet whose location no one knew, a place safe from the slavers who'd use them to send their instant messages. A place where they could always return, if they knew the right frequencies to direct their rebirth. A place where death wasn't the end.

"Do you think Nana is there?" Ronnie asked me.

And what else could I say? "Of course she is. She's waiting there for us."

I never did go in to see a doctor about whatever the lab had detected. I never did find out conclusively whether Mom was my bi-mom. But I knew what I believed.

I grew older, as we all must. When my health started to fail, Ronnie urged me to get it checked out. But when I refused, she understood my qualms and didn't press the matter. She had always understood more than I did. She just made sure I never forgot those 12 notes, singing "Eat Cos-mic Jell-o; the taste is out-ta this world!"

I can't say I wasn't scared to die. I can't even say I believed in Mom's afterlife, not totally.

But I could see that Ronnie did. She wasn't afraid, and she'd get along without me, and that made it easier to go. And if there was a chance we could all meet again on some distant, safe planet?

I sang. I sang with all my soul.



Emily C. Skaftun's tales of flying tigers, space squids, and evil garden gnomes have appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Asimov's*, and more and are collected as *Living Forever & Other Terrible Ideas*, available from Fairwood Press. Emily is an aspiring taxidermist and plays roller derby under the name V. Lucy Raptor.



I Think About You, Only Louder

by Jordan Kurella

At 4:30, I go to the algae covered pool and wait for you to come home. A heron arrives. She goes fishing in the pool, but I am too tired to watch. The heron is pretty, like all birds are pretty: terrifying and loud. I eventually fall asleep, only to wake to a frog settled between my feet. It's staring at me, the frog, its throat bellowing in and out.

In and out.

I stay this way for hours, on this pool chair, on your old rainbow towel, trying to rest. Hours. Maybe less, maybe more. My staying is not for the frog, not for the heron. Not for the pungent smoke that currently lingers on the periphery of the courtyard and will, eventually, come rushing in.

I stay here because of you. You are meant to come home and find me still waiting for you, here on this chair. It was once less mouldy, less saggy, less sad. I was less sad, once. Before the smoke, before the pool turned green and unswimmable.

Before I realised you weren't coming to find me.

So, I gather up your towel, tell myself that you'll come home later. Later. But my memory says that you won't. Doesn't memory lie, though? Doesn't it change and shift? Like the smoke changes and shifts: moving in and out like sighing. The only certainty I have anymore is that I miss you.

Everything pivots around that. Everything.

The frog stares, the heron leaves, and the smoke closes in like fatigue. I can't stay here. I can't wait for you anymore; you aren't coming to find me. I walk, dragging the towel, dragging my feet, back to our apartment.

When I shut the door, I think about you. Only louder.

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You believed in reincarnation. Hard.

I believed in jack shit. There used to be comfort in nihilism. I once told you that the world went away when I died. Once upon a time, I believed I wasn't responsible for anything. Not even you. This all hits too hard in my current reality, because now every day I wake up and grab your rainbow towel, go out to the pool, and that is the routine of this current state of me.

Starting to think I had the wrong idea.

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I open the door with your towel over my shoulder. I am wearing my bathing suit and duct-taped flip flops. It's 4:30, and I am going to sit on the pool chair and wait for you to come home.

There is a heron, she is stalking around the pool chairs. Looking under, over. Goddamn, she's excitable: chattering, calling, swallowing. She sees me, flaps her wings excitedly, raises to her full height. She is tall, blue, gorgeous in the way that birds are gorgeous: like iridescent dinosaurs. Somehow not ashen grey from the smoke but shining. Pretty impressive, this bird.

There is a frog under my pool chair, the mouldy one, the sagging one. The one where I plan to wait for you. You like to catch frogs, to save them. If you were here, you would catch this frog and take it back home to save it from this freaky heron. But you are not here.

I am.

You are late. Something itches in my memory and says you will always be late. Later, even. So, the three of us are at a détente: the frog, the heron, and me. The towel over my shoulder, my sunglasses askew. I stand up to my full height, hands on hips, and the heron chatters at me. I have nothing to say; I have so little to say anymore.

The heron breaks the stalemate first.

The frog blinks at me, its throat bellowing in and out, in and out. I know what you would do, would want to do. The heron dives. Her beak darts through the pool chair and I, in the same motion, dive my hands underneath it. It's not until I feel the frog in my hands and hear her wings beat the air that I know. I understand.

I won.

The frog trapped in both hands, the heron trapped in the chair. She flings the chair about, throwing it into the pool and I stand while she flies off into the smoke. She disappears. I open my hands to see the frog. No thank you is given, it simply leaps from my palm and onto the concrete, and away.

You never arrive to see the spectacle. Nor hear about it. I can't linger to tell you about it either, as the smoke closes in early. So, I go home, wanting nothing more than to scream at you for leaving me alone. I tear the towel to shreds, and somehow, somewhere, I know, you are upset with me for being gone.

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Once upon a time, you taught yoga out of a studio that we rented, and I ran your books. You had degrees in physical fitness and religion, and I had a degree in economics. We had delusions that this was our ticket to long life and true love, even after everything went to shit with plague and panic and more plague and more panic. We were right, for a while. The studio kept on keeping on.

But I didn't.

There were once things of yours in the apartment that I hated, honestly. The French Press with the gold filter that never got cleaned right. Your fancy opaque coffee containers with the coffee in them until the beans tasted off, cause you never drank them as fast as you claimed to. The *Let It Be* poster on the kitchen wall that you said had to be there 'for luck.' I always thought the poster too final, too macabre for the kitchen, but you always said it was a sign to keep going, to keep going.

To, like the song says, just let things be.

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It's just after 4:30pm and I swear I have been here before. With this frog in my hands, setting it on the mouldy pool chair, a pissed off heron flying into the smoke-black sky. But it wasn't like this before. My memory has other versions: the frog sitting on a counter in the apartment, the frog leaping out of my hands, the heron drinking from a clean, blue pool.

You believed in reincarnation hard. I still believe you're going to come for me. Neither of these things are true, because it's just after 4:30pm and the sun has given up its fight with the smoke, and I'm too exhausted to get up and go back to the apartment. Everything is exhausting these days. So much takes too much energy. Just to come here, just to stay here, just to think about you, to dream about you.

Some things never change.

The frog is still settled between my legs, it hasn't moved. It's kind of cute, in that frog way: slimy and balloon-ish. Then it says something and I can't move at all.

It says, "Kiss me."

The frog crawls a little closer, then. Tentative, on all four legs like it's not quite sure if it offended me. I'm not offended? Just a little shocked that frogs talk and want kisses. It gets closer, between my knees, and that's when I reach down and pick it up. Holding it in my hands for the briefest of moments before I kiss its forehead. I kiss the frog like I used to kiss your cat that sat by the spider plant, who ate that poor thing into a perpetual state of near-death.

Quick peck: no lips, just get the damn thing over with.

The frog, to my horror, puckers its lips and crawls closer to the heel of my hand, raising its jaw and closing its eyes. Apparently, my facile gesture wasn't enough. So? So. I kiss it on the lips the way your grandmother used to ask me to kiss her in greeting. I hated it then and I hate it now: both the frog and your grandmother smell like mildew.

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You and I had friends that were the same, and friends that were different. Our friends that were the same liked to come over for dinner parties and offered to feed the cat when we had to travel for whatever or whenever.

My friends that were different liked to go for Karaoke and sing 90's hair metal. My band of choice was Extreme, because I was indifferent to them as I was to everything, so like everything I didn't have to try too hard. Your friends that were different liked to come over and watch bad movies about cool guys who don't look at explosions. You loved anything where the science warped so bad it couldn't even be science anymore.

Makes sense, nothing is science anymore.

Which is why I blame you for all of this. You don't show up, leaving me here to haunt this old life. I'm furious at the fact that I'm dead, and more mad that you don't answer anything that I do for attention. Nothing. You don't show up to see me when I'm quiet. Didn't show up when I knocked your fancy French Press off the counter; didn't show up when I shattered the glass on the *Let It Be* poster.

There's nothing left for me here anymore, not even you.

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It's weird, to kiss a frog in our kitchen with all the doors locked. Feels dirty somehow. Like it's something to be done quietly, like when we used to make out in my old bedroom when we'd visit my folks.

It's a little early for drinking (not quite 5:00) and the moment the kiss ends, I feel drunker than I've ever been. Higher than I've ever been. I set the frog down, except there's no frog to set down, just my hands on the counter to catch my own vertigo, cause the apartment isn't the apartment I left this morning.

The apartment is the apartment as it was before I died. Complete with The Beatles on the kitchen wall, before the band died. And you, too, smoking out of your black-cat hookah, smiling at me in a half-baked stupor.

"Siddown, I got something to show you."

The TV is on, with our wedding video. You're walking down the aisle to languid music so boring it could put Pachelbel to sleep. You gesture at the screen so grandly I'm astonished you don't fall off the couch, but, as I recall, your control of everything was so great, you could hold reality in check.

So, I guess this is reality right now, and so I sit down, cause you finally showed up. All I've wanted in so long was for you to show up, and here you are, passing me the hookah like nothing ever happened. I pull, and pass it back. We both sit like this for a while, staring at the TV, watching the crowd cry and sob as the two of us mumble our vows back and forth to each other.

"Weren't we beautiful," you say, running your hand down your hair. It's shorter than I remember it being. Shorter and straighter, and greyer. Mine is the same. Always curlier and darker than yours. Always impossible to tame, even though you were the one who was impossible to tame.

You turn to me, put your hand on my cheek.

"Aren't you beautiful?"

The whole room is hazy, with a white vignette like in a video game or an old photo, or something you'd try to pass off as 'artistic' cause you edited it on your phone. Hazy around the edges and with incense and skunk weed and smog and gosh, your perfume.

I kiss the palm of your hand; it tastes like sweat.

And you smile, you smile so wide I can see all your teeth. I do, too. I can feel the air on them for the first time in, in. Time has been strange since I died. But my last few memories of you don't have you smiling this wide, or this real. You grab my face and kiss me. I kiss you back, we fall onto the couch: kissing, tearing off clothes, wrapping our legs round each other just as our first dance comes on the video.

George Michael's *Freedom* '90.

We fuck. We fuck right there on the couch, and you are aggressive: like you haven't fucked anyone in so long. And I am aggressive, because I have wanted to yell at you, scream at you. I have wanted to slam all the doors in the apartment at once just to make you notice me. But you're noticing me now.

And how.

Right now all I know is that I love you and I have always loved you, I miss you and I have always missed you; there is no aspect of patience and eternity there is only right now and this moment and this aspect is climbing and climbing and you are in it and on it and we are together with legs on legs and hips on hips and your breath is against my neck and our breasts are tandem and our skin is sweating and I gasp and I gasp and I gasp and you are. And you are.

And we are.

Here.

When you're done, after I'm done, you raise off me and smile. "I missed you so much," you say. "Gods I missed you too much, too too much, everyone says." That's when I realize I'm crying. "Hey. Hey, remember me. Remember this. I love you, I love you and I miss you."

You shower me in kisses. My cheek, my neck, my forehead. Each dotted with, "I love you." Each one with your breath on my skin, smelling like spearmint. "Remember that, remember. Know that. Know that I love you, I love you."

That's when I turn to say something, to kiss you back, but the world shimmers.

Then gone.

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The pool is blue and smells like chlorine. Iridescent like my feathers are iridescent. In my memory I know I come here a lot, sometimes I see you: see you on a pool chair, on a stitched-together rainbow towel, arm over your face, blocking out the sun. You're in a bathing suit that seems familiar. Too familiar. It doesn't quite fit you.

I recognize it, it was mine.

Once upon a time, you tied the straps at my back as I held my hair up; you kissed the bone where the neck meets the spine. I got goosebumps where your finger traced circles where your lips left me behind. The bikini was an impulse buy, fancy black with gold trim; it never fit me. It doesn't fit you now. You've lost weight, you're older, you're asleep.

Time has passed.

My neck extends, feathers ruffling as I watch you in the bright sun, reflecting from the pool behind me, the blacktop of the

basketball court across the street, the parking lot of the school beyond that, heat rising from the highway beyond even that. It is so bright. So bright. I chatter as your chest rises and falls. So slow, so even. Your mouth is open but even the mosquitoes avoid you.

We were this way once before: you on a pool chair, me standing far away, wondering at you. Your arm rising from across your face to stare back. You were younger then, your hair less silver, your legs less slim, less dimpled with age. I smiled at you then as you sat up. Walked over then as I walk over now, on legs too unsteady to carry me.

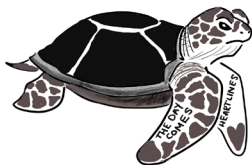
These heron legs are too unsteady to carry me.

Just as then, you are smiling, towel bunched up under your feet, pool chair sagging beneath your weight. I stand over you, as I did then, but this time I say nothing, beak tucked in my feathers I am watching you. Watching you smile as you dream, and breathe.

Breathe in and out, in and out.



Jordan Kurella is a trans and disabled author who has lived all over the world (including Moscow and Manhattan). In his past lives, he was a photographer, radio DJ, and social worker. His novella, *I NEVER LIKED YOU ANYWAY* was longlisted for the BSFA award and was recently re-released from Lethe Press. His short story collection *WHEN I WAS LOST* was released in 2022 from Trepidito. Jordan is a reticent resident of Ohio with his perfect service dog and perfectly serviceable cat.



The Day Comes

by Shih-Li Kow

WHEN I took on the job as the singular employee of Kertih Turtle Sanctuary, the Delphi Visionary Forecast prediction for the end of the world was at forty months.

Sekhar did not trust the Delphi forecast. He said it was a gaggle of old scientists who met for golf and beer on Sundays and burped out a prediction on Mondays. He favoured the DCI, the Domsday Composite Index, with its weighted average basket of three religious prophecies and fifteen technical estimates—they gave us thirty-eight months.

Sekhar and I stopped arguing over which was more accurate. The spread between forecasts issued by different forecasting authorities was +/- twelve months ten years ago, +/- 6 months five years back, and had narrowed to a two-month difference between the DCI and the Delphi. Disagreeing became pointless, like the time our road trip took us through Terengganu and we caught ourselves snapping at each other about which turn to take when the towers of the drawbridge we were heading to were in plain sight. Sekhar was competitive that way; he liked to be right, especially when it involved maps and numbers.

At the Department of Fisheries, the officer in charge of turtle sanctuaries looked at me with a smile and said, “Are you going to wait for the Rapture out there? Is Kertih one of the designated salvation points?”

I said, “No, I’m not pro-Rapture myself. Got nothing against it. I mean, if you are, no offence. My husband and I happen to be agnostics. We figure there are worse places to be when the lights go out. Yourself?”

“I’ll be right here at my desk. Every Monday to Friday.”

“You don’t believe?”

“Depends on what you mean. I believe in lots of things—love, the Almighty, even aliens. I just don’t believe in everything culminating in one galactic coincidence. That’s too convenient.”

“The probability of the conditions coming together for us to exist in the first place was pretty impossible too.” These were tired arguments already wrung dry.

“One anomaly doesn’t beget another. And things don’t change in a day. Change always creeps up on you,” she said, gesturing for me to put my thumb on a fingerprint scanner.

I wanted to say that change had crept up on us. Marched right up to us, and we counted out loud and looked away, playing hide-and-seek with a child who was not interested in hiding. But the officer was friendly and I needed her help. “Will you make sure I get my supplies till the end? And the kibble for my two dogs? We don’t want to be hungry.” I felt a little ashamed, worrying about dog food at a time like this.

“Don’t worry. Once you’re in our database, our drones will deliver a package every week. There’s probably a pile waiting there for you now. The last guy decided to steal a sailboat and disappear.”

“Thanks. You take care now.”

“Come back and thank me in forty months. I’ll be here and you’ll be needing this. My name is Nurhanna, by the way.” She slipped me a leaflet: Post-Doomsday Real Estate and Financial Recovery Services. Somehow, it did not seem at all funny.

.....

Sekhar and I moved to Kertih with our two dogs. We settled in a house near the remains of a decommissioned oil refinery. After petroleum tankers stopped docking, leatherback and hawksbill turtles returned like faithful pilgrims to nest on the beach.

The sea in Kertih was opaque and dishwater grey; the waves foamed with silt. A note left by the previous caretaker—the one who had sailed away—warned us about treacherous currents and

jellyfish. Sekhar and I did not mind. We were not keen swimmers. We had a glorious, clear horizon to ourselves and that was enough.

Around us, the wind whistled across the tops of old flue-gas stacks, making them hum constantly. The refinery grounds, long abandoned, were claimed by pioneer trees, troops of macaques, and sea eagles nesting in cat ladder landings. It was no tropical beach paradise, but there was a sense of a second life about the place which I liked.

Work in the hatchery kept me busy. I scrubbed the turtle enclosures, adjusted the temperature of the egg incubators religiously, and patrolled the beach every morning to check for nests. On silvery nights, I watched hatchlings bubble out of the sand and toddle to the water's edge, hundreds of new lives attuned to moonglow and the constellations. If there were runts left behind in the mad rush to the ocean, I nursed them in the hatchery before sending them on their way. Every week, I dispatched my reports to the Department of Fisheries well before my deadlines. The urge to earn my keep had not left me.

I found comfort in employment, even if we were isolated. I liked hearing the brisk, everyday sounds of the words work and job when I spoke to Sekhar. Work was my constant, the source of my peace. I was content to remain an inconspicuous employee, plodding along in the mechanism of civil service. I thought fondly of Nurhanna in her office keeping things running and maybe fielding questions as to why she bothered about turtles when the world was ending. We were not so different.

Like me, Sekhar found respite in work that was challenging and solitary. He started a kelp farm and made the sargassum floats which sheltered the hatchlings from predatory fish and birds as they swam out to the open sea. He built himself a cabana on the old jetty and fished for hours. Most days, he came home without fish.

Our routine was relieved by sporadic whale alerts over our radio that sent us scampering like children to the end of the jetty with our binoculars. Once, we were visited by three native Temuan hunters who had seen a drone drop off our supplies. They had appeared like sprites out of the secondary forest surrounding us and set our dogs barking. I showed them my incubators and the juvenile turtle I was treating for skin tumours. When I asked them what they thought of the Delphi forecast, one of them shrugged and asked for some eggs. The following morning, I found a few yams and a bundle of stink beans on our doorstep, but I never saw them again.

On some nights, the sea gave us extravagant displays of bioluminescence which spread like lightning when our dogs pranced

on the water. During the Perseids, Sekhar and I counted meteors and told each other how good it was to be away from the ponderous mourning and crushing panic of the city. How lucky we were to be safe and fed and healthy and above all else, not alone.

We watched the good-news channels: Lake Chini filled up for the first time in decades, tiger cubs and tapir families were spotted in the green corridor that used to be the East-West Highway, the atmospheric CO2 content was the lowest in a hundred years. Sekhar cried when his favourite underdog football team won the final World Cup, renamed End of the World Cup. I cried watching two hundred couples marry in a multi-cultural mass wedding event in Langkawi.

I said, "Why is there so much good in the world now that it's coming to an end?"

Sekhar said, "Because you're not watching the other channels."

I suggested making a trip to town to get matching tattoos of our names on our forearms, but our Toyota had not been used for months and we did not know of a tattoo artist who was still working. It felt like too much of a bother and we did not go.

The months passed. Nurhanna sent me a tear-off calendar with pictures of capital cities. I thought of her and her post-Doomsday financial leaflet each time I ripped off a page with Kabul, Dhaka, Phnom Penh, or Copenhagen on it.

Sekhar talked about making a time capsule with his sturdy, fishing tackle box. I did not ask who he thought he was leaving it for, and that too fell by the wayside. We were not journal writers and had no interesting objects to leave behind except a half-hearted collection of seashells and a gold necklace with my mother's initials which I wanted to wear when the time came. Sekhar said we could fill the box with recipes and seeds or the few books we had. We never got around to it. We were lulled into a bone-deep inertia that made us quite content to do nothing new.

The gap between the DCI forecast and the Delphi date became six days. The two dates closing in on us squeezed us together like bookends. We went to bed quietly every night. There was little left to discuss.

I was tempted to say that I was happy, that the way this was happening could not be better, but Sekhar would think I was faking it. My positivity was like pouring water down a yam leaf, he would have said. Nothing would stick. Real happiness was our honeymoon, the time we moved into our first home, his promotion to director, and our big trip to Tuscany in autumn. Yet, these last days were calm and luminous with the certainty that our deaths would be together. There was a relief in knowing that there would be no lingering illness, no loneliness, and no mourning by the one left behind. This

absence of worry was as uplifting as any period of happiness that I remembered.

On the morning of the DCI-predicted Doomsday, Cairo was on the calendar. I made peanut butter sandwiches while Sekhar watched.

He said, "Trim the crust. We can afford a little luxury."

I put the cut-offs in a bowl for the birds.

He said, "I didn't realise you'd been separating the trash the whole time we were here. Not that it matters. I mean, not that it matters if you did or didn't."

"Habits, I guess."

Sekhar's phone flashed with messages from our friends and people in his DCI group.

"Jazri's with a motorbike convoy. They're riding to Bentong to look for durians."

I laughed. "That sounds like him."

"He says they can feel the vibrations in the ground. He thinks it's from the Indonesian volcanoes."

I took out one of the three bottles of champagne I brought with us when we moved here. The second bottle was a spare. The third was my cowardly secret, hidden in a drawer with Nurhanna's leaflet in case she was right.

I said, "Do you wish you were there, riding with the guys?"

"No. No. Why would you ask such a thing?"

We took a picture of ourselves with our champagne flutes with the blue-grey sea in the background. Our smiles were wide and spontaneous. We looked tanned and healthy, almost unrecognisable from the time we arrived. Sekhar sent the picture to a few people. We sat and waited. We held hands until our palms became damp.

After a while, I remembered that I had a turtle in the enclosure. "I forgot to let poor Flora out. Come help me. She's gotten big."

We lifted Flora onto a wheelbarrow, carried her to the water's edge, and watched her swim away. We went back to the cabana, sweating rivulets. The reflective glare of the sea hurt my eyes; it was a hot, still day.

Our champagne ran out of fizz and the sandwiches hardened around the edges.

I took a cool shower and a nap back in the house. Sekhar made lunch. Then dinner. A hankering for chocolate mint ice cream came over me, but we did not have any and I held my tongue. At sunset, we went to sit on the beach with our dogs. When we fell into a game of listing the things and people we had loved in our lives, I said, "Chocolate mint ice cream."

Sekhar said, "My grandmother."

“You, of course, my dearest.”

“Yes, likewise. You. That goes without saying. A good biryani with masala chai on a rainy day.”

“Our dogs. All of our dogs. These two and all the ones before.”

We went on for a bit and I was glad when five turtles came ashore and we stopped. I already had a list in my head which was different from what I was saying and I thought Sekhar did too. I said, “Do you think they know something we don’t?”

“Of course they do.”

“That one’s digging too close to the waterline. I’ll have to take her eggs into the hatchery tomorrow.”

“If we’re here tomorrow.”

“Yes. If we are.”

We did not die on DCI Doomsday. Sekhar sulked a little after that. He had always been the science guy, the one with the facts. The DCI had let him down.

.....

My Delphi forecast said we had five days left. All indicators pointed to Saturday. Krakatao and Vesuvius had started smoking. I saw two waterspouts dance like devils out at sea. Rumour reached us about a golden spaceship landing in the Atacama Desert. Sekhar said it was rubbish, but he heard that the two asteroids heading our way were already visible through hobby telescopes. I snuck frequent glances at the sky. Everything was coming to a head.

I stopped going to the hatchery and spent my time in the kitchen thinking of ways to eat up everything we had in the remaining days. When the delivery drone dropped our package of supplies for the week, I was annoyed. Sekhar thought it was funny, a last joke from the Department of Fisheries.

I tore London off the calendar on Tuesday.

Then Helsinki.

On Saturday, we would sit on the beach the whole day. I planned to bring cheese, crackers, and canned fruit. The second bottle of champagne. Lots of water. Cushions. A hat. All the doggie treats I had stashed away. I would let our dogs lick peanut butter from the jar. I would finally put on my swimsuit and my mother’s necklace. My stomach churned with nervous energy.

On Thursday night, I was awakened by our dogs barking furiously outside.

“Sekhar? The dogs are going crazy.”

He turned on his side and grunted.

I grabbed a torchlight and headed to the beach where the dogs were still making a ruckus. Hundreds of turtles were crawling out of the sea onto the beach. The sea shimmered neon blue, brighter than I had ever seen. The sky was ablaze with stars and so full of birds the air seemed to vibrate.

I ran back to the house, barely breathing. “Sekhar, you must see this. I think tonight’s the night. Everything’s glowing. Everything.”

At the beach, the turtles had oriented themselves to face the sea. Row upon row like stony soldiers at attention with their necks craned upwards.

“What should we do?”

“Sit. Find a spot so we can sit.” Sekhar had our bottle of champagne in his hand.

“Oh, shit. I forgot the glasses. And the cheese and stuff. Our phones.”

“It’s alright.”

“I wanted this to be perfect.”

“It is perfect. Just look at the sky. You can see everything.” He was right. I had never seen a sky like this, so open and boundless. Our dogs laid their heads on our laps and licked our hands. We scratched their velvety ears.

Sekhar popped the champagne. “A toast?”

The moon rose like a white sun. Around us, the wind swirled, raising eddies of sand and sea spray that stung our eyes and skin. The flue-gas stacks sang in harmony, louder and louder. The sea swelled and the waves frothed, silver and electric blue.

I was lifted up and up by water and earth. The backs of the turtles were a cobbled path.

“Sekhar.” There wasn’t time to say anything else before I was borne away, breath and all, but it was alright. All I wanted to say had been said. It was alright.



Shih-Li Kow is a former chemical engineer and real estate manager. She is the author of a novel (*The Sum of Our Follies*) and a short story collection (*Ripples and Other Stories*). Her short fiction has also been published or is forthcoming in *Fusion Fragment*, *ParSec*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and elsewhere. She lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Twitter @shihlikow



Begrudgingly Tertiary

by Angela Acosta

The self I sent into space was impartial to the whims of humans who somehow experience attraction stronger than gravity, pulling their lives into orbit with just a passing glance. I always so self-righteously declared that I wasn't one of those allos who caves in and lets romantic love enrapture them into an engagement while lust beguiles the senses with neurotransmitters. Loathe as I am to admit it, the tertiary kind of alterous attraction suits me just fine, a sapphic little trilingual astronaut who can never just settle on one planet but prefers the tesseract of contradictions and possibilities inherent in QPRs held together stronger than quantum chromodynamics. Perhaps there is a theory for why a platonic sort of sapphic love keeps me tethered to humankind, proof of how love works both as strong waves beating against currents of star systems and particles of single selves wrestling with the loneliness of tertiary axes in coordinate planes that could never fully describe a multidimensional universe. They are, after all, mere models and explanations, always a little fuzzy while the real deal cannot be described with words, only lived begrudgingly by those who always saw biology's fractals and the inevitabilities of human nature for what they were, possibilities for finding heart and home no matter the conditions.



Angela Acosta is a bilingual Latina poet and Ph.D. Candidate in Iberian Studies at The Ohio State University. She is a 2022 Dream Foundry Contest for Emerging Writers Finalist, 2022 Somos en Escrito Extra-Fiction Contest Honorable Mention, and Best of the Net nominee. Her speculative poetry has or will appear in *On Spec*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Radon Journal*, *Space & Time*, and *Shoreline of Infinity*. She is author of *Summoning Space Travelers* (Hiraeth Books, 2023) and *Fourth Generation Chicana Unicorn* (Dancing Girl Press, 2023).



Coins for the Departed

by Rasha Abdulhadi

One day death will divide and break
the bonds we spent our hours braiding, and then,
only messages in bottles will pass between us
in this conversation that sails on and on

I remember the river of laughter where we lived
as in one body, the long dance of dinners and games
of chess over breakfast, the gift of knowing
what you were thinking, all
the while thinking i was hiding
my traitorous thoughts well—
well, i was wrong: you moved through walls
of fear, doubt, desire unspoken
and i still don't know what it did
to your bones, to make yourself
a shape to endure, anchor in a dead lake

I had wanted, with you, to trace an arc of earthly joy,
to burrow a haven as sweet and warm as a warren
in the winter of this little life. I liked the weight of you
against my flight: night anchor, bright house

What was it you held that first night, when i was
more loosely strung than a marionette,
dangling in the wings of an unlit theatre?
You kissed the holes in my clothes,
you wished to please me, then, and i was easy,
i'd walked so long on worn-through shoes

I gave you summer evenings, grateful
for mirror witness, someone to give stolen beauty to—you
look at me sometimes and I don't
know how to reclaim my heart

We never talked
about the seas where our bones would sleep
about the companies we'd keep
or the vessel to hold them all,
what we would wrestle deliciously,
whether together or parting.

How sad not to know the ones you loved before,
never meet the ghosts who measured
our kitchen conversations. But I know
their knives, the ones you kept
beneath your pillows and under
your tongue, the new wounds you would weave—
yes, it was me, weeping in another room.

After the bright coins of our bought days
fell from my eyes, only then could i buy
a ferry to carry me a river away

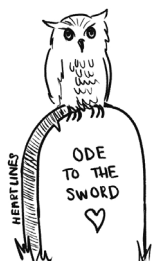
I've collected so many departures
unbought and unburied, and raised
these ferries to carry the departing,
fighting the draught of lip against lip

I wanted an ocean ship, not this river crossing
and though it felt like you leaving
the dearly departing was me
making a self-rescue swim.

Now I drop the coins of my days
into a fishbowl by the door
and no one hears the scales fall or knows.



Rasha Abdulhadi is a queer Palestinian Southerner disabled by Long Covid. Rasha's writing has appeared in *Kweli*, *Electric Lit*, *carte blanche*, *Shade Journal*, *FIYAH*, *Anathema Spec*, *The Deadlands*, and *Strange Horizons*. Their work is anthologized in *Essential Voices: A COVID-19 Anthology* (forthcoming), *Snaring New Suns*, *Unfettered Hexes*, *Halal if You Hear Me*, and *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler*. Their recent chapbook is *who is owed springtime*.



ode to the sword

by Anne Liberton

pray upon flaxseed and carcasses
knee-deep through her gossamer nest
tissue in hand, Suindara will come
better prepare a droplet of red
for her eyes do not bother
lest yours do have caps

those who love you have failed you
those who love *her*, abandoned you
misoneism will bend a saint
have a Rasga-mortalha instead
hold your hand
claws sharp as grief
beneath her veil of umbra
will guide you past wreaths
tear roses asunder

la hoot pierces the air

it is stone
drenched dirt caught in your hair
as fair a barrier to halt the dead as
the headstone that stands
between you and your Juliet

more than granite, life traps
each on one side, never crossing paths
it wafts off your skin
loneliness pours out the seams of
the gashes Suindara makes

behind her beak, she weeps and
nosedives on your insides
gorging on a willing sacrifice who
lies in wait for paramount dusk

chipped crosses bid farewell
angels gasp and vines slither
into their mouths for a better view
of the now-gone bird-woman

time escapes your grip
so suddenly
you miss how grass
withstands your pellucid limbs

through granite, which
has moved nowhere, you meet
a welcoming hand
reclaimed and unbent

Juliet smiles
and granite—it is but stone
it can't hold you anymore

[an owl sweeps the air]



Anne Liberton is an autistic Brazilian author fascinated by all things weird, from fiction and poetry to people. In her spare time, she sings, studies languages and plays with her dogs. She took part in the 2021 Clarion West Novella Bootcamp workshop. You can find her on Twitter at @AnneLiberton.



On Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution

by Nnadi Samuel

The backbone attains hierarchy, calls human
its rarest prototype. raw flesh mold of matter:
metonym for brawn gone erect—the way we put friction to
use.

from the atlas, you map out humanoids godding Asia:
all muscle swift & limb-light—sky-diving their way into
canary objects.
the backflips, met by a whopping sleight of hand: skilled for
this labour.

palm, splayfooted in sheer divinity of talons & claw.
elbow, in awful exchange with the modicum of breeze.

It's my first time witnessing entellus roam, undomesticated.
you: akin to howls. our mouth, brutal in this shy minute.

I attest to making a career off Charles Darwin's theory of evolution,

to the urge of parodying apes—

the way the textbook tells me anthropoids are

blessed with noise, as we are with silence

—the way I kept mute all through the

knowledge of knowing you ran a grocery store,

adjacent to a wildlife department I shuttled on goat-skinned sneakers.

as you crush the boiled persimmon,

while I hang around, aimless—as a fruit cajoling the arm.

nature disciplines me into the longitude of a hand—

outstretched, knifing the heat.

thick yellowish resin, ringing the purlicue of sworded thumb.

Human: the four-limbed aggressor of the food chain.

Being: the state of existence—a call to space, the way an orangutan seeks a tree.

my animal instinct piques at what becomes of us,

in this endless pilgrimage into the oddities of life—as night blurs into day.

you lacing & relacing your heartbeat.

the pheromones we secrete, orbiting our loins,

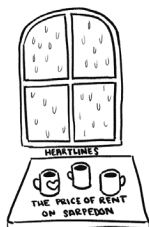
by which I mean my instinct don't lie when I say '*hunger is a call to both hands.*'

I have been meaning to tell you:

I'm desperate for a hug.



Nnadi Samuel (he/him/his) holds a B.A in English & literature from the University of Benin. Author of *'Nature knows a little about Slave Trade'* selected by Tate.N.Oquendo (Sundress Publication, 2023). His works have been previously published/ forthcoming in *FIYAH*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Deadlands*, *Timber Ghost Press*, *Haven Spec Magazine*, *Utopian Science Fiction*, *Penumbric Speculative Poetry & Fiction Magazine* *Star*Line Fiction & Poetry Magazine* & elsewhere. A 3x Best of the Net, and 7x Pushcart Nominee. He tweets @Samuelsamba10.



The Price of Rent on Sarpedon

by Marisca Pichette

Common mistake—Medusa had no sisters.

She met Stheno first, at a bar.
They drank shots of vermouth
knocked back merlot & absinthe
& chewed coconut shells
for dessert.

Medusa was an only child.
Medusa talked little of the past.
Medusa wore a necklace of pebbles
and stone rings on her fingers.

For months Stheno dined
between Medusa's fleshy thighs.
Friday to Sunday they spent
at her apartment
or hers.

She and Stheno set their eyes
on the future & swore
to stay together
always.

Euryale wrote erotica in coffee shops
across Toronto & France.
Stheno met her on a residency in Sarpedon
flirting over almond milk lattes while rain
lashed the café windows.

She brought her home &
their hair tangled &
that's how Medusa found them—
pooled between kitchen counter
and couch.

After that, they got tangled on purpose.

Euryale loved Stheno's nipples.
Stheno loved Medusa's hair.
Medusa loved Euryale's lips,
and Stheno's soft thighs.

It happened by accident
when they bought a house with
three baths
& one bedroom.

Euryale mentioned him on the patio
—her ex.

Stheno recognized him in her memory
—her ex.

Medusa knew him too
—their ex.

They'd tangled tighter
than a rat king
with Perseus in their pasts
twined between twisted lives.

Whatever happened to him? Euryale wondered.
Where is he now? Stheno pondered.

Medusa said nothing.

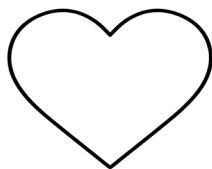
Not wishing—as she hung
her shield-shaped mirror

in their new bedroom

over a king-sized bed—
to disturb their perfect life
with trifles of
her past.



Marisca Pichette walks among beautiful monsters. More of her work appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Fireside Magazine*, *Vastarien*, *Fusion Fragment*, *Apparition Lit*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. Her speculative poetry collection, *Rivers in Your Skin*, *Sirens in Your Hair*, is forthcoming from Android Press in April 2023.



Andromeda (disambiguation)

by Mark A. McCutcheon

One of life's finest pleasures: discovering a complete series of novels as an adult, devouring them to the end, and discovering that, while you'd have happily inhabited the author's world for many more volumes, you are eminently satisfied with the conclusion. (Doctorow, on Temeraire)

We're running out of bookish boys to grow into bookish men (and they are missed). (Paul 76)

FANDOMS, like academia, drive education: both cultivate specialized expertise and promise immersive enjoyment; both host niche conferences on strange topics, with stranger wares and dress codes; most importantly, both also stimulate passion. I went back to grad school in 2001 to parlay an *afición* for Toronto's rave scene into a study of the politics of dancing; at my first symposium, during that September-shadowed winter of 2002, George Elliott Clarke made a comment that became a mantra for my work since: *Critique is a labour of love*.

Sometimes academia and fandoms inform and inspire each other: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is the Cultural Studies field's most studied text (and a touchstone for librarians); scholarship on fandom ranges

from Janice Radway's work on women readers of romance novels to Rhiannon Bury's study of streaming TV audiences. Reciprocally, fandoms engage with research that impacts them; a 2016 article Bob Barnetson and I co-wrote on unions in science fiction raises questions subsequently taken up by SF fandom—and, at a 2018 WorldCon panel, by some of the authors we'd written about (see Rokne et al).

Yet other times, academe and fandom circle each other more warily, like a binary system of denial. They occupy divergent nodes in the networks of knowledge and power under capital's empire. One as an institution for producing and reproducing authoritative knowledge; the other is more a "structure of feeling" (Williams 23) for organizing a scene or community around a shared repertoire of cultural texts and practices: a "canon." A noun whose dictionary definitions all illustrate academe's and fandom's discursive affinities and historical complicities, canon can mean a general rule; a corpus of works deemed authoritative or sacred; a part of Roman Catholic mass; and a music composition of overlapping repetitions of one melody.

An autobiography gestures to the world of a reading self. It signals the complicated ways of reading and interpretation that are necessary under conditions of coloniality. (Brand, *Autobiography* 8)

Conflicts and contradictions of class and culture—as well as colonialism (a founding rationale for English literary studies btw; see Hunter)—keep scholarship and fandom separate; for example, academia everywhere enforces a professional expectation that scholarly writing adopt an even tone, eschew enthusiasm. I've been advised by more than one editor to tone it down, most recently regarding an ebullient draft review of James S.A. Corey's *The Expanse*. With that editor's call I agreed. Besides, what Doctorow says above about reading Novik's nine-volume roman-fleuve sums up better what I'd say about reading *The Expanse*. (Also, *Temeraire* just shot up my must-read list.)

Between the groves of academe and the troves of fandom, how and where do we hold space for ebullience, for *le plaisir de lire*, *la joie de texte*? Ain't that close to love? Before trying to connect these dots to reading *The Expanse*, let's pause to briefly summarize its premise and story:

The Expanse takes place some three hundred years from now, positing a postcolonial solar system that stretches from a climate-changed Earth and its moon, centrally governed by the United Nations, to an independent Mars, engaged in a

Cold War with Earth, to the asteroid belt and gas giant moons, where “Belters,” les damnés du vide, labour on the colonial periphery in resource extraction for “the Innerers” who exploit and oppress them. Belt governance beyond corporate charters is loosely organized around the Outer Planetary Alliance, or OPA, an ambiguous collective that “had begun its life more like a labor union than a nation” (*Abaddon’s Gate* 183) ... *The Expanse’s* interplanetary, postcolonial setting is premised on the novum of an “Epstein drive” that enables fast (but not light-speed) rocketry. To launch the plot, a second novum emerges: the “protomolecule,” an artifact of a vanished alien civilization, discovered on a moon of Saturn and appropriated for research and development by private interests seeking to weaponize it. How the solar system’s powers respond to the destabilizing effects of the protomolecule technology, competing to control or destroy it, drives the series’ storyline over nine novels, which also work as three linked trilogies. In the TV series, which the co-authors had a close hand in as writers and producers, the story changes in many creative ways, and its story arc focuses on a tight and cogent adaptation of the first six novels. (Clitheroe and McCutcheon ¶[2])

The first novel, *Leviathan Wakes* (2011), opens with two events that ignite the novel’s plot and the series’ main story arc. A handful of workers from a cargo ship answer an unknown ship’s SOS; and on Ceres, a station in the Belt’s largest asteroid, a washed-up security detective gets tasked to find a missing girl, a reluctant corporate heiress turned Belter freedom fighter, whose story starts the narrative: Julie Mao.

I binged *The Expanse* TV series, then burned through the books, surprised by my own engrossment. But unsurprised too: the eruption of a novel plague into an already fallen world of cascading calamities made for a radically futureless moment prime for finally cracking that nine-volume behemoth I’d been putting off. It seemed a good *diem* to *carpe* for easy travel to a well-built world with a state-of-the-art story—and an extrapolated future not so much plausible as familiar. Those apocalyptic weeks marked the start of this post-apocalyptic timeline—“post” as in “aftermath” not “done with” (I’m still pretty far from feeling post anything COVID-19, though it would be pretty to think so). A war-torn world rocked suddenly sideways by pandemic is a familiar premise from other SF and horror classics like Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* and Stephen King’s *The Stand* (which I only read first for Hallowe’en 2019). King’s post-apocalyptic setting for survival and struggle is time-scarce: “during these new

days, there never seemed to be time to sit and have a good long conversation with a book” (822). But the post-COVID time soup has furnished unexpected swaths of time, time you could steal back from the capital that had always previously stolen it from us. Freed up time means reading time.

Cultivating conversations between readers and authors is work that fans and scholars share; both are sort of “societies of the friends of the text”:

Society of the Friends of the Text: its members would have nothing in common (for there is no necessary agreement on the texts of pleasure) but their enemies : Fools of all kinds, who decree foreclosure of the text and of its pleasure, either by cultural conformism or by intransigent rationalism (suspecting a “mystique” of literature) or by political moralism or by criticism of the signifier or by snide vacuity or by destruction of the discourse, loss of verbal desire. (Barthes 14)

I’ve long taught Barthes’ theory of “la morte d’auteur” as a foundation for close reading, literary criticism’s core methodology. Barthes argues that the author, having released their “hideous progeny” (as Mary Shelley nicknamed *Frankenstein*) into the wilds of public opinion, cedes their claim to state what the work “means” to the reader. Barthes thus empowers the reader to make what they will of what they read: every act of reading is an act of creative rewriting. But the reader is not exactly sovereign in this exercise: less a subject *speaking through language* than a subject through which language *speaks*. The reader becomes a subject determined and overdetermined by history; this is also a tenet of Marxist theory. Ideology immerses and inculcates the human subject in systems of power as invisibly as water immerses a fish. This sense of historically determined “subjection” emerges in *Babylon’s Ashes*, in the quotation from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, which, as re-read by the pastor Anna Volovodov, ends the novel: “...so in history the difficulty of recognizing the subjection of personality to the laws of space, time, and cause lies in renouncing the direct feeling of the independence of one’s own personality” (529).

What is an autobiography? What can fairly be said to lie within its bounds, share in its purpose? (Burgess 116)

On first watching *The Expanse* TV series in 2018, I got why it had been recommended it to me, amidst that unions-and-SF research. The series also appealed in ways I couldn’t make out until I learned that Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck (*The Expanse*’s co-authors, publishing under the pseudonym James S. A. Corey) started

developing *The Expanse* as a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG); and that their play-testing produced characters, plot points, and the story's main arc. The render depth of *The Expanse's* worldbuilding, the coherence and consistency of that world's "rules," the well-wrought story, and the "relatability" of its characters all bespeak the work's foundations in TTRPG play and collaboration. Successful writing, likewise, creates an experience built on "the lure to character/reader identification" (Rooke 24).

In the cavernous and cold winter castle, in some hallway where love's never been, your company and you especially are all surprised; your blood rises on suddenly seeing, standing in the threshold of the wide, flung-open door, with the wild winter night outside a vast void of cold death at her back, dressed for the weather in fragrant furs, frost-rimed mail and plate, and trussed in musky leather, snow beading on her bosom and melting in the long strawberry blonde hair she tousles out of her helmet, her eye walking still in beauty but now come back haunted, your lover, here she comes your beautiful world, swirling galactically into the shadow-vaulted hall, and back into your dream until blue crystal juts from your mouth and wakes you, each to each.

As Constance Rooke notes, the "lure to identification" is a writing strategy integral to the "theory of intimacy": "not as a full account of the reading act, but as a reminder of feelings both friendly and hostile that we should not be afraid to admit" (12). An institution builder of Canadian literature, whose life centred writers and writing, Rooke understandably contests Barthes' "needlessly bloody" theory with her pointedly more nurturing one.

Rooke labels Canadian writers like Margaret Laurence as "open" and Alice Munro as "warm". These characterizations apply to Corey's professedly "accessible" style (Franck and Chatham), which encourages "a strong feeling of intimacy ... between reader, character and author" (Rooke 23); with which "the reader feels much closer to the characters, much more comfortable in their society—as if the hostess, in introducing us to other guests, had made a special point of opening the channels to intimacy" (25). In Corey's case, we might add the opening of other, related channels: to personal transformation; coalition-building; restorative justice; and other more expansive forms of social relations. From Miller to Avasarala to Tanaka, major characters in *The Expanse*, together with the performative fandom the franchise fosters, demonstrate both the applications and implications of Rooke's theory. Echoing Rowland McMaster's 1976 argument—that reading expands the reader's sympathies and horizons (a theoretical chestnut half a century old,

perhaps, but one freshly touted in recent years as a neuroscientific “discovery”)—Rooke’s “theory of intimacy” anticipates literary theory’s “affective turn” and, like McMaster, eloquently articulates the social and personal value of learning to read closely and critically: “[A] sample (however atypical) of the writer’s sensibility has nonetheless been presented to the reader, who will make of it what she can. And this is rather like what happens in ordinary social contact: we respond to a performance, as when we listen to a dinner companion’s story. ... We choose our friends partly on the basis of how such stories are told” (10).

Having shared some scholarly context for reflecting on fandom, some complementary fandom also informs my scholarship includes *The Expanse* Geeks Facebook group and the Archive Of Our Own fanfic repository: the first social media fan groups I joined, this was in 2021. *The Expanse* Geeks page’s sign-up includes a screener that asks you to declare which character you most identify with (an arch nod to the series’ TTRPG roots). I typed HOLDEN, to get on with it. But if I’d given myself a second to think about it, I’d have typed MILLER.

did I dream you dreamed about me (This Mortal Coil)

After I first read the series in 2020, I reviewed my notes and a whole lot of dog-eared pages, looking for Miller’s excellent, character-establishing line: “God help a man who outlives his vices.” I only found it when, after learning of the untimely passing of the writer Steven Heighton, I revisited *The Waking Comes Late*—and found the line there instead (35), in the last book I’d read before cracking *Leviathan Wakes*. It’s still a great line for Miller.

In *Leviathan Wakes*, the first character you meet is Julie. As the story unfolds, Miller pieces together her story. Finishing chapter two, I paused on a detail I hadn’t noticed when watching the show: “Juliette Andromeda Mao. He read through her work history, her academic records” (25). Julie’s middle name: how’d I not make this connection before? Andromeda is also the middle name of your first love IRL. Absolutely true.

*To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize
“how it really was.” It means to take control of a memory,
as it flashes in a moment of danger.* (Benjamin)

Who could forget a first love’s name as memorable as that belonging to a mythic princess, a constellation, a galaxy? Especially since that the princess of my teen dreams bore *two* space opera heroines’ names, the other she shared with a figure already famous by the ’80s when we met.

But I regress.

2023

Some thirty years after you used to do this, alone you approach your bookshelf and pull down *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, and

1987

—you're thirteen, in your shared bedroom in the family's townhouse in the new subdivisions sprawling north towards Steeles and beyond—

you hold the book in both hands, spine between your fingers, like you're in church with a hymnal and all of the singers' close your eyes, exhale slowly, and

—bring the book to your face and fan the pages, the scent of her hands left on the thumb-softened pages like—

library dust, now, the only olfactory trace of it now a memory of

—lilac and cocoa butter, the chlorine they put in the neighbourhood pool, sunscreen and girl sweat, a phenomenal rock dropped straight onto your face and into your five dreams of teenage heaven. The book smells like the sun: its scent sets you on fire. Reluctantly, you replace the book on the shelf in the space vacated by its sequel, which she's reading now—

Juliette Andromeda Mao. (Corey, *Leviathan Wakes* 25).

Before pulling at these threads any further, I must issue a matrimonial disclaimer here. I've been delightfully wed for decades to a woman who's the mother of my dragons—I mean, my daughters; a woman who's the muse of my filthiest publications (see the Works Cited). What Nick Cave says of how he first saw his wife (give or take some references) evokes how I saw mine the night I knew I wanted to wed her:

when she came walking in, all the things I had obsessed over for all the years—pictures of movies stars... Anita Ekberg in the fountain, Ali MacGraw in her black tights, images from the TV when I was a kid, Barbara Eden and ... Miss World competitions, Marilyn Monroe and ... Bo Derek ... Bolshoi ballerinas and Russian gymnasts, Wonder Woman and Barbarella and supermodels and Page 3 girls, all the endless, impossible fantasies... girls at the ... pool lying on the hot concrete, Courbet's *Origin Of The World*, Bataille's

bowl of milk...all the stuff I had heard and seen and read... advertising and TV commercials, billboards and fashion spreads and Playmate of the Month...all the continuing, never-ending drip feed of erotic data came together at that moment in one great big crash bang and I was lost to her and that was that. (qtd. in Forsyth and Pollard)

Her love's why I'm living, so what follows here isn't any pining for "one that got away." I count myself astronomically lucky to have learned how vastly first love can differ from true love. What follows here reaches out to one illuminating, locality-defying data point, star-born seed-crystal in my own never-ending Eros feed.

Writers' works speaking to readers feels like writers talking with us (as Rooke writes), when each reader is making of the same work a unique meaning, making it their own story (as Barthes argues). Expanding this already vast parliament swirling between readers and writers are writers' conversations with other writers: "*The Expanse* exists as part of a conversation," Abraham and Franck say (*Leviathan Wakes*); elsewhere, they elaborate: "The literature of science fiction is—and has been since its beginning—a conversation between writers and their work across time. ... We all owe debts to the other writers in our field—the ones who came before us, and the ones writing along with us" (Corey qtd. in *Mixon*, pp. 5-6). Conversations among writers mean much more than talking about writing; such conversations can take place in the writing itself:

"Holden," he continued as he started off, "is in Mount Zion Hospital with a laser track through his spine. He'll be there for a month at least." (Dick 23)

"Who were you talking to?"
"Ghost of Christmas past," Holden said, forcing himself to sit up. (Corey, Cibola 448)

Philip K. Dick's William Holden in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* may not be *The Expanse* protagonist's only namesake (a certain Salinger crumb comes to mind), but elsewhere Corey quotes the *Blade Runner* scene that immortalizes Dick's Holden:

"So tell me only the good things you remember about your mother." At my horrified look, he smiled and waved the comment away. "No, I'm joking. I don't need to know that." (Corey, *Memory's* 212)

In Scott's 1982 film, as in Dick's 1968 source novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Holden is a cop shot by an android while testing whether it's human; so the LAPD, in Dick's postnuclear 2021, replaces Holden with formerly retired detective Rick Deckard,

tasked to “retire” the fugitive android and its fellow “replicant” workers who have fled a colony world and come to Earth. I recall being twelve years old and intrigued enough by *Blade Runner* to read Dick’s novel, which explains nothing about the movie, and deepened my perplexity; but I also recall this was the novel in which I first read a sex scene. The line that stays with me (maybe since it rhymes): “Afterward they enjoyed a great luxury: Rick had room service bring up coffee” (172). I remember where I was when I read this scene. Just the tenacity of that memory feels like a reason to let kids read—more than *let*, *encourage* and *excite* them to read—*whatever they want* to read. Just be open to their questions.

Further to conversations among writers, Larissa Lai’s “rachel” (2010) responds directly to Dick and Scott with a long poem voiced by the eponymous android: “my favour / not mine to give / you threaten / i repeat / your desire // ... i float ghostly / a hot air incubus / made of breath and want” (29).

This *recherche du temps perdu*, to sort out why I’m a bit *de trop* on all things *Expanse*, reflects on a particular historical-material contingency (following Benjamin) in which genre fiction and TTRPGs converge or supercollide with adolescence, first love, *Bildung*. This *recherche* reaches back to the late 1980s, different times to come of age. Before the Internet (for most), between the monsters of the Cold War and the maelstrom of HIV’s then-novel plague, among my friends and peers a *Carpe diem* ethos prevailed (the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* captures that Zeitgeist). And in the middle-class, multicultural Toronto I grew up in—“the city / that’s never happened before” (Brand, *thirsty* 11)—by the time *Baywatch* aired it couldn’t compare to the incredible spectacle up the street at the neighbourhood swimming pool, an *isla bonita* where summers turned me upside down, one absolute beginner of a sunburnt boy, eyes completely open but nervous all the same amidst an embarrassment of vixens: stunningly voluptuous, blithely tanned, dazzling talent, all around my age but all unapproachable as Venus. And anchoring this fantastical pantheon was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen (I mean, a total #HuttSlayer smokeshow, bro) who, with her galactic middle name, dropped on my life like a pheromone-coated dirty bombshell. Shocked me awake. Flipped all my switches. Ate me like a room.

I reached out, more than once. When we did connect, our young lovers’ discourse oozed with nicknames and references from novels we’d both read. As we drew close my infatuation only grew. “It was more hormones and hubris,” as *The Expanse*’s Ashford reminisces, “speeding back to Ceres. Yeah, to see a girl” (Phang). But that first love ended, as first loves must, in heartbreak.

1991

–*What do you want?* she had asked. The rain falls so hard that the cottages lining the lane drown in dark sheets, billowing blankets of rain concealing the trees and cars and porches. In the bone-white light of the lone street lamp, the falling rain looks a snow flurry. We huddle together tinder the light and the words she said a moment ago, in the field, her face low over mine, hidden by her long blonde hair:

–*There's one more place we have to go.*

I guess we fell apart in the usual way; let's just say going with my first love all the way to Eros sent me on a trip that ended with me undone and cratering somewhere venereal. I would take years to understand how we ended was a gift. I learned other things about myself. Who and what I'd want in a lover. (The first time I saw the woman I'd wed as someone I'd want had been poolside, too; like schools, pools are desiring machines and, thus, a vital public good.) How I'd been a romantic ass. How I had misunderstood and hurt her. Did I ask too much? (More than a lot.) How I was not what she needed. How sex isn't love. And how to become someone else. I fumbled rebounds, didn't give dating much chance, became a disappointing boyfriend to people who didn't deserve it. Takes a long time, learning how to be a better man. A quarter-century into marriage to my true love—*my love is a pure love*—I'm still light-years from being close to done that study. And my wife get more gorgeous every year.

1995

Steer her among horn-rimmed hipsters with glasses of the house red to the beige stairs, the auditorium doors, a deepening hush; steer among murmurs and rustlings of papers, past lipstick and tan-scented camera bags to your assigned seats pinched together like lips. Her hand clammy, or is it yours, feeling her palm always itching for that constant blade. File past the firing line of khakis, crossed stockings, standard-issue black shoes. Pry open and sink into your seats. The lights fade around Acker as she speaks.

–*So I've been rethinking sex lately*, thinking about vibrations and language, Acker tells the Harbourfront audience. Haloed by stadium-grade spotlighting, her close-cropped skull shines like a moon. Acker commands the stage, statuesque, stricken. The excerpt she reads from *My Mother: Demonology* machetes a clear path into your head's messy jungle.

This writing reaches out to understand love, fandom, and learning; how they enrich and enlarge one another; how history's

accidents become *Bildung* (“a process of personal and cultural maturation”); and how the hauntings of a man in his old age feed on reads opening doors to new lives.

The reading enjoyment that *The Expanse* reignited hasn’t stayed reserved for just that work. I’ve since read books (by Maria Dhavana Headley, N.K. Jemisin, Colson Whitehead, and Philip Pullman, for example) that I’ve thrilled to as much as to *The Expanse*. (Well, almost.) That reading started flipping these switches to see what all it would turn on, what it might bring back to life. A lot, turns out. Like *le plaisir de lire*. A big big love.

At indigo dusk, among the decommissioned silos, your true love meets you; she’s dressed not for a party but for a ball; you’re dressed like you don’t know how to. Take her hand in yours as you head for the red field where the generation ship has parked. You’ve already said goodbyes to your bewildered parents. From here you can hear the DJs spinning up the drum of the dance floor. The door search is a joke, and there’s no vac suit check. The walls vanish into darkness above, festooned with elevators, balconies, catwalks, conduits, and access ladders. Out in the booming, grooving din of hive-mind orchestrated beats, the floor pins you down as you circle each other, your steps correct, now magnetic, now ballistic, get down to get up, jump up and lose gravity; time moves the ghost in her. You don’t feel this as any falling thing; you dig dancing but can’t wait to quit this scene. In a park on a bluff overlooking the domed ravine, sit with her apart from the crowd that has gathered to interrogate the mayor. Stars sting a sky that glows in the violet relief of a Martian eclipse. You leave the meeting for a finity pond where crickets and katydids dub the undergrowth; you run threadless from the bank into the shallows, your skin slips together silver, wading and then swimming into a possible future.

The chance encounter with my first love’s middle name, so out of context here, with the memory bank it opens, a waltz dragging its tail in the sea, suggests a formal connection between, then, a person in whom my teenage eye beheld the paragon of human beauty and, now, a reading that my critic’s eye holds as an exemplar of novel form. You can take the *plaisir* back.

That galactic middle name, encountered again after a span of some thirty years’ time—a long-falling rock target-locked on Benjamin’s angel of history—reminds me how an unlooked-for encounter can open a life to a new horizon, bend a life’s arc, move it to fall somewhere rich and strange.

Demand a better future. Why did you enlist? They didn't even give you the proper gas mask apparatus, just told you to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth—never vice versa. Well, if you're going to die in a gas attack black op the government's going to spring on the refugees, you might as well die in the fine company of this extraordinary woman. The craft isn't much to look at—just a lashed-together pair of airplane seats, like a flying sedan chair—but your brilliant, beautiful co-pilot climbs into the cockpit, dressed in rather less than combat fatigues, since hey it's your dream. As the chair lifts off and hovers toward the AO, you can think of a lot worse ways to go.

As for these fragments shored against my ruin, a further complication occurs to me. The daisy-chain sequence of the protomolecule's "simulations" in *The Expanse* first plants a simulation of Julie in Miller's head and a sim of Miller in Holden's head; and so much of this goes on that in *Tiamat's Wrath*, Holden says of Avasarala, "I feel like I built a little version of her in my head"—then, to Nagata: "You ever have that feeling?" To which she replies, "I know the one" (516). Dubs of echoes, uncanny vibrations of resonance frequencies. And if I feel like I relate to Miller most, among *The Expanse's* eminently relatable characters, then doesn't the feeling of being haunted or inhabited by Miller's ghost also put me in Holden's chair?

The Expanse's recurring motif of absent or dead characters as simulations haunting those they know becomes legible as, among other things, a metaphor for the conversations and connections engendered by reading, study, and fandom. "The most complex simulation in the history of your solar system is running right now so that we can pretend I'm here in the same room with you" (Corey, *Abaddon's* 264). A conversation with a good book doesn't end when you turn the last page; it follows you around, keeps talking to you.

Till human voices wake us, he thought, without quite being able to recall where the phrase came from. (Corey, Leviathan Wakes 520)

Hey, that mermaid stuff hits too close to home. Get out of my head, Miller.



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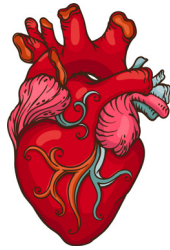
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Thank you for reading.