

**MAY/JUNE
2024**

**REACTOR
MAGAZINE
SHORT
FICTION**

Cisco
Greenblatt
Valentine
Larson
Shawl

REACTOR MAGAZINE SHORT
FICTION
MAY/JUNE 2024

The Two Music

Michael Cisco

Between Home and a House on
Fire

A. T. Greenblatt

Other Kelly

Genevieve Valentine

Breathing Constellations

Rich Larson

The Colors of Money

Nisi Shawl

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: <http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy>.**

Contents

Title Page
Copyright Notice

The Two Musics

Title Page
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Copyright

Between Home and a House on Fire

Title Page
Begin Reading
Copyright

Other Kelly

Title Page
Begin Reading
Copyright

Breathing Constellations

Title Page
Begin Reading
Copyright

The Colors of Money

Title Page
Begin Reading
Copyright

About the Authors
Copyright

MICHAEL CISCO

THE
TWO
MUSICIS



The Two Musics

MICHAEL CISCO

illustration by

NATALIE FOSS

REACTOR 

1

Simon first became aware of the two musics in no particular moment, although there did come, a little later on, a confirmation of that awareness. His understanding of the two musics crystallized then; although, as a boy of eleven, he didn't quite recognize the problem they posed at the time, and he never fully did.

When he was ten, he moved with his family to a new home in Southern California. A veiled allusion by a neighbor, in reference to the hill peak above the house, infused it with mystery. A little research revealed to Simon that it had once been a place of worship for a group of ravers who called themselves "Sunshine Circle" and lived together just a quarter of a mile away, on the far side of the ridge. The hilltop—that was where they had all killed themselves.

There had been a string of murders in the mid-1990s, all evidently committed by one man, a member of the Circle. His name was Jeremy Rensselaer, but the media dubbed him "the Sunshine Killer." Simon read all about him on the internet. He came from Ojai. He'd dropped out of high school and left home. When he was seventeen, under the mistaken impression that a child was trapped inside, he'd run into a burning house, and it wasn't until about five minutes later that firemen managed to reach him and drag him back out, nearly dead from smoke inhalation. He was taken in by friends who helped him recover, but the fire left him with chronic pain. He worked mainly in groundskeeping-type jobs, and did some work

farming produce. He was nineteen when he joined Sunshine Circle. He killed a man named Carl Morning, a man named Rodney Dean, a man named John Mendez, and was thought to be responsible for the disappearance of another man, Dwayne Mittie. After killing Carl Morning, he'd gone up to the top of that hill, that hill right there, and cut his own throat. Six other members of the group, including its two founders, congregated on the hill and committed suicide by heroin overdose a little while later the same day. They were found laid out in a row, facing west, holding hands, about ten feet from Rensselaer's body.

Carrie Morning, Carl's sister, had been a member of Sunshine Circle. She wasn't there when the suicides happened, and neither was her friend, and fellow Circle member, Sharon Letigue. Carrie blamed herself for the events of that day, became very religious and refused to speak to anyone about it, so the details of the story were almost entirely supplied by Sharon. She, in turn, was trying to balance the accounts pushed forward by the widow of Dwayne Mittie and Carl Morning's two bereaved kids, who blasted the Circle, calling it a cult, comparing it to the Manson family, the Branch Davidians, and Heaven's Gate.

The Circle was founded by a couple in their thirties, Olam and Nancy Wilson, who owned the house in Glendale that served as their headquarters. They made their living by selling drugs, mainly Ecstasy and mushrooms, at raves, and would take in strays from time to time—kids who'd left home, or who had run away from some kind of juvenile control system, and had nowhere to go. They would all take drugs together, read the Gnostic Gospels and Hermes Trismegistus, and worship the sun. The Wilsons had nebulous spiritual ideas of deliverance through a kind of contagious ecstasy and what they called "breakthrough to psychic." They wanted to start recording and selling dance music, maybe start putting out their own white-label twelve-inches for DJ sets. None of it came to anything. Olam was best known for roaming around dance floors with a backpack full of water bottles across his chest. Simon learned

that taking Ecstasy makes people forget to feel thirsty, and so good Samaritans took to reminding them that they're still earthly enough to need water. That was how Olam met Jeremy Rensselaer, who loved to dance, loved raves, and apparently often forgot he was thirsty. He also loved Sunshine Circle.

While they might have been sketchy, the Wilsons weren't abusive people, and they didn't take advantage of the other members, except insofar as they drew on them to help sell the drugs that paid the bills. Photos of the group showed anywhere up to eight fancifully-dressed people hanging out around the house in Day-Glo colors. Nancy was originally from Mexico and painted the interior rooms in brilliant bands of blue and ochre and green and red; she made her own pottery and painted it so brightly the pots, vases, bowls and mugs all seemed to glow with their own light. There were peace signs, weed stickers, ribbons of incense floating in the air, colored lamps—everybody at a table outside chopping vegetables for the big tofu pot. The doors and cabinets were placarded with band stickers and posters with slogans like "ALWAYS HIGHER," and "ACID HOUSE."

Simon could find only three photographs of Jeremy Rensselaer, and none of them conveyed any idea of what he really might have looked like. The first was a baby photo. Squinting in the sun on his mother's lap. She had a square face, roughly bobbed hair, and deeply-recessed eyes that were barely visible. The second photo showed a group of people working in a field, harvesting tomatoes. One of these persons, circled in the image, was believed to be a teenaged Jeremy Rensselaer. He was shirtless, long-haired, bent low, a short, curved blade in his gloved hand. His face was, at best, a blurry profile, half lost in his dangling hair and his work. The last was a photo of a Sunshine Circle celebration. It was outdoors, with long shadows leaning away from the camera, so the sun was low in the sky at the time. You can see Nancy Wilson frozen in mid-clap, smiling. Carrie Morning is in the foreground, beaming, dancing. Sharon Letigue is right behind her, arms above her head, eyes

closed. Off on the right, you can just see Jeremy. He's shirtless, barefoot, wearing only his flared blue jeans; a heavy, darkly-tanned body floats in midair, hard arms outspread, long blond curls tossing everywhere, his face invisible within them.

★ ★ ★

The body of John Mendez was found at the bottom of a tall rock face off the Angeles Crest Highway. His neck was broken, but the coroner's inquest determined that it had been snapped by sudden twisting, and that he had likely been dead before he took his tumble. He'd been briefly associated with Sunshine Circle; a twenty-one-year-old athlete at USC who bought drugs from the Wilsons and developed a fixation on Nancy. He evidently came by the house one day, and she'd been forced to lock herself in her upstairs bedroom and call for help. It's not clear what happened, there was no one else there, but Nancy later told Sharon she'd heard John Mendez calling out to someone, that she'd heard and felt heavy footsteps that shook the wood-frame house. She thought she might have heard a brief scuffle as well, but couldn't be too sure. After that, silence. When she finally dared to venture out of her room, the house was empty, everything was in order, the front door, which had been forced by Mendez, was set back in place. When she learned that his body had been found, she didn't know what to think. Going to the police didn't seem like a good idea. And what would she have told them?

The Wilsons had a connection that also sold heroin, and they were afraid of him. Everything bad began with him. He brought over a good-sized package of it one day in 1997 and told the Wilsons that he was stashing it in their house for the time being. Sharon Letigue says that the Wilsons wanted to refuse, but were too frightened to say no; they'd had some opium there once, but never anything as "heavy" as heroin.

Dean and Mittie had been working together. They knew the connection; they found out about the heroin. They came by the

house with a story about some Mexican heroin they could pick up cheap in a week. The idea was, they would sell the connection's heroin now, giving the Wilsons a cut of the proceeds, and then replace the missing stash with the Mexican heroin before the connection could come calling for it. He'd never know the difference, and they'd all be a bit richer. The Wilsons weren't tough characters, but they had enough sense to see through this and refused. Dean and Mittie left, but with the promise to return. They were clearly angry, and not prepared to take no for an answer.

Mittie disappeared that night, and Dean's girlfriend eventually told police that he'd left home the following morning to go over to Sunshine Circle, and that was the last she ever heard of him. Mittie was never found. Dean's corpse was—splayed out in the scrub just off the Angeles Crest Highway. He'd been stabbed once in the back with such force that the blade had gone through his chest and perforated his sternum.

That morning, Carrie had called Jeremy, who was staying with a friend in Santa Monica. He didn't have a phone of his own, so she'd called the friend on his home phone. She spoke with Jeremy, nothing special. But Dean had been taking leave of his girlfriend around the same time, according to her, and the drive over to Sunshine Circle was only about ten minutes from his girlfriend's house. It was obviously impossible for Jeremy Rensselaer to have intercepted Dean—he was too far away. This fact was taken up by journalists to deepen the mystery, suggesting that more than one killer was involved. Simon saw the impossibility clearly, and likewise the most plausible explanation, namely that Carrie had gotten the time of the phone call wrong. And yet, somehow, he was certain that Jeremy Rensselaer had actually done it at that time. Sharon said that Carrie had told her she'd heard Olam and Nancy talking with Jeremy later, and that he'd said: "I gave him back to the sun." She said she knew he meant Dean, but, since he'd been on the phone with her, plainly in Santa Monica, she'd assumed that he was not speaking literally, that he meant he had, perhaps, been praying for Dean.

After Dean's body was found, it wasn't long before the police came to visit Sunshine Circle. The Wilsons spoke to them on the porch, denying them entry to the house for fear that a search would turn up the heroin, which was still there. The police went away to get their warrant. The Wilsons should have ditched the heroin then, but Carl Morning was present that day, visiting his sister, and, once the police were gone, he insisted that she leave Sunshine Circle that moment, with him. Carrie refused. Carl tried to drag her to his car, and Olam Wilson intervened. Carl struck Olam, knocking him down, and then left, but returned almost right away, with a pistol he'd retrieved from his home, determined to take Carrie.

Carrie Morning was being shut into the back of Sharon Letigue's car when Carl went around the opposite corner of the house and met Jeremy Rensselaer coming the other way, with a long knife in his hand. Simon could see it happen. Jeremy bending low, and sweeping his heavy arm out straight. The knife sheared through Carl's carotid artery and his windpipe. Simon watched as Jeremy marvelled at a jet of blood spangling the air between him and the sun, peppering his eyes with a blazing scintillation, and Carl collapsed on the ground, dying. With the last of his dimming vision, Simon knew, Carl Morning would have seen Jeremy Rensselaer dance around him in a circle, pumping his arms at the sky, giving Carl back to the sun.

No one living knows what happened next, except that Jeremy went up the hill and cut his throat, and six of the remaining members of the Circle followed him later and overdosed on that heroin. Simon could imagine Nancy Wilson watching as Jeremy dragged Carl's body into the backyard, where it would be less visible from the street. In his imagination, he saw her eyes widen as she thought about John Mendez, lying dead with a snapped neck, and of the abrupt disappearance of Mittie and Dean. He saw the expression on her face spread to Olam's face, and the faces of the others, and he saw Jeremy Rensselaer, standing over Carl's body, dim in the daylight haze of mid-afternoon, blood splattered on his bare chest

and stomach, seeing the horror on their faces, and understanding it, and not being able to handle it.

The police found the house empty. Two members of the Circle were not accounted for, and they never have been. Presumably, they ran, taking what was left of the heroin, which was not found. Carrie wouldn't talk about what happened. Sharon would: she was adamant that it was Jeremy alone who had killed anyone, and could only really be held accountable for the death of Carl, which was self-defense anyway. Far from being an admission of guilt, his suicide only proved how bitterly he regretted killing Carl, and how much he hated violence. Sharon Letigue was now dead, having been killed in an automobile accident in the 2010s. Carrie Morning had grieved over and buried her brother, then somehow contrived to disappear. People weren't sure if she was alive or dead now. Simon thought she was alive, somewhere. He wished he could talk to her.

* * *

The story of "the Sunshine Killer" took on a life of its own. The Museum of Death claimed to have one of Jeremy Rensselaer's fluorescent raver necklaces, but they seemed never to put it on display. Sharon Letigue claimed that Jeremy tried to store sunlight in things, not just items that glow in the dark, but in pieces of metal and clothing. He wondered if any of his stuff was still around, exposed to the sun on bare rocks, open patches of ground. A reporter had convinced Sharon Letigue to talk to her, and had published the one researched book on the story, *RENSSELAER: The True Story of the "Sunshine Killer,"* which had been adapted into an unwatchable film. Simon read the book, learned that Jeremy Rensselaer wore a hearing aid, because he'd fried his own hearing with loud headphones, and that his favorite movie was *Lawrence of Arabia*. Sharon Letigue said that Jeremy was more pure than any of the rest of them, that she saw him dance in adoration of the sun with tears pouring down his face, and he loved to sit and listen to birds, crickets, and the ocean.

It seemed to Simon as though reporters and writers wanted more victims for Jeremy Rensselaer, to inflate his menace, and consequently to make their own stories and books more important and exciting. More than a dozen additional murders were attributed to him. Simon read over those stories skeptically, trying to decide if he believed them or not. There were two that he believed.

In one case, reporters tied Jeremy Rensselaer to the unsolved murder of a housewife in San Luis Obispo, named Brenda Foglio. She had been seated at her kitchen table in the early afternoon, facing away from the back door of her house, when someone came in through that door and brained her with a cinderblock from behind, killing her instantly. There were no witnesses; nothing was taken. The murderer dragged her body outside and left her there, lying face up in the sun. There was no obvious motive, but several neighbors independently told police that Brenda had recently gotten into a loud, protracted quarrel with a homeless woman who'd parked her van just off her property line. She'd demanded the woman leave, then called the police on her. The woman, who fled rather than face arrest, was found and questioned later, but she'd been picking up her son from school at the time of the murder, with many witnesses who could vouch for her. That, and her physical frailty, due to untreated lymphoma, tended to rule her out as a suspect.

Research showed that Jeremy Rensselaer had lived in San Luis Obispo for about six weeks after he left home, and that the murder happened very near the end of the sixth week. When questioned about him, the homeless woman confirmed that she did remember meeting someone who matched Jeremy Rensselaer's description, probably at a public concert. She never knew the name of the man she met, and she couldn't say, one way or another, whether the man in the few existing photographs of Jeremy Rensselaer was the same person. He did seem hard of hearing—she remembered that. She couldn't recall whether she had or hadn't mentioned her trouble with Mrs. Foglio during any of her conversations with this man she'd met, but after the murder she hadn't seen him around anymore. There

really was no evidence, but that didn't stop people from assuming that Jeremy Rensselaer had stalked and killed Brenda Foglio in retaliation for her hostility to the homeless woman.

The other case, which would have happened first, involved an Ojai man named Peter Van Ast, Jr., who was found dead in his backyard. Van Ast notoriously kept a .22 caliber varmint rifle handy around his house and used it to shoot coyotes, possums—anything that came into his yard, including, allegedly, a few stray cats. He was also rumored to have shot and killed a neighbor's dog, who had gotten loose. The dog's body was found near a trailhead, with a sizeable wound in its neck. If she had been shot, then someone had rooted around in the injury with a knife, and retrieved the bullet. The dog's owner accused Van Ast of the killing, but could offer no proof. So he printed up fliers, and posted them around Ojai, showing Van Ast's face, name, and home address, warning people that he killed animals. It's not clear how Jeremy Rensselaer heard the story, but those fliers might have been his source. Van Ast was bludgeoned to death with the butt of his varmint rifle, which was found beside his body, so battered and bent out of shape the police said the gun looked like it had been run over by a train. It was still fully loaded. The one telling detail in the story, linking it to Jeremy Rensselaer, was that Van Ast had called 911 that afternoon and said that a "derelict," a "male Caucasian, approximately twenty years old" he described as wearing only blue jeans, was in his backyard. He "requested backup," gave his address, and rang off. That was the last anyone ever heard from him. His body had been dragged a short distance from his back door to a spot where the afternoon sun could fall on what was left of his face.

What persuaded Simon was not so much these descriptions, but the consistency of the stories with the idea that Jeremy Rensselaer killed people he considered dangerous, particularly to others. It was the meeting of the two musics. There was the martial, aggressive, violent music; the music that was associated with images of vindication. Then, there was the tranquil, contemplative,

compassionate music, that made him hate violence, and shrink from the world's cruelty. Each music invalidated the other. Each claimed him, exclusively. And when no music was playing, they both were there, waiting. What music today?

Jeremy Rensselaer stood where the two musics meet, in violence on behalf of another. But there were many, many stories of atrocities supposedly committed on behalf of others. The two musics also meet in suicide, at least, in his case. Here, Simon's thinking grew thick, dense, and finally ground to a halt. The thoughts stopped connecting; nothing could move anymore. He would falter between the two musics, unable even to frame a question to put to his parents, and somehow ashamed to try. The idea of balance haunted him, the evening of things, but he couldn't make it make sense. If I recognize life for the miracle it is, then, anyone who threatens that miracle is someone who must be crushed utterly out of existence; not just stopped, but obliterated—but then, isn't that destroying life, too? Does destroying life mean that you renounce its magic, and does that mean it isn't wrong to destroy you? Does life avenge itself, he wondered, through a kind of angel? It was a circle he couldn't think his way around. It wasn't hard at all to condemn Jeremy Rensselaer, and he did. So why didn't that feel like the end of it? Why did it seem as though there was more to it, that, actually, the entirety of the question—whatever it was—remained untouched?

He'd made his way to the address on his bicycle, but the Sunshine Circle house had been demolished years ago. In fact, the property lines had even been redrawn, and there were now two new houses splitting the original lot. Some internet sleuthing had turned up the true location of the original building, and Simon visited cautiously, trying to give anyone who might be watching the impression that he was only idling by, stopping to tie his shoelace, check his phone. He darted looks in the direction of the site, examined it in hasty glances. People must come here to gawk. The property owners probably dislike the sight of random loiterers out in the street.

Sunshine Circle members used to congregate beneath those gnarled live oaks over there, with their ash-grey trunks and small, dark leaves. They had to be the same trees; his father had told him you couldn't cut them down, they were protected. The path leading up to the hill summit must be beyond that chain link fence back there, all but invisible in mounds of shrubbery. Jeremy Rensselaer walked down this street, stepped up over that curb, thinking about the tunic of fire he would wear after death, thinking that human blood came from the sun and returned to it. Thinking it, but also, really believing it.

That was probably the spot where Carl Morning was killed. His blood poured from his gashed throat and into that earth. And then, the sun melted his blood and drank it. That was where Jeremy saw the looks of horror on the faces of the others, where he made up his mind, without a moment's hesitation, to kill again in order to protect the Circle—this time, he would be the victim, the offering, as well. He was going to go back to the sun.

Simon didn't need to visit the old location to get closer to the past, though. He would gaze up at the rolling masses of the hills, and feel a presence hover there, soaking into the shadows beneath the brush. He knew that Jeremy Rensselaer must have felt that presence; that he was connected with the mysterious power that was dreaming there in the landscape, that he partook of it. Wide spaces, open to the sky, could disable Simon with sudden fear, as though he were in danger of being abducted right through the sky and out of the world, but he was attracted to large, powerful things, like mountains, storms, the ocean, the desert, anything very old. They made him feel small, but he didn't mind feeling small. He felt small in the way a clown fish must feel when it nestles itself down among the venomous tendrils of an anemone; safe and small. It was the big and conspicuous thing that got blasted. The little one is hidden in plain sight. Every day, the people who lived in the canyon got up and went about their various ordinary human activities, just like he did, but there was another sort of hum that would still be

there even if all that activity were hushed, abruptly, and that you could sort of hear at night. It was the secret activity of the hills, a life vast and furtive, massive, whispering sense without meaning, saturated with unassigned value. It was holiness, basically. Waiting for something to endow. It was the object of Jeremy Rensselaer's worship. And didn't it embrace him? How did—how could—Jeremy Rensselaer kill Rodney Dean, when he was in Santa Monica and Dean was already in Glendale? How did he get here so fast? Could Carrie really have gotten the time that wrong?

There was a bright day in June, only a few days into summer vacation, when Simon had been playing alone in the backyard, lighting scraps of paper on fire by focussing the sunlight through a little magnifying glass. The sunlight was a silent, blazing phantom, like the presence of another person beside himself. It stood in the air, vertical, the mute roar of a furnace. He had found a pocket mirror, and experimented to see if the light it reflected could be gathered and focused by a magnifying glass to start a fire even in the shade. Sitting on the crabgrass in the mellow gloom beneath the enormous oak tree that sheltered half the backyard, he directed the beam of light across the ground and along the grey bricks of the dividing wall that marked the boundary. The breeze had withered away, the air was still. He didn't know why he did it, but, abruptly taken by an unaccountable impulse, he aimed the reflected beam of light toward that hilltop, looking perhaps to see if the trembling patch of brightness he controlled could travel that far, and remain visible. He was startled by the sudden jet of light that appeared way up there, as if in response. It pivoted, slightly, as it flared into its full brilliance, causing him to blink, flinch and shut his eyes, already swimming with magenta and pale green after-images. Only in hindsight—he was already walking back inside—did it occur to him that the answering flash had come only after he had lowered the mirror, and when, some time later, he finally climbed that hill, he found a few old coffee cans with the dried and scattered remains of roses and other flowers, the untouched remnants of a little

memorial, but nothing that could reflect light, certainly nothing that could have flashed at him from four or five feet above the ground. Simon asked his mother what color were fireflies, and she looked bemused and told him green and that there were no fireflies around there, or probably anywhere in California.

“Well,” he told her, “*something* was glowing green up on the hill. Green and red.”

He forgot all about it, and never remembered it again; but then came that *particular* day, when he had nearly been hit by a car. Lost in thought, as usual, he was absently crossing the street when a hood, a window, a snarling face suddenly slid past, only inches away, with a blare of horn. The shock of surprise struck him like a physical blow, somehow inside him. He stood in the street, and watched the car vanish. Mercurial, incoherent anger fluttered and struggled inside him. Then he finished crossing the street, spun in place, sat down on the curb, and wrapped his arms around himself. He hated the driver, and his sudden car. He felt almost violated, and impotent, although he was untouched, and he'd brushed up against an immensity of sadness and failure that didn't make sense, that shouldn't have been there. It was like nothing about him mattered. He could be plucked out of the world by chance, and nothing would stir to prevent it. Eventually—he knew he had to get home—he decided to cut across the park. He had to avoid the street. He just couldn't walk there, but more out of resentment than caution, as if the friendly, familiar street had inexplicably betrayed him, and with a depressing idea of futility, his protests not meaning anything. The park curled around the base of the hills with a sort of corridor connecting its two parts, like the handle of a dumbbell. As he made his way along this corridor, he began to notice that there was no one else around. He was alone.

There was a moment of dead silence. Simon watched his trudging feet, then glanced up at the path to see where its margin lay, to make sure he wasn't walking off track. That was the moment when Jeremy Rensselaer strode past him. He loomed over Simon,

took two steps toward the brush at the trail's margin, showing the blackened soles of his dirty, bare feet, and then the trunk of a big oak tree interrupted the sight of him, and he didn't come around the other side. He had sort of faded a little as he passed behind the tree. Faded, and sank, a little. As if he were about to throw himself down on the ground, curl up and rest there in the shade, like a dog. Simon had kept walking a step or two further, and only stopped after a few moments.

He stood there a long time, staring at the oak tree until it began to blur and float before his eyes, not unlike what Jeremy Rensselaer had done. He listened. After a while, he did hear something—deep, even breathing. The sound of someone sleeping.

Very quietly, so as not to disturb anyone, Simon began walking home. Eventually, he noticed birds singing, and the ambient roar of the city out there, but it wasn't until he'd been lying in bed that night, and had wondered if someone dead might still be out there, sleeping behind a tree, that his body jackknifed, and he clasped his head hard between his two hands. He whimpered, and was afraid. Afraid of the world, his parents, the trees, everything, even himself, somehow. Why did the violent music fill him with life, and so much energy he could barely contain it? Shouldn't it be the passionate music that filled him with life? Why didn't the violent music make him sad? With a flash of reflected sunlight, he had called on Jeremy Rensselaer, and set something in motion that he didn't understand, and that was much, much larger than himself. That idea haunted him all throughout his childhood, his adolescence, and into adulthood. It would visit him whenever it wanted to, and he would see the city rolled out in front of him, blanketed in heavy ochre sunlight, half-smothered under weightless dayshine in a psychedelic urban pastorage that made the frenetic activity all around him seem like rustling leaves, swirling dust, ripening, drinking, basking. Beneath the sun, a dancing figure, throwing his arms up into the air, high as he can, a knife blazing white in one hand, long curls snap as

the head, with its face always turned away, toward the sun, nods in exultation and affirmation.

And sometimes at night when he would lie awake, he could hear the coyotes carolling somewhere out in the hills over something they'd killed. It was strange because you never heard the sound begin—you only became suddenly aware that it had been going on. The noise didn't frighten him. He'd seen coyotes a few times, but they'd never come near him or anyone he knew. Maybe they'd gotten a cat here and there, but then, well, don't let your cats out. It was a wild sound, that had been heard here on the hills before California was California, and it was kind of a blessing or honor for him, something that not everyone got to hear. On other nights, his heart racing, he would see the vampires, the slashers, the demons from the movies and games coming for him, and then the walls would come down in a cataract of blinding daylight, and dancing there in the heart of the glare would be Jeremy Rensselaer, almost a silhouette welded into the gold. The menace, whatever it was, would shrink from the light, start with fear at the abruptness of its onslaught, and then Jeremy would be on them, the tang of his knife would catch the light as it came down in one pure line, and Simon would feel something better than safe, he would know that justice is the only thing anyone has to fear, that justice and beauty are inseparable, united and invincible, that you have to surrender unconditionally to them together, you have to, you have to have to have to offer yourself, let them become you and become perfect where the two musics meet.

2

Through the window, Laura can see Simon come up the path, greet Angela and her son, Mark, as he steps onto the lawn and into the shade. There they are all together, framed by the window like an idyllic painting. They form a family together, spontaneously, without her. They smile, and Mark hurries up to tell something he's been saving just for Simon. No one is thinking of her inside that frame, him least of all. When she brings the lemonade out, then he'll notice her, turn his kind eyes on her, and she'll grimace, trying to return the smile, but it's all been decided, hasn't it? There's a center of gravity among them that cannot include her.

He's cutting slices of bread for sandwiches when she brings the tray out to them, like a servant, but he sets down the knife and hurries up to her, taking the tray and nodding a greeting in his minimal sort of way. Just one nod from Simon conveys a lot of information, and she wishes that it isn't as warm as it is. It would make things easier, like a confirmation.

The four of them had been thrown together by chance. Angela and Mark were going to move to California. Their house was closed up and they were just spending a few final days in Colorado before they left. Simon had been in Denver for an astrophysics conference, and had been forced to remain a while longer when bad weather led to a spate of flight cancellations and delays. Laura was a systems analyst working for the state, and her boss had told her in a sternly

good-natured email that she would lose accumulating vacation time if she didn't take it soon. She didn't want to go far from home, but she didn't want to sit alone in an empty house, either. One way or another, they had all four of them ended up staying at the same motel—a Del Webb's Hiway House right across I-25 from St. Vrain State Park. The park was a constellation of enormous ponds surrounded by meadows, trees, and campgrounds. The Rocky Mountains—Longs Peak, Ptarmigan Mountain, the Twin Sisters—presided to the west, still spattered with snow in late June. There was something important, and precious, about this opportunity to spend time with other adults away from the usual responsibilities. It was like being a kid again, playing at random with other kids, not caring who they were or what they did.

It was a near miss that introduced them to each other. A shock went through her when she saw the police SUV roll up behind that little boy, whose name turned out to be Mark, and another voice that later on proved to have been hers shouted a warning in unwitting unison with Angela's, who darted into the street. Simon was faster. He seemed to come out of nowhere. He lunged for Mark and snatched him up in his arms, pivoting just in time to avoid being struck himself. The car passed between Laura and the others; she saw the man driving it, the aviator sunglasses and expressionless face, one beefy arm draped across the top of the steering wheel, guiding the car with the underside of his wrist, a *semper fi* tattoo dull under the mat of hair and half melted into his tan, the dull gleam of his badge, and she saw Simon momentarily framed in the opposite window, staring indignantly. He was handing Mark to Angela, who gathered him up in her arms, pressed his head into her shoulder, and her face was convulsed with rage, astonishment, and confusion. Korean words burst from her; they didn't need translating. Mark, for his part, seemed bewildered.

The SUV continued on its way, and Laura registered its unhurried nonchalance, as if killing children were its prerogative. Then she

turned her attention back to Angela. Simon was guiding her quietly to the picnic tables, near the motel, and she was still carrying Mark.

"He could have been killed." They were the first words Laura heard him say.

"I know!" she answered. She was hurrying to express her concern, to avoid being left out. She could offer Angela a woman's understanding. Angela set the boy down and examined him, turned him around and then back again.

"You're fine!" she told him, her voice still harsh.

Simon wasn't just anyone. He was one in a million. He was a man who could understand her painful isolation. He was already at home in the arctic circle that encompassed her; she saw that at once. They were the same, in the most critical way, standing to one side, observing the world with pain, with contemplation, seeing the world's reason, and the depressing unreason. They were alike. It was plainly there, in his sad kindness, his mild voice and reserve and his delicate gestures and discretion—just like her. But there they were, the three of them, together in their own ring, not shutting her out, but not allowing her in, either. Somehow, being deliberately shut out would have been less painful. What if something bad—not that bad, but only just bad enough—happened to divide them? It was wrong to wish for that, or even to think about it. It was only human, but it was still wrong. She salved the pain of her casual exclusion with the feeling of righteousness that came with declaring something to be wrong.

He was happy to give them rides in his rental car. Simon was a conscientious driver. Laura imagined that being an astrophysicist must reflect a computer-like knack for processing information, and Simon seemed to attend to every alteration in traffic with effortless concentration, rolling in and out of stops so easily that she barely felt the momentum. There were a few eateries in the vicinity, and then there was the park, its ponds distributed along a curling road like beads on a string. He would guide his car gently around the

bends while fresh air wafted in the windows, making her feel light-headed and happy.

I wish we could go on driving like this forever, she would think. Round and round these bends, the mountains swinging, the sun turning golden, air as pure as can be, and just us.

The sunsets here were so spectacular that staying inside while the sun was going down seemed a little sacrilegious. The ritual suggested itself: they would pick up their dinner at Toni's Diner, Tacos Imposibles, or the Fosters Freeze and then carry it into the park to eat in the open air at one of the picnic tables. Lean and wiry as he was, Simon ate voraciously. He was always done first, and gazing west with a dreamy, cold light in his face. She noticed that he didn't speak with his mouth full, and he never drank. Laura also finished quickly, but then she was too self-conscious, wiping her mouth after every bite, and barely eating anything, so that, once they had dispersed to their rooms for the night and she was alone, she would fortify herself with some secret snacks from the vending machine by the office.

Now they sit together, eating, while a conflagration transforms the sky above them in silence. The sun welds itself to the earth, daubing the mountain peaks with red while the ground below subsides into blue and purple shadows. The inaudible noise of these sunsets binds the life here together under the sway of a single event, like one answer that could satisfy any riddle. Simon, Angela, and Mark all blazed red in that effulgence. Laura wondered if she did, too. Four golden phantoms dimming, growing ashen, as the light left the sky.

Simon was never at a loss for things to talk about, since he was an astrophysicist. He could give little impromptu lectures at will, seemingly without effort, and with a real zest for the subject. When Angela politely asked her what she did, she said --

"I'm a bureaucrat," and smiled ruefully. "Although that implies I have a power that I don't actually have, at all. I'm a systems analyst."

“What does a system analyst do?” Mark asked.

“I find and customize computer programs for Colorado State University, to help them keep track of their budget and payroll, and maintain records on employees.”

From the expression on Mark’s face as he disengaged from her, he didn’t really understand what that meant, or find anything about it interesting.

“I wish we’d had a systems analyst,” Angela said. She had already told them about the failure of her family restaurant. That, and her husband’s death, were the reasons she was moving away, to join her family in California. She’d started a law degree some time ago, and hoped to resume her studies there.

She’s turning the conversation back toward herself again, Laura thought. And she’s making it look as though she were thinking of me. Trying to impress him by seeming magnanimous.

“It’s important to keep accounts straight,” Simon said. He had a way of making strict pronouncements like that; it gave him an air of integrity.

Laura was searching for something to say when she caught sight of the police SUV and gave a little jump. The car coasted through the parking lot with its lights off. Like a cruising shark, it rolled from one end to the other, almost colorless in the dusk. It didn’t want anyone to notice it was there until it was too late, and it had caught somebody in an infraction. Was it the same car, with the same evil police man inside? She turned to the others to see if any of them had noticed. Angela was wiping ketchup from Mark’s chin, but Simon’s face was dreamy again; he had seen.

We both noticed, she thought. We’re the same. We belong together. We don’t need to talk. We can understand each other, Simon, just like this.

Simon was particularly good with Mark. Something boyish would rise to the surface whenever Mark looked his way. With adults, he was serious, even a little stern, but still friendly. Laura felt his reserve emanating from him like a magical endowment, and it

thrilled her, because she wasn't the sort of person that other people found readily available, either. They were alike. But would he want someone else like him?

When that boyish look came into Simon's eyes, there was something so painful there that Laura's heart went out to him. Mark was a child, and children are vulnerable. Simon seemed to experience Mark's vulnerability himself, to relive it. He knew it. It hurt. Something had happened to him. Laura was sure of it. A childhood of worry, and boredom, and sometimes even pain, had trained her to recognize it when she saw it. She watched Simon showing Mark the contents of the little red tacklebox he'd bought for him, the gutting knife, the hooks, the line, the collapsible rod. Mark wanted to try the line right away, but Angela insisted he finish eating first, that it was getting dark, that the fish were all asleep, that they could come back tomorrow, and Simon promised he would come along too, to show him what to do.

Laura gazed at Angela miserably. Angela was a widow. The same marks were there on her face—loss, pain, worry. All there. You had something to lose, though, she thinks. I never did. I didn't get my turn. I'm sorry. But when do I get my turn?

When Simon was talking to Mark, Laura watched as the creases smoothed on Angela's face, how relief momentarily lifted the weight that normally bent her neck and sloped her shoulders. With Simon, Angela was upright, and even lively. Younger. The more you look at him, the younger you get. And the older I get.

That night, after midnight, Laura finished her furtive snack and idly went to peek through the curtain and into the parking lot. Simon strode by just then. Where was he coming from? He was heading for his room, but where had he been? Not Angela's room? That was upstairs. Was he heading for the stairs? But then, he's coming back.

Laura watched as Simon marched back and forth, back and forth, three times, scanning, craning his head. Had he lost something? Should she offer to help? He wasn't looking on the ground, though. It was more like he was patrolling, as if he were on sentry duty.

After a few minutes, she didn't see him any more. Presumably, he had returned to his room. Could he be crazy?

* * *

Laura was the first to catch sight of Mark, stumbling alone into the parking lot. He was in shock, his teeth were chattering even though the waning day was still unusually warm, and sweat trickled in heavy beads down his face. He didn't answer her questions, and submitted robotically as she guided him by the shoulders up to Angela's room. At sight of him, Angela swung him up in her arms and dashed inside, setting him on the bed, checking him frantically for injuries that weren't there. Laura was looking everywhere for Simon.

"Did Simon do something to you? Where is he? ... Did something happen to him?"

Mark threw her a look of anguish, but he couldn't speak.

Laura looked toward St. Vrain. Angela hadn't been feeling well, had perhaps a migraine, so Simon and Mark had gone to visit the fish ponds alone. How had Mark gotten safely across I-25, she wondered irrelevantly. There was no sign of trouble, only the celestial mayhem of another wild sunset, a flaring tangle of colored ribbons, blazing silver, peach, bronze and green.

And so Laura began to walk toward I-25. With her heart in her mouth, she dashed across and into the park. She had no idea what she was looking for, only that she had to find Simon, and the most likely place to find him would be by the Mallard Pond. With a pang of fear, she looked at the empty path in front of her—what was at the end? The park was nearly deserted. There were only a few stragglers, dithering their way to the exit, and one family, two middle-aged parents and their teenagers, cooking out by Sandpiper Pond. Their music, their laughter, the smell of grilling meat, and all around a feeling of painful unreality, urgency, the ponds all flat and still as mirrors reflecting the sky like vast, cold slabs of pink gold, a light near the ground to match the light high above, and darkness in between.

It was in that darkness she searched, coming upon the parking lot beneath the mountains, the great panoply of the twilight that they seemed to be making and emitting. There was the building with the bathrooms and showers. No people here. And then she was drifting in an arc around the corner of the building, cut loose by the sight of an arm. Just an arm. A forearm, with a semper fi tattoo thatched with coarse hair. She stopped moving when she saw the red, red expanse, that bristled a little as the night wind rose.

3

A lean, stylish young person passes by, not two feet in front of him, forearms sleeved in retro-tattoos. A globe, eagle, anchor, and a banner inscribed *semper fidelis*.

Formally speaking, no one ever saw Simon again after that day at St. Vrain. Mark knew no one could ever find him, in the safe place where he was now. He remembers the drawn faces of the police officer's wife and children in the news stories. He had been asked again and again if he could remember anything, tell them what happened, where the rest of the man's body had gone. He had only silence to give them in reply. They knew what had happened. A man had been killed. What else was there to say about it? It was something for people to marvel at, not understand. The Dominguez family, who had been having a cookout nearby at Sandpiper Pond at the time, didn't see anyone enter or leave until—what was her name again? That woman? But anyone could have come in from the other side of the park, or over land, and away again. There was infinite space for appearances and disappearances. Even now, with everything scanned and mapped, it wasn't impossible that one or both of them were out there beneath the Rockies somewhere, melted into the ground.

They had gone on to say all sort of things about Simon, but there wasn't any clear reason to believe that he hadn't been as much a victim as the dead man had been. Neither his mother, nor that other

woman, had anything bad to say about Simon, nor should they have. Simon had no relatives. He left behind no clues, except a few interesting bookmarks on his web browser. The Sunshine Killer. Sunshine Circle.

★ ★ ★

Mark watches the crowd dispassionately through the window of the coffee shop. The tattooed figure rounds the corner and is gone. Mark has exactly fifty-seven minutes and twelve seconds before he has to be back at the shelter, where he lives, and he has to go by the hospital first and check in. It's possible they will ask him to leave the coffee shop sooner than that. The two employees behind the counter keep throwing him nervous looks. The shop is half-full, and almost everyone is sitting at least a table away from him. Mark is clean enough, neat enough. He knows he should move more than he does, but he can't bring himself to make unnecessary gestures. So he sits stiffly upright, facing the window, with his hands in his lap, studying the playground across the street. He has removed his watch, and laid it down on the table in front of him, where he can see it. Every time the minute hand strokes 12, he picks up the mug with both hands and raises it carefully to his mouth. He always wears an old-style watch. It belonged to his father. After taking one sip, he replaces the mug, wipes his lips thoroughly, and waits for the next minute to elapse.

He was only dimly aware of the lumbering policeman at first. He had come up toward them at St. Vrain, rolling as he walked, like a bear. His sunglasses seemed to be riveted on Mark. When he was about fifty feet away, Mark felt Simon's hands slide beneath his arms, lifting him. He felt his feet part from the earth. Simon carried him around the corner of the bathroom building, and set him down. Simon, he noticed, had thrust his gutting knife into the back pocket of his jeans.

Mark could see the sunset. A golden figure stepped out of it and gambolled like a satyr in the scintillating light of Mallard Pond. Mark

saw a gutting knife turn until its broad tang caught the light, made a line. It flashed, and he experienced a violent jolt, like an electric shock. The silhouettes and outlines came loose and bounded and scampered and joined, Simon, a dancing figure with tossing golden curls, a knife brandished in the sun, the heavy dark figure of the police officer. All sway, all leap, all turn, pivot, and sway again. As the light drained from the sky, Mark became alone.

There's a park across the street from the coffee shop, and a playground in the park, filled with the wan copper of a winter dusk. Mark understood how important it was to protect the innocence of children. What had happened with Simon taught him that. They must be protected. We who are no longer children have to be ready, we have to be guided, we have to have faith. Safety is for children. Children are for safety, and the world is not safe, it is not just, it is not beautiful, not in itself, but only as the sun lights it, justifies it, clothing it in its tunic of fire. Only fire is safe.

Once upon a summer day, when he was a boy visiting St. Vrain park with his friend Simon, he had watched three figures swim and dance away into everything and everywhere, and recalls it again as he sits in the coffee shop, an adult man, keeping careful track of the time, fifty-five minutes, forty-one seconds, keeping vigilant watch over the children playing in the park, their hidden custodian. He can't be there all the time, though. Those three would have to be everywhere, in order to ensure that he could keep watch over them. A man hurries to pick up a little girl who has collapsed with her legs under her a few feet from the playground gate, and Mark shifts his weight, leaning forward, begins to stand. A woman joins the man. They appear to be a family. The child seems to be calm enough. Mark lowers himself back onto his seat.

Fifty-three minutes, sixteen seconds.

The clouds shift, the effulgence of the dying day breaks through, the daylight brushes the grass, which is somehow still green in places, and, for a moment, he sees the lawn become a little sea of glinting blades. What music today?



Copyright © 2024 Michael Cisco

Art copyright © 2024 Natalie Foss

A. T.
GREENBLATT

BETWEEN
H O M E
AND
A **H O U S E**
ON **F I R E**



© 2010 A.T. GREENBLATT

Between Home and a House on Fire

A . T . G R E E N B L A T T

illustration by

D A V I D P A L U M B O

REACTOR 

You're taking the long way home, through that stretch of no-man's-land between two one-traffic-light towns, when you feel the air pressure drop. Swearing, you pull the pickup onto the shoulder and key off the ignition.

There's no one else on this unassuming highway, level for miles, hiding nothing among the wide flat boulders and bent grassland. But you know emptiness is sometimes an illusion, especially on this lick of road. Your knuckles are white on the steering wheel as you wait. For God knows what.

A minute passes. Your ears pop and suddenly this girl, seventeen or twenty at most, is rapping on your pickup's passenger-side window. She's covered in ashes, her knuckles torn and swollen.

You roll down the window.

"Can I?" she asks.

"Sure," you say and move your jacket from the passenger seat. She slides in, without preamble or explanation. She slams the door closed with more force than necessary and you both jump. She doesn't apologize, though, and for that you find yourself warming toward her.

"Heading to town," you say, starting the engine and pulling back onto the road. "I can drop you off at the motel there."

"Which one?"

"There's only one motel."

"No, which town?"

"Littleton." You say it with fondness. It might not be much to spit at, especially compared to some places you've been, but Littleton's home to one of the best coffeeshops in the world. Your family too.

The stranger nods, unsurprised, and pulls out a phone from her jacket pocket. The screen's a massive web of cracks, but she doesn't seem to notice as she furiously types out message after message.

Her composure unnerves you. Were you ever this self-assured when you were in her shoes? Especially after whatever disaster she looks like she fought before coming here? Maybe, you don't remember. Those are not the details you held on to from your old life.

You keep your eyes on the road as the pickup speeds down the silent highway, grateful that maybe you won't get a backstory. (*If you didn't want a story, your voice of reason counters, you wouldn't have taken the long way home.*) But you can't help stealing glances at your passenger and wondering. At the tears in her navy t-shirt and cargo pants. At her disheveled black hair and the grit under her fingernails. The exhaustion in her eyes and her posture. You clock, with some relief, that there's no resemblance between you and her.

But you recognize the pin on her jacket, a burning house, and there can be no denying where she just appeared from.

She catches you looking, but you don't apologize either. Throughout this quiet drive, she's been snatching glances at you too.

The sky's gray and growing darker as the sun falls behind the distant mountains; bluish-black against the horizon, hundreds of miles away. The air in the car stays still and bated. Until the stranger swears under her breath.

"Dead," she says. She holds up her phone. "Have a charger?"

"Nope," you reply, patting the steering wheel. "This baby's a dinosaur." Your trusty truck still has an analog radio, dials and all.

The stranger slumps against the headrest, with that fluid drama that only teenagers can pull off well. She closes her eyes.

"Why haven't you asked me why I'm here?" she says.

"Live around here long enough and you stop questioning some of the strange shit you see."

"That's very trusting of you."

"I could say the same about you."

She shrugs. "They told me this was one of the good places."

You're about to pry, ask for names and details, but you catch yourself. Because, despite your curiosity, you don't want to know.

Not anymore.

"I'm Selene," she says.

"Jen," you reply, and some of the tension in her shoulders releases. The air in the truck becomes easier for a stretch. But as the lights of Littleton rise up in the distance, she begins to fidget, picking the ashes off her clothes.

"Was it a bad fire?" you ask before you can stop yourself.

Damn your curiosity. That insatiable appetite.

Her lips go flat and tight. "Always could be worse."

Good answer, you think, and swallow your unasked questions.

At the edge of town, you pull over to refuel. Not because you want to prolong your time with this stranger, Selene, but because you know yourself too well. You're not going to leave again when you get home tonight and Thom, understandably, would be annoyed if you left him the car running on fumes.

You grunt as you climb out of the pickup, stretching your bad leg, muscles protesting after sitting for so long. You were tenser than you thought, the stiffness is worse than typical. It's not a graceful limp to the gas pump. But you don't think much of it until you catch her expression through the windshield.

Selene stares, practically gaping at your scars, thanks to your cutoffs, visible from calf to ankle.

"Old accident," you say, though you don't owe her an explanation. Actually, you don't owe her or where she came from jackshit. You've given them enough of yourself. Selene turns red and looks away. She doesn't apologize when you get back into the car and this time, you aren't impressed.

It occurs to you that you've probably become a cautionary tale to the people in your old life, one of those nameless characters talked about during lulls and meal breaks. The thought makes you incredibly depressed. And angry.

You hold the steering wheel in a death grip during the short drive to the Grand Motel. You speed. The air in the car is oppressive.

She slips out of the passenger seat when you pull up to the front of the two-story building.

"Thanks, Jenna." You nod once and she closes the door, gently this time. You watch her walk into the lobby and give Pam working the front desk a two-fingered salute. Then you peel out of the parking lot, swearing to never take the long way home again. This was the nail in the coffin that you needed. End of story.

It's only when you're on the couch, beer in hand, legs draped over Thom, your pit bull mix, Pecan, sprawled out on top of both of you, that you catch her slip.

It's been a decade since anyone called you Jenna. Not since the In-Between.

★ ★ ★

The problem with the In-Between is that it's always calling you back.

You're neck deep in a reservoir restoration design proposal when your cell rings. Unknown number. You don't answer these, usually. If it's important, they'll leave a message. But your curiosity wins out, again.

"Jenna, it's Selene," says the stranger as soon as you pick up.

"Jen, actually," you reply with an evenness that surprises you. Three weeks have passed and you were relaxing into the idea it was all over. You've asked around, naturally. Pam said there weren't any more soot-covered visitors at the motel and Thom reported no wayfaring strangers at the coffeeshop. "How did you get my number?"

"I asked the motel lady for it. In case this happened."

Pam's kind heart's a double-edged sword. Your fingers tighten around the phone. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she says quickly. "I just ... I need a ride."

You sigh. The trouble with living in a one-traffic-light town is you can't tell her to piss off and order a taxi or rideshare. You consider saying no anyway because you recognize the strings. You feel the pull of your old life rattling in its coffin, the magnetism that kept you

taking the long way home and kept you up at ungodly hours sketching concepts, year after year.

But you also remember what it was like to be stranded in a place you barely knew.

"Where?" you say, picking up your keys and your coat, already moving toward the door.

"Not far from where you found me last time. I think." Her hesitation does not inspire confidence.

She's off by ten miles.

You find her in a worse state than before, soaked to the bone and shivering in the wind that streaks across the grassland. God, you remember what that was like too. Guilt gnaws at you for considering not answering the call. Yet you put up a hand before she climbs in.

"No talking about the In-Between, its problems, anyone in it, or their problems. Got it?"

She pauses, stunned. This has clearly thrown a wrench in her plans. You wait for her to come to the obvious conclusion. No rideshares here.

She hesitates, then nods and concedes. She hoists herself in and you hand her an old towel from the back seat, usually reserved for Pecan. Clean, or as clean as possible with an endlessly shedding eighty-pound dog. She wraps herself in it and cranks up the heat on the dashboard.

"Thanks for coming to get me."

"Sure," you say. She smells like mildew and honeysuckles, and something like homesickness hits you in the ribs. (*But you are home, you remind yourself.*)

(*Then why, your voice of reason asks, do you still feel the pull of the In-Between?*)

This question eats at you in the silence. For thirty miles, neither you nor the stranger speaks.

Then Selene cracks. "Elise says hi," she says.

"Hey, I mean it." The sharpness of your voice surprises you. "I don't want to know."

"Not even that the water retention wall that you two built broke?" she snaps. "The Summer Quarter is completely flooded. Thought you'd at least care about *that*."

You decelerate.

"Oh my God. You seriously going to abandon me on the side of the road?"

"Please. You have return plans," you reply. "When's the rendezvous? Tomorrow at seven a.m.?"

She ignores that. Instead, she says, "The flowers along the boulevards are still blooming, though. I didn't even know there were so many colors."

You swerve to the shoulder.

"Fine!" she shouts. She crosses her arms and slumps as you ease back onto the highway. "But I need to know—"

"That *is* always the problem," you mutter.

"—why don't you want to come back?"

(*Oh, who said that?* that little voice inside you whispers.)

"After the accident," you begin and glance over. Selene nods. You roll your eyes. In-Betweeners are nothing if not adventurers and gossips. "After the accident, I built a good life here." Selene wrinkles her nose. "Yes, you can live well here. One day you might find the work in that other place is not worth the cost."

"Never," she spits. But you don't take the bait. There's no point in arguing with an obsessed nineteen-year-old. Neither of you speak until Littleton's in your sights. The atmosphere in the car is like a brewing thunderstorm.

"I need some coffee," she announces as you pass the town's welcome sign.

"You need some sleep."

"We need help."

"Too bad," you say and Selene scowls and types out something on her shattered phone.

Were you such an asshole when you were that age? Probably.

But you feel the pull of your old life grow stronger as you begin to see the depths of Selene's stubbornness. And that frightens you. You realize, then, *you* need help. Someone to ground you, remind you, be the counterweight to this ceaseless lure. Also a good cup of coffee sounds perfect right now.

To the untrained eye, the Pit Stop is just another diner, with its neon lights outside and vinyl seating within. But it's the smell of espresso that embraces you like a long-lost friend when you enter, not grease. The whirl of coffee grinders is constant and every item on the menu is made to complement your drink.

And unlike roadside diners, the proprietors of the establishment have a history of welcoming the lingerers, the travelers who are both wandering and lost.

Thom is on his usual perch behind the counter. He's surprised to see you in the middle of a work day, but a grin lights up his face. Then, he spots Selene beside you, and it dims slightly. Then he sees the pin on her jacket.

"No," he says.

You hold up your hands. "I've been trying to tell her that." You tilt your head toward Selene and take your usual seat at the counter.

Thom turns to the stranger. "No."

"Dude, I just want a coffee," she says.

"That's how it starts," he mumbles and looks at you. His eyes widen and you know he understands why you came. God, you love this man, and not just because you've been together long enough that you can ask each other questions without saying a word.

"Large cappuccino, please," you say. "I'll be sticking around for a while." He disappears with a grunt. A moment later, your phone buzzes in your pocket. You glance at the text.

THOM: *thought u said it was over.*

YOU: *Yeah. They want me to come back*

THOM: *oh NOW they miss u*

His indignation eases some of the pressure off your ribcage. Beside you, Selene picks up the menu, pretends to read it.

"The French toast is good," you say, because it's true.

"You gave up the In-Between for French toast?" she asks, incredulous.

"No," you reply. "I gave it up for coffee, but the French toast helped." You give Thom a small smile as he works the espresso machine. His shoulders relax but the worry line on his forehead doesn't disappear.

You bite back a grin when Selene listens and orders the French toast and then a laugh at her stunned expression when the food arrives. A mountain of homemade bread, battered and cinnamoned, cooked to golden, and adorned with fresh whipped cream and even fresher raspberries.

The In-Between, for all its wonders, doesn't have good, home-cooked food.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here," you say, "and guess that Elise sent you."

Selene answers by jamming another forkful of food into her mouth.

So, you tell her about your life after the In-Between. About the painful process of healing after the accident and learning the new limits of your damaged body. About rebuilding — everything. Because your head and your heart belonged to the In-Between for so long, you didn't have much to work from when you decided to make a life in this world. You only chose Littleton because the people here had shown you some kindness when you turned up out of nowhere covered in water or ash or slime. Like the woman at the only motel in town. And the coffeeshop owner you fell hard for. You finished your engineering degree and made yourself useful here. You were stunned to learn how many small disasters happened in Littleton.

In some ways, you are doing the same thing you did in the In-Between. Difference is you build and repair things here without risking a limb. Here, the work lasts.

You tell the stranger all of this, knowing that the story will find the person you're really telling it for. Elise, who was with you when you stumbled into the In-Between for the first time during your sophomore year in college. Who spent countless hours with you in the mud and ash, shoring up walls and digging drains, trying to preserve this magical place you'd both lucked into. Who never forgave you for refusing to come back when you healed.

Selene fidgets and picks at her food. She's clenching her fork and her jaw. Her phone buzzes as you finish your story. She glances at it, drains her coffee, and gets up. She looks straight at you for the first time in thirty minutes and says, "I'll never give up on the only place that feels like home."

The last words Elise texted you before she blocked you.

Selene strides to the door.

You're stunned, a little hurt. Then Thom is there, hand on your shoulder, and you give him a broken smile. "Out-of-towners are the worst."

He doesn't return it. He hands you the jacket she left behind on the chair.

"Jen, close this chapter for good, yeah?" he says.

You hesitate. For too long. Then nod and follow the girl.

You find her behind the coffeeshop, near the dumpsters. The air is charged and you're so startled by the sudden rush of water around your feet, you failed to notice the obvious. The trap.

Selene's standing before a rift in reality and beyond it is a place that's neither of this world nor the next one. The smell of roses and ash fills your nose and you're struck by nostalgia so deep and raw it knocks the air out of your lungs.

There, you see a slice of the main boulevard in the Autumn Quarter. Sunlight dancing among the reddening leaves and late season blooms garbing the old stone buildings. Stone faces of statues and gargoyles peering out from the foliage. It looks like a beautiful day on the other side.

You've missed this. God, you've missed this. Even as water pours out from the In-Between, engulfing your ankles. Even though every word you told Selene was true.

She turns and there are tears in her eyes. "It's being destroyed faster than we can save it."

She steps into the rift.

★ ★ ★

You spend the rest of the day mopping the floors of the Pit Stop with Thom. The sudden flood from the In-Between was too much for the street drains and the coffeeshop found itself with an inch of sooty water on the linoleum floor, despite clear skies and sound pipes.

Thom blames the pipes anyway as he apologizes to the evacuating customers.

But when only the two of you are left with mops, he swears off the In-Between loudly and colorfully. You don't blame him; you just finished replacing these floors two months ago.

"Why do the disasters there always leak into here?" he says. "Literally, in this case."

"She said that most of it has been destroyed now."

Thom's expression softens. "I'm sorry."

You wring the mop. "I'm just worried about her and the others."

"Why? They cut you out after you got hurt."

"Did I ever tell you the story about the guy who came back from the In-Between and met an older version of himself?"

"No." He pauses. "How's that even possible?"

"It's a weird space and time is weird anyway."

He frowns. "But you don't think she's you, right?"

"No, my hair was never that straight or my boobs that small," you say, with a laugh. "But she's not so different either."

Neither of you speak for a little while as you push the mop back and forth, making more streaks than progress.

"You told her off, though, right?" asks Thom, hesitantly.

“We didn’t leave on good terms,” you reply. But that’s not what he’s asking, and you both know it.

It takes you both a long time to dry the floor.

★ ★ ★

That night, you’re back in the In-Between, in your dreams at least. You’re walking down the twisty, mysterious streets of the Spring Quarter with Elise, joy and wonder filling you up as you discover a new garden courtyard or art gallery. That quiet thrill of being in the In-Between hasn’t faded.

You’re brought back by the sound of your phone buzzing. You squint at the clock. 3:24 a.m. and Thom’s snoring softly beside you. Pecan’s paws twitch, lost in his own dream, as he sleeps at the foot of the bed.

Your leg protests in your night brace as you slip out of bed and into the living room. Selene’s texting you, making your phone a spasm of light and vibration. You read.

SELENE: *So I dont know if youll just delete this without reading it, but I just wanted to say sorry for what I said in the diner.*

SELENE: *Im really bad at talking. You didnt want to listen. But you deserve to know bc you fought for this place once.*

SELENE: *You and Elise I mean.*

SELENE: *The In-Between is disappearing. Like really really fast now. Floods + fires + vanishings happen all the time now. Always losing another piece. Last week it was the grand hall in the Winter Quarter. You know the one felt out of a fairy tale?*

SELENE: *Im not dumb. I know why you wont help us.*

SELENE: *And yeah that was really shitty how everyone ghosted you after the accident.*

SELENE: *Im not asking for them. Im asking for me.*

SELENE: *And I know you dont know me + you might not like what youve seen. But this is the first place Ive loved. Its first time Ive felt useful + good at something.*

SELENE: *Ive nowhere else to go.*

SELENE: *Ill spare you the gory details but my life before the In-Between was bad. Really bad. Its the only home Ive ever had.*

SELENE: *Will you seriously not help me???*

You're crying. God, when did that happen? You knew, *you knew*, what type of people were called to the In-Between, because once, it called to you. It's a paradise for lonely kids, lost teens, and desolate adults. It filled your otherwise empty life with wonder, and trying to save it from disappearing gave you a reason to keep waking up. There, the first time in your life you felt valuable, strong. You had friends with the same purpose. And that was almost as intoxicating as being in the In-Between itself.

You sink to the floor and rub your eyes. Pecan licks your snotty nose. You didn't hear him trot out from the bedroom. He rests his big, dopey head on your knees, his expressive eyes fixed on you and concerned.

"Why can't I just walk away from this?" you ask him as you rub his velvety ears.

(Because you're not that type of person, answers your voice of reason.)

You text Selene back.

YOU: *When will you be here next?*

You get up and go to the coat closet. From its recesses, among the piles of your late-night design sketches, you pull out an old denim jacket with a pin of a burning house on it. A twin emblem to the one Selene wore. You sling on the jacket and look in the mirror. It still fits and you smile at the bitter irony.

Something moves behind you. You turn. There, standing barefoot, wearing only pajama pants, is Thom. His expression's devastating as you stand there in your old jacket, just like the day you met.

There's that question in his eyes.

You don't have an answer for him.

★ ★ ★

You meet Selene in no-man's-land, almost exactly between the first place you found her and the second. She's sitting on one of the wide flat boulders when you park your pickup and step out with a thick folder under one arm and the old denim jacket over the other.

"Ready?" she asks. She's grinning. It makes her look so young.

Before you can answer, the air pressure drops and suddenly there's a rift in the world before you. It shows the manor in the Spring Quarter, your home with all the other In-Betweeners. Beautiful and grand as always. Even with the scent of burning things in the air.

"Shit, another fire," she says and starts rushing toward the rift. But you catch her by the shoulder.

She turns, confused, and it takes you a minute to swallow back the memory: the panic, the sound and feeling of stones crumbling and trapping your leg under them. The look of horror from Elise when she realized this was not a clean break. Nothing that followed was a clean break either.

"Here," you say, handing her the folder. All the designs for the In-Between that have been haunting you for years. "Drawings and instructions on how to build a better retaining wall. And a few other improvements too." You nod at the rift. "I've learned some things since my days over there."

"But you're coming, right?" Selene asks. There's desperation in her voice. Now, ash is blowing through the rift in thick gusts.

You take a half step back, though the strings to the In-Between are tight and strong. "I'll help as much as I can," you say.

"I can't do this alone!"

You take her hands in yours and, God, you're tearing up again. "You won't be," you say.

★ ★ ★

Afterwards, you go back to the Pit Stop. It's an hour drive and you think about Selene the entire time. You hope she'll be okay, that she

doesn't lose too much. Of the In-Between or herself. But she isn't you. You aren't her.

You arrive at 11 a.m. on a workday and you reek of ash. You take your normal seat at the counter.

"And what can I get you?" Thom asks, with some hesitation. The question in his eyes is still there. Which is fair. Because up to an hour ago, you didn't know what you would choose. You were a lonely kid once, a lost teen. You still feel the pull. But you are no longer desolate. You have another world to tend to now.

"Cappuccino. Make it a large," you say. "I'll be here for a while."



Copyright © 2024 A. T. Greenblatt

Art copyright © 2024 David Palumbo

**GENEVIEVE
VALENTINE**



**OTHER
KELLY**

Other Kelly

GENEVIEVE VALENTINE

illustration by

MARY PELC

REACTOR 

Kelly was twenty minutes late, which was usual for her by now.

"Sorry!" she said, with a smile that was mostly teeth. "It was hilarious—turns out that the leak from my kitchen they said they fixed had just moved across the ceiling to my closet and I didn't know for two months, so my stuff all molded. I had to buy a new coat on my way. Isn't that like the most Me thing you've ever heard?"

It was pouring. Marshall had bailed at eleven minutes and Kyle had gone with him, so Diana was inside pleading to change the reservation. Kelly, carefully staying out of Diana's sight, nudged under the awning with Erin and me.

"It's cute, though, right?" Kelly said. "I mean like, I got a cute coat and a story out of it, at least. It's kind of funny, right? Like, it will be fine."

"It's already wet," I said. "Why didn't you buy an umbrella?"

"It'll get rained on at home anyway," Kelly said.

She looked over her shoulder; in the middle of the sidewalk, standing in the rain that dissolved right before it touched her, Other Kelly watched the traffic.

★ ★ ★

"—and then Carver said he couldn't come because he was at an intensive dog-training course Thursday and Friday, but he volunteered me because 'he believes in team responsibility,' so I spent *two* fucking days in a sexual harassment seminar taking notes like Carver can even read, and now I'm behind on my actual work, so I have to go to the office after this." Kelly stabbed her waffle.

"When are you going to leave?" Diana said. "Like, he's a dick, we get it. You know the deal."

"But it took me a year to even find it," Kelly said. "I have prescriptions. What am I supposed to do?"

"Date doctors," Erin said.

"Hey," said Kyle, who had been doing that for the last four years as he tried to get his music career going.

Other Kelly was staring at a couple outside who were well into a breakup. (She would stare at anything. She should be staring at Kelly—why else was she here?—but she hardly ever did.) Her place setting was empty. She didn't eat, or sleep, or talk. She just showed up anywhere we had invited Kelly.

"I just can't keep going like this," Kelly said, wobbly, pushing a piece of bacon around her plate, the fork shrieking a little when she pressed too hard.

Other Kelly looked over, almost, at the sound of the fork—Kelly looked up, like she was waiting, like she knew Other Kelly was about to say something—but then the woman outside was shouting "*You're fucking kidding me,*" so loud it echoed off the glass condos on either side of the street, and then burst into tears, and we ended up watching that for so long that I was at home and sorting through twenty emails I'd missed before I wondered what the hell Kelly had been hoping to hear.

★ ★ ★

By the time Kelly told us, her downward slide didn't feel like a dramatic change in direction anymore, just a slowly permanent state; I'd waited a while for her to hit bottom, but even before Other Kelly showed up I realized it was all just falling. When she sat down and told us with a straight face that she'd seen herself passing her in the street, we all looked at each other, hoping this was the floor.

"Does your carbon monoxide detector have batteries in it?" asked Erin.

"Don't fucking talk down to me. I've seen her. I saw her every day this week."

"I'm not talking down to you," said Erin, who absolutely was. She was a counselor at one of the high schools where rich people sent their kids to do drugs in peace. She didn't know any other way to talk.

"Is she following you?" I asked.

"Not quite. She's always where I am, but not like she's waiting for me. Like somebody dropped her out of a plane right there and she's heading back to where she came from. We just keep ... passing."

Kyle sat up—he'd suggested leaving Kelly out of this dinner, but he was clearly repenting now—but Diana beat him to it. "How did you notice her?"

"Because she's my fucking double, Diana. You notice stuff."

Diana made half a face before Erin kicked her under the table to stop Diana saying whatever she thought about Kelly's powers of observation. (Diana had come into the group by way of Marshall and Erin. Kelly was a lot unless you had decided to be her friend beforehand. Diana had not.)

Marshall frowned, looking halfway to actually concerned. "So this woman is, like, copying you and stalking you?"

God, why would she bother, I thought before I could stop it, and hoped it hadn't showed on my face.

"She *is* me," Kelly snapped. "She's not copying. She is *me*."

"Yes," Kyle said under his breath, already typing into his phone. He kept his keyboard noises on; everything he typed always sounded eighty letters long.

"Kelly," Erin started, and I shook my head at her, because the way Erin said Kelly's name before she asked how therapy was going was enough to piss off a much more patient person than Kelly was.

"There are a lot of people in this city," I said instead. "This can't be the first time somebody's seen someone who looks exactly like them."

"Correct," said Kyle, turning so that everyone could see the website in his hand. "I knew I'd seen this—look, it happens all the time! God, imagine meeting your double and he's also in coach. Like

you have a cosmic twin that you actually managed to cross paths with, out of eight billion people in the whole world, and neither of you can get your shit together enough for business class.” He started typing again. “Oh my god they were both going to Disney. Oh, this is sad.”

“Yeah,” said Kelly. “It’s them we’re sad about.”

“Next time stop her. See what the deal is,” Erin said. “She’s got to be curious, too.”

Other Kelly wasn’t curious about much of anything, as it turned out, but even there, she and Kelly were alike.

* * *

Not exactly, though. That was the thing.

I mean, you knew who she looked like—she was Kelly, nobody doubted it, the first time she’d ever showed up Marshall had said “Oh shit” under his breath and Erin had edged halfway off her bar stool. She was wearing something I recognized of Kelly’s, before Kelly had started forgetting her clothes in the laundry room and putting them in the dryer on high to kill whatever happens to wet clothes in a washer overnight. Now everything Kelly wore pulled a little, everywhere. (Other Kelly’s clothes fit her. Other Kelly’s clothes were always clean.)

When you looked right at Other Kelly, of course, something was missing. The lights were off, somehow; an empty house. But it didn’t matter. No waitress or security guard or taxi driver ever glanced at Other Kelly with concern.

I avoided looking at Other Kelly for very long, but I didn’t look at Kelly for very long anymore, either. What was the point? You knew somebody or you didn’t. You could do something or you couldn’t. Other Kelly wasn’t Kelly, and I could always tell; anything else was Other Kelly’s business.

Kyle was the one who got really obsessed, at first—not even when Other Kelly was there, just random moments where Marshall and I would be getting McDonald’s with Kyle at four a.m. and he’d

look up from his fries like a meerkat and say “Fuck, I bet it’s killed Kelly already” and start typing so loud nobody could even talk until he was finished. He had a phone full of photos of people posing with their doubles.

“*Those* doubles are *people*, asshole,” said Marshall once, a warning to shut up about it, but if Kyle was smart enough to take a warning he’d have stopped being a musician already, and he said, “How would you know—they show up on camera, doesn’t mean they’re a person,” and kept typing until Kelly texted back.

Marshall rolled his eyes, but it was true. In the group photo at New Year’s, Other Kelly was there, in the same thing Kelly was wearing (it fit her better), looking right into the lens. She wasn’t smiling, but still she seemed perfectly normal until you saw Kelly with her arm outstretched to take the picture, dress pulling at her shoulders, grinning like her skull was about to make a run for it, and realized that one of them was very wrong.

(Eventually Kyle stopped texting Kelly. She was never dead. It was fine.)

* * *

I couldn’t remember how long Kelly and I had been friends, which made me feel sort of responsible for her whenever she was going off the rails in front of everyone, even though I was *not* responsible for her, which I reminded myself about a lot. I’d still tried—“When she first started at that stupid company she had some real talent,” I’d told Diana once, when Diana wasn’t sucked in yet and I was trying to make a case for us as people worth spending time with, and Erin had said “Jesus Christ” and stared like I’d spat on a grave and said, “Kelly’s a drag but she’s the friend who shows up when you’re in the hospital,” and Marshall added quietly “And at no other time,” and that wasn’t true, obviously, we’d all had dinner two weeks before, but for a long strange second it really had felt like I hadn’t seen Kelly in years.

But if Kelly had gone off the rails enough to accidentally summon Other Kelly, there was nothing I could have done about it. I asked her to museums with me for a year and a half before I gave up (she didn't even say no, just wouldn't answer when I asked, until I'd end up going anyway and sending a picture of some miserable painting from whatever room I was in; she'd write back *lol same sorry i couldn't make it!!* instantly), and Kelly never asked anyone to meet her anymore, so I'd given up even waiting for that.

She hadn't been surprised when Other Kelly showed up. She'd treated Other Kelly the way she treated tax season.

I couldn't stop thinking about Other Kelly, though. It wasn't the kind of thing you told your friend who already hated her job whose clothes kept getting jacked up in the dryer, but Kelly already looked like half the girls in the new condos—every time one of them was walking a dog I had a half second of wanting to call after her, horrified Kelly thought she could handle a puppy. Other Kelly looked exactly like Kelly, but so did all those girls. It wasn't bone structure we were all scared of. Whatever you saw when you *recognized* Kelly was something deeper, some essential quality that only Kelly had, and I couldn't stop trying to guess what it was.

Had been, I guess. She shared it with Other Kelly now.

"They are literally the same person," Marshall said when I brought it up, not quite like he'd sounded with Kyle, but close. He was hanging around after we were finished, and some not-Kelly had come out the door with a French bulldog while I smoked out my kitchen window, and I knew better—we weren't supposed to talk about Other Kelly—but it had slipped out before I could stop myself.

"But you know what I'm saying. Remember that time you started making fun of that girl's purse on the train because you thought Kelly had finally given in to pink and it wasn't Kelly?"

He flinched, and after a second he flinched again, different. "That's a regular mistake, though. I wouldn't do that with—I mean, I'd *never* just start talking to—if I. If I saw." He gnawed on his tongue a second, like he could massage the right word out, but it

never came. Nobody had ever invoked Other Kelly out loud. We knew better.

“But,” I said. I stopped—I couldn’t talk about her, either—but I wanted to say, The eyes are different, even though they shouldn’t be. Something about the mouth is so different. Why does Kelly look older than Other Kelly? What’s wrong with whichever one of them is more wrong?

“I keep thinking about it,” I said. “All Kyle’s photos. Somebody just like you, and you never knowing.”

“Not you,” he said. “You look like somebody about to get shot to death in a Renaissance painting.”

He was trying to insult me; it was the most romantic thing I’d ever heard.

★ ★ ★

Other Kelly had an ASMR channel. None of the others had seen it, but I couldn’t sleep nights. She sat at a table close to the camera, so you only saw her to the neck, her long brown hair swinging a little as she moved; she held silver rings at the very tips of her fingers—fingers that were slightly longer than Kelly’s, no one could say those hands were the same—and tapped the covers of hardback books. It was doing pretty well.

★ ★ ★

Kelly called an emergency meeting the day Carver made her fax some legal thing without looking at it. It was already after nine when she got out of work (*lol fucking kill me* she wrote, underneath the last three *lol fucking kill mes*). By the time she made it to my place we’d eaten the takeout, and all I had was cereal. She ate three bowls without stopping, her gaze shaken loose from anything actually happening. Probably still back in the office; she told me once that she kept a Swingline on her desk for whenever she finally

snapped, and imagining his skull busting open was the only way she could keep coming to work.

She started talking during bowl four. "It's not that I don't trust you, he said, it's that this is really important, and we don't want anyone to be able to complain about your performance. It was his divorce papers. He turned out the light in the room so I couldn't see it. He took my phone back to his desk, too. He took my fucking phone!"

She dropped onto my futon, which I'd bought as small and uncomfortable as possible so nobody would sleep over at my place, which everyone respected but Kelly.

Diana was perched on the other side, at the very edge where none of the metal bars could dig into your back. I was in my wobbly desk chair, and Erin was sitting on my desk so she wouldn't have to sit on my futon. Marshall and Kyle had been omitted, because when Kelly was going to cry she didn't like men to look at her. Other Kelly stood by my bookcase, where she might have been looking over my books, if she could read.

(She couldn't—Kyle had checked. She just liked to look at them. She'd stare at anything, except Kelly.)

Kelly dragged her skin outward under the heels of her hands, like she could pull it tight enough to hold back tears. "Honestly, fuck my job. The insurance won't help when the ulcers eat me, I might as well bail. *Everest* would be less demanding. At least up there if you collapse everybody just leaves you to die in private like normal people."

Diana set down her drink, a little sound that always marked something shitty about to come out of her mouth, and said, "You're right. Go."

"We'd miss you," said Erin, almost like she meant it.

Kelly looked around like she'd actually been expecting a better response. Then she looked at Other Kelly.

Erin and Diana pretended not to notice, but I couldn't help it and I looked over, too. Other Kelly had given up on my books and had

wandered to my window. Two pigeons were fighting over something on the sidewalk outside.

Kelly watched Other Kelly, waiting, picking absently at her cuticles. The silence held a long time. Eventually Kelly shoved her bowl of cereal across the table, toward Other Kelly, slow and deliberate enough that nothing spilled.

"Come on," she said. "You must be hungry."

Other Kelly never moved. At some point Kelly started crying. Erin pulled up the car service she used that was so exclusive I'd never heard of it, face lit up bright green for a second as it loaded. Outside, the pigeons were still fighting, a battery of wings.

★ ★ ★

I had seen myself, once. I'd gone to the Met on a free Friday because I was trying to meet people who weren't the people I already knew. I didn't—I was bad at meeting people, it's how I'd ended up with the people I already knew, Kelly had pulled people toward us until we were all locked in orbit and I had absolutely no idea how you started that all over again from scratch—and it was so embarrassing to be there alone that after a while I'd just kept turning into whatever gallery was empty. In a small room of lesser works nobody was interested in, there was a big painting of some peasant-y kitchen full of light and people. I was sitting on a stool off to one side, peeling potatoes.

It was an old enough painting that the other me had probably died of something disgusting and preventable right after posing for this, so I tried not to get romantic about it, but in the painting I seemed like I knew what I was doing; I had something in my hands, and I understood what was being asked of me.

I wondered if the woman next to me, who was pulling feathers off a duck, had ever met herself here. If someday I would meet that woman—if she was still alive, if she was somehow here. If she'd even recognize me when she saw me, when this potato peeler was

all she had to go on; for someone who had my face, she didn't look like me at all.

* * *

"It's supposed to show up ahead of me."

Everybody shows up before you do, I thought, before I realized what Kelly was talking about.

Diana had gotten dumped eight months ago—Jason, who broke up with her when her mom was sick, saying she'd gotten really selfish. I don't know how long they'd have stayed together if she hadn't been in Connecticut and unable to give up whatever she was doing all the time to go deal with Jason. Diana never spoke about him again, except once when we were walking past some bubble tea place and she'd said "God, this was a deli when Jason—" before she could stop herself, and we'd all frozen up so bad that the people behind us crashed into us. We didn't say anything else for a full minute, like we were waiting for him to show up. It had torn up the sidewalk under us, to hear the name.

There was no reason to be surprised that Kelly was talking about Other Kelly, but it startled me the same way; I banged my knee against the coffee table and looked around to see if Other Kelly was close enough to hear. She wasn't—when I got eyes on her she was out on the street staring into a sewer grate—but it was a fucking stroke of luck. She should have been close enough to hear us.

If Kelly had noticed, she didn't mention it. She was thinking hard. Her bed was too tall, and with her legs tucked up she looked like a kid afraid of what was under there. (The overflowing boxes of musty sweaters and shrunk skirts she had instead of a dresser, the folding chair she kept for guests and never needed.) All her framed art had magazine pages taped over it; she had a succulent in the window, alive, the tag still on.

"The whole point is that they want to replace you. That's the only thing they want." She ran her necklace back and forth under one fingernail, her mouth pulled into a single line. When she saw my

expression the line got thinner. "What? You think I'm not paying attention? I can read, okay? I can like, *prepare*."

She sounded more upset at me than at Other Kelly who had showed up to kill her.

"Okay," I said. "I believe you. What happens when—when you're ... not with us? What does it feel like?"

Kelly glanced at the window. (I thought, At least Kelly isn't alone all the time, and then stopped myself. It didn't count, probably.)

"When my coat molded over the winter," she said, "I bought that other one. I hung it up in the same place. It's molded. But the landlord didn't fix the first leak and he won't fix this one either, and it's not like I can move out, and it's not like another closet will appear, and it's ... I don't have any other place. If I buy another coat, it will be the same thing. But eventually it doesn't matter about the leak or the mold, because where else am I supposed to put my coat? At some point you just run out of places. It feels like that."

After a long time, I said, "What happens to—the person?"

"Consumed," Kelly said. "Like, the person disappears, not like, cannibals."

I tried to imagine Other Kelly consuming anything. When she chewed on Kelly's bones it would sound just like silver rings against a hardback book.

"So what do we do?"

Kelly shrugged; she'd gotten lipstick on her teeth, and I thought vaguely that Other Kelly wouldn't do that. Eventually the necklace gave way, but she kept her hand where it was, pressed to her sternum, the chain spilling down over her fingers.

"Ask nicely," she said.

★ ★ ★

Game night was at Marshall's, and when I got there Diana and Kyle were setting up some new game Kyle had brought from the game night he had with his other set of friends, who he'd never introduced us to because he said we wouldn't like them—they were too serious,

apparently, and he wanted our game nights to be more fun (“*This one’s really fun,*” he said every fucking month, like he’d ever been right). Other Kelly was in the kitchen toasting something while Marshall finished his cheese plate.

“I brought wine,” I announced, toeing off my shoes. We’d dropped most of the actual greetings a while ago. No plural seemed to work anymore since Other Kelly.

“Kyle is setting up Round Table,” Marshall said, one tick too pleasantly. “It’s an Arthurian board game with cards. You go on quests.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I reminded him that Erin hates card games and you hate quests, but Kyle was not to be deterred,” Marshall informed me as he slammed the last handful of cucumber slices on the board and scooped the whole thing up to bring it into the living room. Other Kelly moved an inch forward to let him pass by, though she never looked up from the toaster; when the toast popped up, she pushed the lever again.

“*This one’s really fun!*” Kyle called.

“Erin doesn’t have fun, Erin wins or she quits,” Diana said, putting the last little pewter knight into the cluster at the center of the board. “Remember when she lost that game of KeyCypher last year?”

“Well, Erin has issues,” Kyle said, after visibly discarding his first reaction, which was that if anyone lost a puzzle game to me they should be ashamed of themselves. Everybody had pointedly joked about it for three weeks after that game night, any time any of us met up, that Erin the salutatorian had lost a puzzle game to me. Eventually Erin pulled me aside and said, “I’m not going to come back unless they can shut up about it,” which was at least half for my sake, and that was about as considerate as Erin could be about anything. By the time she finally showed up again it was autumn, and everyone was so worried she’d ditched us all forever that nobody brought it up anymore.

Somebody buzzed the apartment. It was probably Erin. Kelly was going to be late (*sorry!! should i bring coffee? definitely start without me*); she hated game night as much as any of us, but she didn't want to risk getting cut out, so she showed up too late to play and got weirdly supportive off to one side of the couch.

I didn't want to be in the living room with Erin, in case Kyle tried to be funny again and also a little bit just because of Erin, so I moved out of sight into the kitchen. The thing that had been a slice of bread about seven toasts ago popped back up. It was nearly charcoal. Other Kelly pushed it back down.

"I brought doughnuts," said Erin as she beelined down the hall. Everybody in the living room immediately began parceling out who was going to get the fun flavors.

"I won KeyCypher because I figured out one of the symbols was for a space between words," I said. "Everybody else forgot about separation."

Other Kelly looked up from the toaster. I wasn't really looking at her (how could you), but I was talking to her. There was nobody else to talk to.

"That's hazelnut, put it down," said Marshall, "we roll for it. Diana, the dice."

"You can buy doughnuts yourself with money whenever you'd like," said Erin.

The toast came back up. It was fully a cinder.

"Four, *fuck*," said Marshall, "okay wait, stop—Kyle, stop it—we're doing best two out of three."

Other Kelly's finger hovered over the lever for a second before pushing. The two of us watched the cinder fall apart.

★ ★ ★

I was supposed to meet Kelly for coffee, and even though I was twenty minutes late Kelly was still texting *left the house I promise* and *hang on my laces broke be there asap*. Eventually I made a slow

loop of the park to let Other Kelly stare at stuff. She liked water a lot. Trees. Shadows.

"Hey, Kelly," called Carver.

Kelly had made me be her date to her office holiday party, the first time; she'd still thought there was a future for her, and she introduced me to people as if she'd be talking about them a lot as soon as she got promoted. That was so long ago that she'd still looked like Other Kelly, no eye bags and all her cuticles still in one piece. Carver looked exactly the same, except now he was in an outfit where everything he was wearing was a slightly different shade of black with a different logo on it, walking a dog.

"Kelly, wow," said Carver, mostly to his phone, and partly to the dog that was struggling to get at a cigarette butt. "Small town, huh? You know, our deadline hasn't changed just because it's the weekend. Are you on your way in?"

Other Kelly stared. I thought about a mouth full of metal teeth ripping Carver right off the bone. What was all this for, if not to make everybody who knew Kelly fear for their lives?

He said, "I mean, you don't have to, but it's really not fair to the team when you get overwhelmed. Nobody wants to make you work on a weekend, but, you know?"

She blinked at him. He gave her a tight smile, waved with the dog-leash hand (the puppy choked), said, "Okay great, thanks," and left.

Other Kelly and I looked at each other. It was too long, immediately, but then I was stuck staring, waiting for Other Kelly to ask the question I knew, all at once, she wanted to ask.

Then the wind shook the trees, and whatever I had been staring at was gone; she was already in the little grove, shadows dappling her hair as she stared down where her body blocked out the light.

I ended up meeting Kelly at the coffee place alone; Other Kelly hadn't followed me, and I didn't know how to call out for her.

I explained what had happened. She took too long to realize Other Kelly hadn't done anything to Carver, and hadn't gone

wherever Kelly was supposed to go now, and hadn't even come here to get stared at. Then her head dropped forward. Her hands, short-fingered, pulled the skin taut over her face. Her whole body was fraying at the edges.

"It's not fair," she said. "I'm so ready. How fucking long do I have to hold on?"

"She'll be here soon," I said.

I believed it, too. I believed it for a long time. I sat there even after Kelly had given up and left for work; for nearly an hour I sat in a stool at the window of the coffee shop, waiting for Other Kelly to find one of us or the other, wishing for something to do with my hands.

★ ★ ★

Game night was KeyCypher ("I'm *sorry*, I forgot," snapped Kyle from the living room, as Erin said "Don't use that tone with me, I'm not the one who made it an issue" and Diana cut in with "I would honestly rather play Go Fish than get into this again"), and Marshall had invented some missing thing from the cheese board just so he'd have a reason to walk half a mile to the new fancy grocery store in the lobby of the new block of glass condos and avoid all of us for forty minutes.

Kelly was late (no texts), and honestly it was just as well. Other Kelly hadn't come. There was nothing for her here.

I was in the kitchen. With the lights off it was dark and quiet. I pushed the toast back down. It wasn't a cinder yet, but it would be soon.



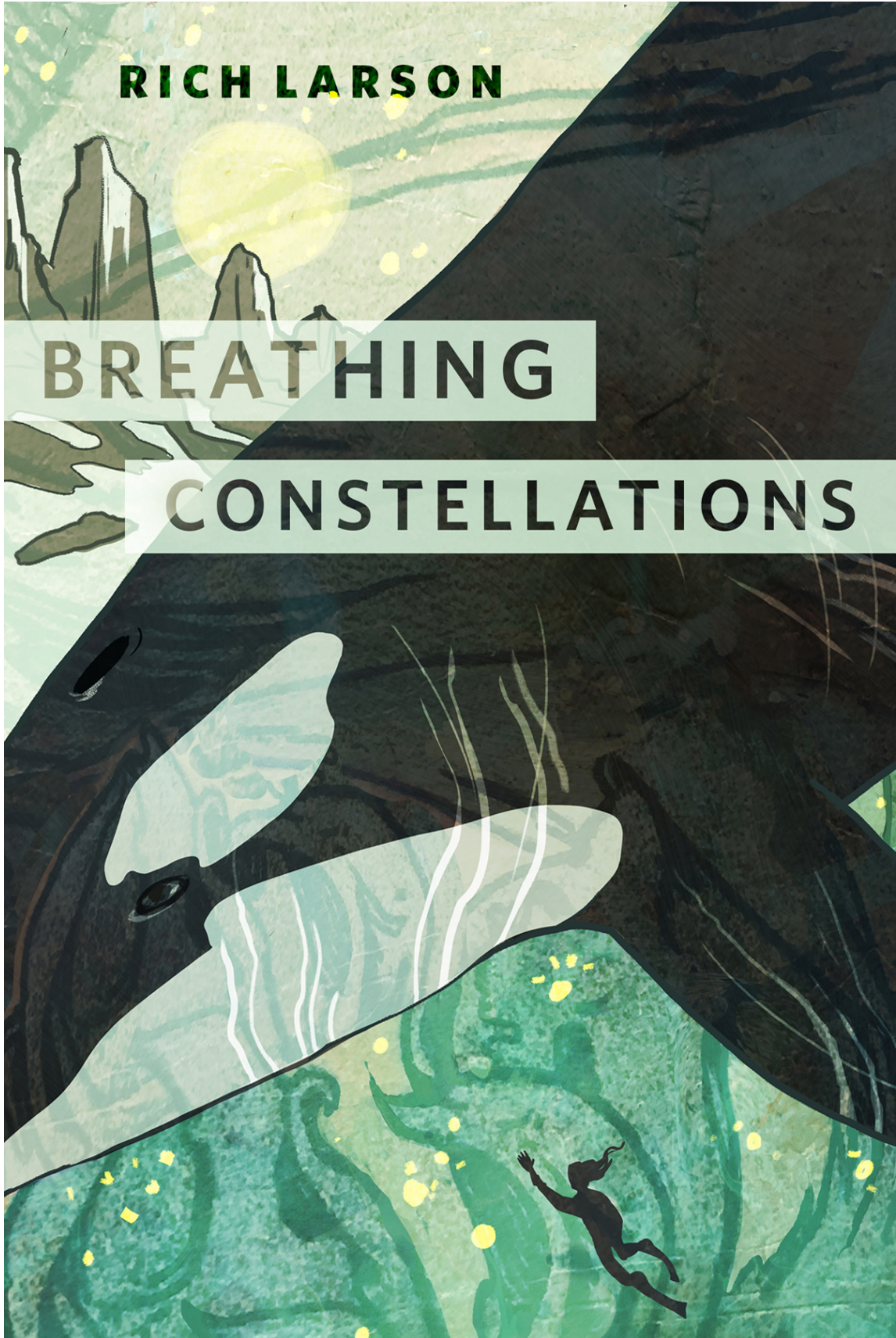
Copyright © 2024 Genevieve Valentine

Art copyright © 2024 Mary Pelc

RICH LARSON

BREATHING

CONSTELLATIONS



Breathing Constellations

R I C H L A R S O N

illustration by

Z E L D A D E V O N

REACTOR 

“They don’t want to talk, Vega.”

Vega readjusted the waterproof screen hooked to their sonar. The pod was still circling below, graceful black-and-white behemoths rendered as drifting pixels. The babeltech transmitter was still functional, squealing a standard Patagonian greeting into the dark waves. But just like yesterday, and all the days prior, not a single orca spoke back.

“Come on,” Miguel pleaded. “It’s cold. It’s been hours.” Her younger brother, small and skinny for seventeen, was huddled in the back of the boat, shivering despite his puffy orange coat. “Let’s go home.”

“You were the one who wanted to come along,” Vega said, checking the transmitter settings. “Maybe there’s been a dialectal shift. Maybe they don’t like this pitch anymore.”

“Maybe they already know what we want from them,” Miguel said, face stiff as the wooden masks he’d been carving lately. “And know they don’t want to give it to us. Because they’re nonhuman apex predators who don’t give a shit whether we starve or not.”

The words triggered a familiar dread, the one that had been seeping slowly through Vega’s stomach wall for the past two weeks. She said nothing.

“Could be for the best, now that Mom’s dead,” her brother muttered. “Could be the commune was never built to last without her.”

In all of a split second, Vega’s dread oxidized to burning anger. “Don’t say that,” she snapped. “Don’t ever say that. We’re still here, and once we have the plankton farm running, we’ll be just fine, so don’t you ever talk about—about giving up. It’s fucking cowardly.”

Miguel flinched with his whole body, ears flushing scarlet, and Vega could feel her own face heating up to match.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I didn't say anything about giving up," Miguel muttered, with a bruised catch in his voice.

"I'm sorry," Vega repeated, wishing she could reel it all back. "I just—"

The sonar chimed, and her next words caught in her throat as an enormous snout exploded out of the stormy gray water. The spyhopping orca was female, gigantic, her black hide scarred from years of hunting. The matriarch had finally come to open negotiations. Vega glanced at her brother, whose dark eyes were winched wide, then she pulled up the babeltech input with a trembling finger.

"Greetings to the matriarch," she said. "I am named Vega." She paused, tried to remember the grammatical guidelines that best let the tech do its work. "The other human is my brother. My brother is named Miguel. We come from the Punta Norte commune."

The transmitter clicked and squealed. Just under the white slash of the orca's patch, her glossy brown eye narrowed. Vega tried to avoid anthropomorphization, to read it only as visual focusing and not a signal of suspicion.

"The Punta Norte commune is struggling to feed itself," she continued. "We seek your permission to begin harvesting plankton here in your waters."

The matriarch's jaw slivered open, revealing rows of conical teeth.

"There will be submerged construction," Vega said. "But only for a brief period. And once it's complete, your pod will be welcome to —"

"Away."

The single synthesized word bleated from the receiver. Before Vega could seek clarification, the matriarch plunged back beneath the waves, leaving a whirlpool gurgling in her wake, and before the

boat could stop rocking, the entire pod had turned east and swum off.

Vega stared after them in utter despair. Today would end just like yesterday.

"We can talk, if you want," Miguel said quietly, still looking out across the ocean. "About Mom. We haven't really done that yet."

Vega turned to him, feeling a familiar numbness. She knew they *should* talk, knew it was something her brother needed even if she didn't. But she was cold and aching and hollowed out by successive failures.

"We will," she promised. "Just not right now. Let's get home and get warm first."

★ ★ ★

But Vega couldn't stay within the bounds of the commune for long, not when every person she came across had the same question, in words or a look: *Any luck? Any luck today?* Even worse than the worried faces were the trusting ones, though the past weeks had eroded that population.

And everywhere she looked, she still saw Mom. Lounging on the stoop of a neighbor's biobrick house, or elbow-deep in the main solar generator, or squatting to inspect whatever had shown up in the wild, tangled gardens—back before the blight wiped them out.

Mom had been the beating heart of this place and its nervous system at the same time, and Vega didn't know how to be either. So instead of telling people *No luck today*, or sitting down to open wounds with Miguel, she slipped away, back to the beach.

She hauled the transmitter with her, ostensibly to recalibrate it, but it was only camouflage. Her real goal was to be alone and miserable by the water. She clambered across sea-slimed rock to her usual perch, a broad stone with a shallow indent. Then she unspooled the receiver and lowered it into the water—carefully, because it was valuable. Sat down right in a cold puddle, because she was not.

When Vega had been younger, she and Miguel and their mom sometimes watched the orcas from this stretch of shore, competing to spot dorsal fins slicing the waves. The pod had seemed beautiful, alien, dangerous. Something to admire from—and keep at—a respectful distance.

That wasn't an option anymore. There could be no legal plankton farming without the orcas' say-so, and the company loaning Punta Norte the equipment had given them a hard deadline to produce proof of agreement. Vega shut her eyes and pushed the heels of her hands against them, blacking out the world and all the problems therein, the biggest of them being the fact that the deadline was now less than forty-eight hours away.

"You are named Vega."

The synthesized voice jolted her eyes open. She stared down at the transmitter in shock, then scrambled for the input. The pod had returned, and now someone was in the shallows, close enough that she could pick up their clicks.

"Yes," she blurted. "Yes, I am named Vega."

"I am named Breathe-For-Us," the voice said. "Circle in place, Vega. I will come to you."

For a giddy moment, Vega thought she was being ordered to get up and pirouette—and nearly did it, too. But it made sense that the orcas had no term for sitting still on a rock. She re-checked the transmitter settings, then hugged the babeltech to her chest and watched the frothing waves for dorsal fins.

There: gray, lopsided, carving through dark water. It wasn't the matriarch. This orca had a more angular eyespot, less scarring. Vega felt her hopes dim slightly, but she was unwilling to extinguish them completely as another clicking burst of speech hit the receiver.

"Why are you named Vega?" the babeltech intoned.

Vega blinked. "It's the name of a star, up in one of the northern constellations," she said. "My mother named me after that star."

The orca's dorsal fin rose skyward like a pointing finger. "We do not know star names," came the synthesized voice. "They are too far

to hear.”

“For us, too,” Vega said. “We invent the names.” She gripped the input more tightly. “And you? Why are you named Breathe-For-Us?”

The orca was close now, swimming perilously near to the rocks. A female, but not quite as old or as massive as the matriarch. “Breathe-For-Us is the name given when a calf fears their first breath of air,” the babeltech bleated. “When the calf fears to breach. My mother sang it to me, and the pod sang with her, and it became my name.”

“That’s amazing,” Vega said, and meant it. “I’m glad you breathed. Glad you survived.” Her heart thrummed hopefully in her chest. “I’m glad you and I can speak now, because the matriarch—”

“Do you know why she ignores you, Vega?” Breathe-For-Us interrupted.

Vega’s face grew hot, and she felt her shoulders slump of their own accord. “No,” she said. “Tell me. Please.”

“You speak to us as if we were salmon-gluttons,” the orca said. “We are unamused.”

Vega knew the pejorative referred to the resident pods up near Old Vancouver, for whom the Patagonian orcas held little love. But she also knew that her babeltech was tuned specifically, painstakingly, to the local dialect, and was about to defend herself when Breathe-For-Us asked a second question.

“Do you know our way-of-hunt?”

Vega bit at the inside of her cheek. Orca hunting methods were almost as varied as human ones, but there was a particular behavior found only here. “Stranding,” she guessed, as the orca drifted ever closer. “You mean stranding.”

In answer, her conversation partner burst free from the water. Spray drenched Vega’s clothes, stung her eyes; she stumbled blindly to her feet with a shout of alarm, still clutching the babeltech to her chest. She heard a sickly sound, meat and blubber smacking jagged stone, as the orca hurled herself out of the shallows and onto the rocks.

“Holy shit,” Vega said, not caring if the babeltech could interpret the curse. “Holy shit, are you all right?”

Breathe-For-Us wriggled on the shoreline, transformed in all of an instant from graceful titan to oversized larva. She bared her bright teeth, and this time Vega could hear both the chittering squeal and the babeltech’s interpretation.

“I come to your world shucked,” the orca said. “You come to ours in a shell, refusing its smallest touch.”

Vega stared, tracing the vast web of scars crisscrossing her hide, picturing for the first time the hundreds of strandings that had created them. Then the tide surged back, and with a perfectly timed thrust of her tail, Breathe-For-Us rolled herself from rock to water. She drifted there in the shallows for a moment, belly scraping stone, the whole of her body heaving from the effort.

“We are unamused,” she repeated, and swam away.

★ ★ ★

Vega returned to the commune at a shambling run, desperate to share her news, equally desperate to not slip and fall and smash the precious babeltech to pieces. She’d seen stranding before, if never up close. So had Mom, so had Miguel, so had any other Punta Norte inhabitants who took time to orca-watch. It was the hunting technique the Patagonians were famous for, one of the earliest proofs of nonhuman cultural transmission.

In order to prey on sunbathing seals, local orcas left the safety of the water entirely. They would throw their bodies onto the rocky shoreline, snag a fur seal in their jaws, then combine precise timing with brute strength to return to the waves before their bulk made the stranding a permanent one. Older orcas could be seen teaching the method to younger ones, practicing on chunks of driftwood, knots of seaweed.

But it was more than just a way-of-hunt. Vega saw that now, and the instant she saw her younger brother, slumped on the steps of

their biobrick hut with his carving knife in hand, she knew what she needed to do.

"One talked," she blurted. "While I was at the beach, an orca came to talk, came right up to me, and told me why the pod's ignoring us."

Miguel snapped to attention, dark eyes blinking hard. "And?"

"Because they think they're real tough customers," Vega said. "And they only talk to other tough customers. You know stranding?" She freed one hand and made it into an orca, thrashed it onto an imaginary shoreline. "Breathe-For-Us—that's the one who came to talk—she did it right in front of me. Said she comes to our world naked."

"They're always naked," Miguel said, frowning. "Why do they even have a concept for naked?"

"The translation was 'shucked,'" Vega said, hefting the equipment in her arms. "But it's not important. What's important is that I do the same thing, but in reverse." She envisioned it properly for the first time, and couldn't quite suppress her shudder. "I have to get in the water with them. No shell. Meaning: no boat."

Miguel's eyes widened. "Vega. No."

"People used to do it," Vega said. "They used to do it all the time."

"That was before the orcas enacted their ..." Miguel waved his arm, coaxing the term from memory. "Retaliation Doctrine," he finished. "Before they started ramming boats and dismembering kayakers."

"And the Retaliation Doctrine was pre-babeltech," Vega argued. "It was their only way of telling us to stop fucking with them. It's been years now since a fatal incident."

She regretted her choice of words the millisecond they left her lips. *Fatal incident* was only syllables off *fatal infection*. Her brother's face spasmed, unable to hide the pain. He glared at the babeltech bundled in her arms, and Vega could see all his grief and frustration rising, ready to breach.

But when he spoke, his voice was calm. "You won't be able to haul all that stuff around underwater."

Vega felt a rush of relief. "No," she agreed. "Think you can help me streamline it?" She paused. "We could strap it to Mom's old diving gear."

The corners of Miguel's mouth lifted just slightly, taking the liminal space between smile and grimace. "A babelmask," he said.

Vega nodded.

★ ★ ★

Every person in the commune gathered to send them off the next morning, murmuring encouragements, squeezing Vega's shoulders. The hope had returned to their faces, and it was more frightening than ever. Vega did her best to murmur thanks back. To smile warmly. To look brave, and capable, and more like her mother.

She and Miguel shoved off into the water, angled toward the pod's feeding grounds—for all their *salmon-glutton* disdain, when no seals were around the Patagonians ate plenty of fish themselves. Vega breathed deep, inhaling the briny breeze.

"Last chance," Miguel said, because he was always verbalizing the things she didn't want verbalized.

"Yeah," she said.

Her brother looked out over the water, his thumb tapping the tiller. "I don't think it's about being a tough customer."

She blinked. "What?"

"What you said yesterday. The stranding behavior. I don't think it's about being tough." He gave a strained smile, and Vega saw a worrying wetness in his eyes. "I mean, imagine how it must feel for them."

Vega pictured the scar tissue wrapped around Breathe-For-Us's body. "It would hurt," she said, running her fingers absently along her wetsuit. "A lot."

Miguel nodded. "Physically? Big time. Mentally, even worse." His thumb tapped quicker on the tiller. "I kept thinking about it last

night. How it would feel to go from the sea—where you're the queen, where you're the apex predator, where even great white sharks run away from you—to bellied down on the rocks. Totally exposed, heavy all at once. Gouging yourself open on edges you can't even see."

Vega's brain churned through the image, then past it, to what was coming next: her floundering in the dark water with predatory behemoths circling around her, beneath her. "Helpless," she said, windpipe squeezing tight around the word. "They feel helpless."

"They feel vulnerable," Miguel said sharply. "It's not the same thing, Vega. Because they know there's a way to get out of it, and they know ..." He drew a shuddery breath. "They know it's worth doing. They share big kills, right? So for the good of the pod, that little moment of absolute terror is worth it. Feeling vulnerable is worth it."

A small, cruel voice in the back of Vega's mind, the one she heard so often lately, wanted to ask her brother if he was done playing psychologist. Wanted to suggest they get back to focusing on the situation at hand, on the actual stakes. Instead, she reached inside herself for that particular transmitter and ripped it out by the wires.

"The first time Mom got sick, back when we were kids," Vega began. "I thought I would be able to handle her dying." Saying it aloud made Vega queasy with shame, made Miguel flinch, but she pushed on. "I wrote up a list of all the things she did for us. All the responsibilities. And I thought—okay. I'll be able to do those things. Or else learn them. I wanted ..." She swallowed back the mudslide building in her throat. "I wanted to take care of you so good you'd barely notice she was gone," she croaked. "But she got better. We got older." Vega looked her brother in the eye. "Now all of a sudden she *does* die, and I realize I have no fucking clue."

Miguel stared for a moment. Then he fell against her, letting go of the tiller to wrap both scrawny arms around her, and she hugged back hard enough to bruise. All the spaces she'd thought were

hollow were brimming over now; all the numbness was boiling away. She suspected it would be back, suspected she still needed it in some way, but for now she stroked her brother's head and sobbed herself dry.

They stayed sitting like that until their sonar chimed. Tear-blurred shapes were moving on the waterproof screen, the pod gathering. Still holding Miguel, Vega craned over the side of the boat. Massive silhouettes slid back and forth beneath the dark water. She knew one of them had to be Breathe-For-Us, waiting to see if fearful humans could learn new tricks.

Her brother gave her a final squeeze, then opened his bag and pulled out the babelmask, the thing he'd spent half the night sculpting and soldering. The receiver now looped into a pair of waterproofed earbuds; the stripped-down transmitter sat across the front of the oxygen intake like a toothy grin. There was a tiny star etched into the bridge of the goggles.

"Like it?" Miguel asked.

"It's beautiful," Vega said, and realized it also looked kind of alien, kind of dangerous, which meant it was perfect for the job at hand.

"Thanks." Miguel paused. "Whether this works or not, whether the commune stays or breaks up—she'd be glad you tried. And she'd want you and me to be happy anyway."

Vega inhaled. Nodded. Then she slipped the babelmask over her head and let Miguel fasten it to the neck of her wetsuit. Fear was rising from the pit of her stomach in slow, trembly bubbles; walking to the edge of the boat felt like walking to the edge of a cliff. Memories of watching the pod hunt came to her unbidden: the sudden strike, the billowing red cloud, the moment a thrashing animal became drifting meat. It made her heart thump harder.

Maybe what she'd taken for advice had been meant as a final dismissal, a veiled threat. Maybe Breathe-For-Us was still young enough for cruel games, luring a particularly annoying human into

the water to be tossed from maw to maw like a rag doll and finally drowned.

"Wish me luck," Vega said, the words accompanied in stereo by a click and squeal.

"Good luck," Miguel said quietly. "Love you, Vega."

"Love you, Miguel," she replied, and stepped off the boat.

Even through the wetsuit, the icy water hit her bones. When it closed over her head and she took her first pull of oxygen, she pictured an orca calf breaching the surface for the very first time. Then the swirling vortex of bubbles dispersed, and she saw that once-calf gliding toward her. Breathe-For-Us seemed even bigger down here, dorsal fin rising like a crooked tower.

Her skin was practically smooth compared to the scarred and pitted hide of the orca swimming behind her. The matriarch was back, and for the first time, Vega noticed her dorsal had a certain lopsidedness to it, as well. Breathe-For-Us let out a long, popping burst, and the babelmask turned it to synthesized speech in Vega's earbuds.

"Welcome, Vega," the orca said. "My mother has agreed to speak with you. If you are ready to speak."

"I'm ready," Vega said, and the words became a fluid whistle, high and true.

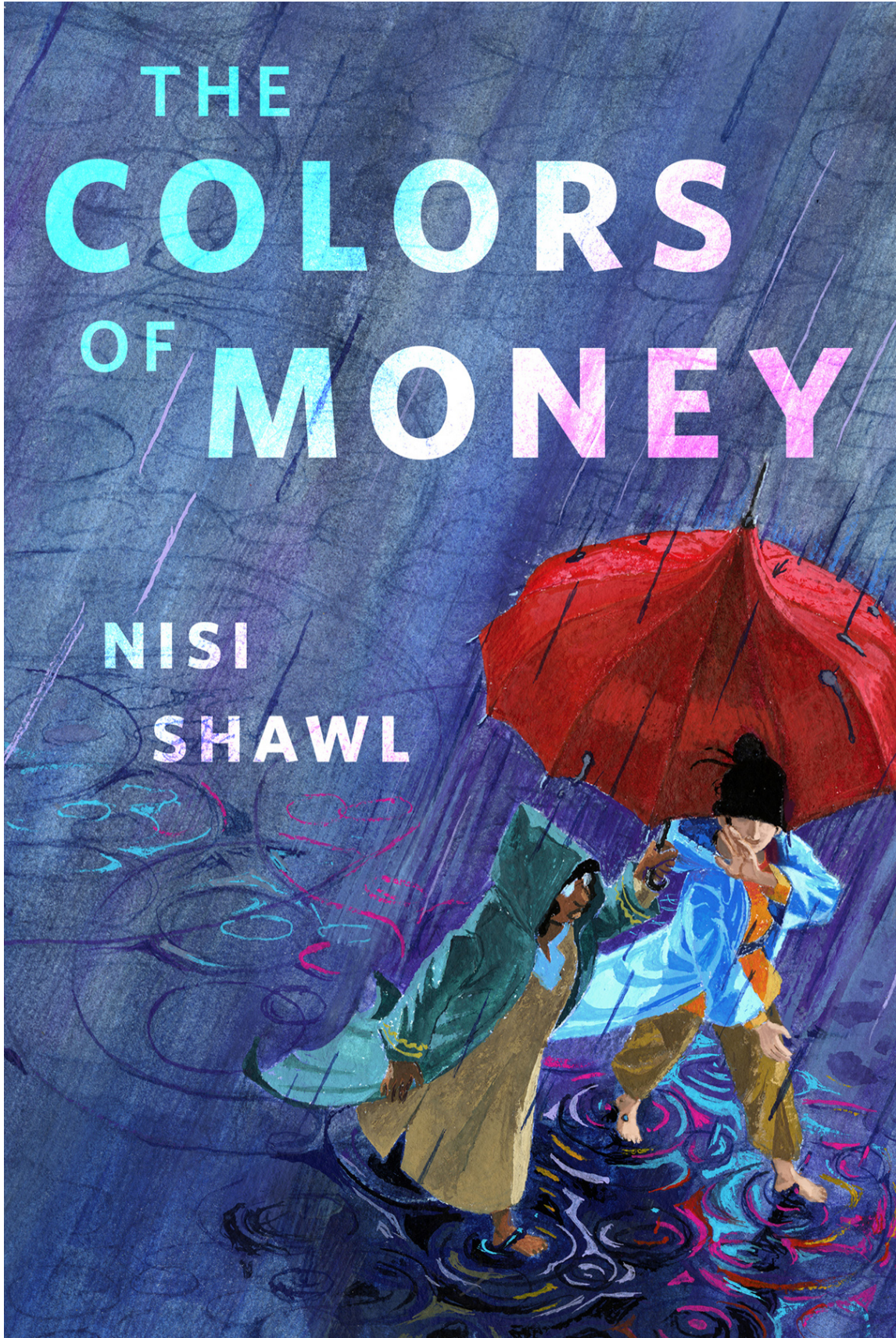


Copyright © 2024 Rich Larson

Art copyright © 2024 Zelda Devon

THE
COLORS
OF
MONEY

NISI
SHAWL



The Color of Money

NISI SHAWL

illustration by

JABARI WEATHERS

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

Though the sun grinned fiercely down, September's steadily blowing *kaskazi* kept Rosalie cool enough as she walked out from under the shadow of the recently arrived aircanoe. Moored to the new mast built atop the Old Fort wall in 1918, *Tippu Tib* bobbed ever so slightly as the last dozen of its passengers disembarked. Beside her Laurie Jr., Rosalie's long-estranged brother, blinked in the brilliant afternoon light. "Kind of you to meet me here," he said. That was the sort of automatic politeness she'd come to expect of him during her year in Britain. The sort of surface-borne emotions he seemed to feel for her. Nothing deep. Nothing that would justify his visit now, mere months after her return to Africa.

What did he want? What did he really want? She watched his eyes rove nervously over the heat-thinned crowds of the fruit market. On her first trips to Zanzibar at the age of eighteen, soon after Leopold's defeat, the inhabitants of Stone Town had seemed strange, their billowing, quasi-Arab robes so different from Everfair's mix of nudity and tropics-adapted European styles.

"Is it far to where we're to stay?"

"No." They reached the intersection. She turned. "This is Hurumzi Street. That means 'free man' in Kee-Swah-Hee-Lee. That building up there—we'll soon pass it—that's Zanzibar's old Office of Manumission." She remembered Laurie liked being told such things. "From there Emerson House is only a few yards on.

"How was your trip?" She should probably have asked sooner, but he seemed gratified nonetheless.

"A bit of fuss over my transfer to *Tibbu* from the cruiser. Customs officials talked some rot about detaining me in Alexandria since I

wasn't boarding the train to Cairo. But I had arranged this little detour with the company's full knowledge. It all worked out with a touch of lubricant." He rubbed his thumb and fingers together in a gesture she understood to mean money.

Laurie's "little detour" here had taken him as many miles from Alexandria as his original itinerary had taken him from London. Rosalie supposed that once he'd left "civilization" behind the rest of the world was a featureless blur to be passed through as quickly as possible. All the rest of the world except their mother's home, where he refused to go.

In mere seconds, clouds covered the sun. Rosalie raised her hood and gathered her cream-colored Omani duster close about her. Her brother's Foreign Office helmet, made from the pith of the sola tree, would shield him from rain as well as the heat of the sun. But they arrived at the guesthouse before the shower burst.

Imran waited in front to open the door and usher them to the table behind which his mother sat in stiff watchfulness. A nod, a swiftly made notation to the page of the registry book opened before her, and her gnarled hands removed an iron key from the bunch at her waist. Imran took the key and went ahead of them to the stairs.

After the fourth flight Laurie flagged. He pretended to be astonished by the view between the bars covering the landing's tiny window. "Very nice!" he declared. "That's the mooring tower, I take it?"

Rosalie didn't bother looking to where he pointed. She already knew the tower was visible. "Yes."

Laurie's stoutness stemmed not from greed or laziness. She no longer laughed, even internally, when his fatness discommoded him. She mounted the next set of steps more slowly. "The view from the rooftop garden is most astonishing. Imran, you will bring us tea there, please."

"Just the ticket." Breathing heavily, but still through his nose, Laurie followed her up the penultimate flight.

"Miss's room is to the west," said Imran in his accentless English. "Yours is opposite. Do you wish to see—"

"No, no, I'm sure it's fine. Will my valet be able to obtain entry? My luggage, when it's brought, will that be properly taken care of?"

"Most assuredly. I will see to it."

"Then let us proceed to the roof for our refreshment." Stubbornness was a family trait.

Exiting the shed at the top of the last of the stairs, Rosalie felt without surprise the gentle patter of rain on her light curls. She made an apologetic face at her brother as he emerged behind her. "It won't last long. Do you mind? There's a pavilion where we can shelter till it stops."

Laurie removed his hat and swiped off the moisture collected on his forehead—probably a greater percentage of perspiration than precipitation. "Capital. Cooling, isn't it?"

Imran assisted them in seating themselves, bestowing embroidered cushions so strategically that her brother actually looked at ease on the low benches. At Laurie's nod of satisfaction he disappeared down the steps without waiting for further instruction.

"Kind of you to meet me here," Laurie said again. He wanted her response so he could continue the conversation in a certain direction.

"I had business on Pemba anyway," she said, "with my coral suppliers and the family who collects shells for me. A trip thirty miles south was on the way."

"Nonetheless. I didn't dare write to tell you why I wished to meet you here, in case some spy found me out. And I realize full well that leaving Everfair so soon after your return, with the government in an uproar, must have upset Mrs. Albin—"

"Do you mean Maman, or George's wife?"

"*Your* mother—as you insist." From the age of three Laurie had been raised by their father's second wife, Ellen, in England; because of that and because Ellen had actually given birth to him and to

Rosalie, he refused to acknowledge Daisy Albin's maternal rights. "I imagine she was unhappy to see you go."

"She understood." Besides, there was the commission Maman's wife Mam'selle had given Rosalie—and the contradictory one from Princess Mwadi.

"Did she." Laurie heaved himself up for a better sightline over the garden pavilion's short wall. "Will that boy be back up again with our tea soon? I have something to say. I don't wish it overheard by servants."

"Mr. Imran and his mother own this house."

"Or by anyone, if it comes to that."

Secrets. Rosalie had them, too.

To pass the awkward interval till Imran returned, she showed her brother the necklace she kept tucked beneath her smock top. It hung from a leather cord strung with carefully matched treasures: heavy silver beads from the braids of desert wanderers; two-sided rounds of shell, black and moon-bright; segments of blue-dyed coral, unpolished, their rough surfaces intricate with the patterns of growth. And suspended by a filigree finding the size of a baby's hand, the medallion she'd made from the remains of the little oil-slicked Pemba Island tortoise she tried to save.

"Pretty," said Laurie, setting it on the lacquered table before them. What had she expected? Not even Maman, sympathetic and familiar with Rosalie's work from years of intimacy, thought it important. Wordlessly she slipped the necklace back on. Thank heaven she'd met Amrita. Amrita understood.

"Jolly prospect up here," Laurie remarked. Streams of water poured off of the pavilion's canopy. Further away the individual chains of raindrops blended into greyness and obscurity.

The door to the stairway down opened, a subtle change in the sound of the monsoon's drumming, an almost-echo. A man and woman appeared, the woman carrying a tea tray and the man hovering over her, carrying an umbrella. The man of the pair was Imran, as expected, but they hadn't taken a step in Rosalie's

direction before she recognized that the woman was Amrita. Who ought to have been thirty, forty, fifty miles away, safely hidden among Pemba's green hills.

Amrita smiled as she lowered the tray. "Miss will like to prepare the drink herself?"

Rosalie was momentarily too outraged to speak.

"That's right," Laurie said. "And is there any milk?" He began lifting the covers of the various bowls and ewers. "Ah, good! And what's this?" He indicated a pink-and-white cube on an enameled saucer.

"A confection of rosewater, a Shirazan delicacy my mother thought you might enjoy," said Imran. He bowed and turned to leave. Amrita did the same.

"Pardon me for just a moment, Laurie." Rosalie leapt up and chased her friends across the garden. She caught up as Imran grasped the handle of the still-open door.

"What are you doing here?" She realized she clutched Amrita's gold-trimmed sleeve. She made herself release it.

Amrita's flower-like face lost a bit of bloom. "Let us get out of the rain and your brother's regard and I'll tell you. Inside." She took Rosalie by her elbow and guided her to the stairs and a few steps down. Imran stayed with them.

Impatiently she asked again, "What are you *doing*?"

"I'm spying on your brother."

Her brother needed to be spied upon? "No, *I'm* the one doing that! *You* are simply interfering in what is none of your concern!"

A pitying look. "Imran, tell her."

"Yes, tell me." She rounded on her host. "Am I not intelligent enough for this work? Am I judged incapacitated by emotional attachment to our target? Am I to be withdrawn? Replaced?"

Imran raised his hands, tan palms outward. "No. Please, calm yourself, miss." He called her "miss" at all times to avoid addressing her erroneously in front of those who mustn't know of their true relationship: equals.

The kaskazi entered as the door behind her opened. Her brother stood without, his expression annoyed. "Is the help proving recalcitrant about something, Rosalie? Do you need any assistance?"

"All is well," Imran assured him. "Your sister merely inquired whether little Rita will assume the duties of her personal attendant now she is promoted from the kitchen."

"Doesn't seem so urgent you need to leave the tea to stew, Rosie."

How Rosalie abhorred that diminutive. "As you say." She forced hauteur into her voice. "Girl, you may bathe and dress me for dinner. Come to my room betimes." She went back to the pavilion with Laurie.

Already the rain tapered gently off. Drops fell more slowly from the new leaves of Imran's beloved stripling oil palms, or hung motionless till she brushed against them as she passed. In the wet distance, other rooftops shimmered as the sun broke cover.

The tea was passable. Perhaps Rosalie had been spoiled by the freshness of the produce of Maman's plantation. Laurie stirred a spoon of honey into his cup in lieu of sugar. "I believe I will try a morsel of this as well," he said, using a butter knife to slice a sliver from one side of the Shirazan rosewater preparation.

"Now. You know I have been tasked with representing certain British interests in the cause of exploiting oil and mineral rights in the Levant."

Rosalie nodded. He had admitted as much over Christmas of last year, when she reasoned with him for the last time about his avoidance of Everfair. Attending to his work, as he explained it then, prohibited long visits such as she wanted him to make.

"In the brief months since we parted the assignment has expanded. Word reached my employers of oil deposits here, in their newly won possessions."

"Here?"

"Nearby. This very archipelago; in fact, Pemba." His face took on a look of self-congratulation. "So you see why I suggested that we

make this place our rendezvous.”

How had the far-off English discovered this? Who had told them? Was there a traitor at court among the Sheikhas? They wanted the oil developed to fund humanitarian projects. Unlike the sultan. Or could Laurie’s source of information live in one of the fishing villages, among partisans of the oil palm? Somehow the fiction of a bombed and sunken freighter full of crude had obviously been pierced. She must get away, must warn—was there anyone trustworthy?

Like an automaton, Rosalie lifted the teapot to Laurie’s raised cup. “What will you have to do? Is there any way for me to assist you?” Hinder you, she meant.

“Well, I’ll want to inspect the site and map out its boundaries....”

She relaxed a tiny bit. He knew there was oil, but not exactly where. Her side could still make their claim.

“And then I’ll need to approach the owner—”

“If there is one.”

“How not? Oh, you mean that the deposits may lie within lands owned directly by Sheikh Khalifa.”

“And his dependents.”

“Yes. You have contacts there, I take it, because of your—” He waved his hand as if at a negligible object. “—hobbyhorse, that crafting of jewelry you care so much about. Fellow riders, eh? Nothing but time on their hands in that harem.” A suggestive leer was banished as he remembered she was a lady—at least in his estimate.

The rest of their conversation consisted of plans for an excursion to Pemba. Rosalie suggested chartering a private boat, an idea her brother seized upon as if it had been his own. She would count on Imran to make the arrangements, and to make sure that whatever they were they fell through till a means of dealing with Laurie had been found.

An hour of this, and then she was able to escape to her rooms. Ostensibly to nap. She took a chance on Laurie overhearing and rang the bell.

Amrita answered it, opening the suite's door and bowing gracefully as she shut it, as if she'd been in service all her days. "Miss."

Rosalie jerked her head toward the balcony. When Amrita joined her there she related her findings.

"So." Amrita, like Imran and much of Pemba's population itself, favored investing in oil palm production and leaving whatever petroleum deposits they sat on unexploited. "If your brother has his way, you'll be happy."

"No! The money ought to benefit *us*! Everfair and Zanzibar!"

"Then I suppose you'd better inform the Sheikhas that their charity fund is about to be plundered. And soon."

Next day, under the flimsy pretense of obtaining permission to access the ruins of a temple of no real interest, Rosalie was able to present herself at the palace.

Amrita accompanied her. Laurie, to his chagrin, did not.

"There will be a very special reception given in your honor on a fortuitous date," she consoled him. "Till then, it's best if you allow the court to act as if you haven't yet arrived. Officially, you know, you haven't."

In Rosalie's own case, all ceremony had long since been set aside. She went to the palace on foot, accompanied only by Amrita and one of Imran's kitchen boys, Kafeel. The boy was big enough to serve as an escort across the city but young enough that the guards admitted him to the harem's outer chamber with only a little hesitation. He awaited their return seated in apparent contentment on one of the narrow room's many benches.

Traversing polished marble floors to the source of an enticing scent of lemons, Rosalie and Amrita entered the harem's main courtyard. In patterns like a zebra's, palm shadows fell on white stone. The aroma of lemons intensified so that Rosalie could almost taste their cooling fragrance. Flowers and fruit together thronged the branches of the grove of trees sheltering Sheikha Ghuzza and her four sisters.

At Ghuzā's nod Rosalie and Amrita knelt to sit on the cushions provided. She made a gift of her tortoise pendant, but didn't follow it up with any Pemba-related conversational gambit as she'd half thought to do. Indeed, the discussion was pointedly desultory till a pitcher of sherbet had been poured and sampled. Then the youngest, named Salme, picked up a guitar and began to strum noisily to prevent them being overheard, and they talked more seriously.

Ghuzā at least seemed unperturbed by Rosalie's description of Laurie's mission. "Perhaps it's best we fund our efforts another way. Fortune checks us in this scheme; it may be we should heed her guidance and forsake what we took to be the easiest path."

Blind Matuka, sightless eyes covered in a silken scarf, wondered whether they ought to wait a season—or two—or more—to ensure needed equipment and systems were installed, then force the interests Laurie represented to sell their stake in the business.

Rosalie struggled to conceal the impatience the Sheikhas' mysticism and indecision caused her. "But we are ready to help you now! And if you let the English in, they'll bring more than mining equipment! There will be military conflicts—which you may well lose!" She must find a way forward.

Amrita understood. "Is there any way to learn what Fate intends? At home we divide piles of rice grains or listen to crows singing."

"Yes." Ghuzā consulted Matuka and her other sisters in Arabic too swift to follow. Then she declared, in Kee-Swah-Hee-Lee: "I will journey to the Green Island to perform geomancy on this matter upon its sands. You may join us. Let this be done tomorrow."

★ ★ ★

Fortunately, the foundations of Imran's gambit to thwart Laurie in his mission had by now been laid. He and his mother packed several hampers full of provisions and sent them to the royal dock in the care of Kafeel and two of his small cousins. Chattering happily, the

young boys led a procession comprised of Rosalie, Amrita (again in the guise of a servant), and a grumbling Laurie.

"Pesky valet had no cause to fall ill like that," he complained. Rosalie thought he had rather sufficient cause: Imran's mother had poisoned him. Only mildly, of course; only enough to put him hors de combat so that Kafeel rendered services in his place. Despite Kafeel's tender years—twelve—the kitchen boy was a member in good standing of his employer's conspiracy.

They paraded down the rising and falling dock, their hollow footsteps echoing off the steel plates of the vessel moored beside it. *Nyanza* was a converted paddlewheeler, a steamer purchased by the previous sultan and devolving, when time and accident reduced its value, to the harem, as did so many things.

Up the gangway. Folding chairs had been arranged for them toward the yacht's bow. Once they cleared Prison Island the wisdom of this was obvious. Though she was equipped with sails, these were next to useless when heading northeast this time of year. *Nyanza's* engines vented smoke and cinders as they pushed her almost directly into the kaskazi. The stern would be more sheltered, but the air there would be full of dirt.

Kafeel procured a blanket for Laurie and tucked it around him, then positioned a parasol above his head for shade. Amrita held Rosalie's parasol so that it protected them both. Her skin was not much darker than Rosalie's own. Another variety of shell. One of Amrita's plump hands fussed unnecessarily with Rosalie's hair ribbon. She shut her eyes against the glare of the waves. The hand moved lower, to her neck and shoulders, to separate the chain of the locket Lily had bequeathed her from the elephant hair braid she wore because of Mr. Mkoï.

About to ask for—no, to *order*—this fiddling to stop, Rosalie opened her eyes on the unexpected sight of a harem servant throwing herself face-first on the deck.

A long moment passed before she remembered she must give the poor girl permission to do anything more. "Rise to your feet and

“speak,” she commanded.

“Her Most Serene Highness Sheikha Ghuzza wishes to welcome you into her private accommodations for the duration of her voyage.” Rosalie stood, warning Laurie to keep his seat with a frown and a shake of her head. He subsided, muttering.

The servant led her below, Amrita following, to a spacious cabin, its walls swathed in some heavy cloth winking with tiny mirrors. On a bed or divan covered in more comfortable-looking fabrics sat their hostess. Beside her sat her sister Matuka, eyes unbound.

Terrible scars twisted outward from the eyes’ ends like frozen lightning bolts. Like storm clouds they were swollen, black, their lashless lids thick with bumps and ridges and—

Rosalie looked away. Then forced herself to look back.

Whatever damage had been done, it had healed a good while since. No blood. No—matter. The blackness was that of the too-wide pupils.

She felt again the touch of Amrita’s hand. Now it squeezed hers tight. “I’m so sorry,” said Rosalie’s friend.

“Yes. But of course this is the fault of neither of you, nor of anyone with whom you’re associated.”

“It was our father who did this to me,” Matuka explained. “Seeking to cure me. He subjected me to dozens of operations meant to rid me of the deficiency which makes me unmarriageable.”

“As for my singleness,” Ghuzza said, “it’s mostly the result of the timing of attractive offers. Either there have been too many at once, making the decision of how to bestow me difficult or, lately, as I age, none at all.”

“Our younger sisters,” Matuka added, “continue to face these choices. Rumors of chronic illness, a squint assumed at critical interviews; such are their defenses should they want them.”

“Why—why do you tell us these things?” Rosalie asked

“Ah. Perhaps we attempted an earlier divination?” Matuka asked in reply. “Our results indicated a need to become better acquainted with our allies, and to listen as well as share with them the bases of

our daily lives. And also to invite—persuasion? At the very least, explication of your viewpoints.

“You will sit.” Matuka’s gesture indicated the cushioned stools before them, though her bottomless pupils stayed fixed on nothing that could be seen.

Slowly, over the two hours that remained of their voyage, they accomplished what the Sheikhas wished. They discussed mundane personal affairs: their monthly courses, caring for their teeth and gums. They exchanged information about politics; the princesses knew much more than Rosalie would have expected concerning the doings of foreign nations. They discussed the relative merits of oil palms and petroleum fields: the palms could be planted and raised generation after generation, but needed more processing for a less potent yield. And so on.

It was agreed that Imran’s plot was the best way to render Laurie harmless.

Finally, the Sheikhas tried to explain the coming ceremony of divination.

“This method is called the science of the sand,” said Ghuzza. “So we want to lay out the squares on the beach above Chake Chake Bay.” The Mothers, the figures filling the four initial squares, were divided into four parts: Head, Heart, Belly, Feet. From them would derive four more figures, called Daughters, and from the Daughters Nieces, and from *them* Judges and Witnesses, on whom depended the querent’s ultimate answer. To Rosalie it seemed unnecessarily involved. Why not simply decide based on the known facts?

“But how do you arrive at the Mothers?” asked Amrita, cutting through to the root of the confusion as Rosalie had come to anticipate of her.

“We toss a coin. Or roll a die.” Matuka took from her sash an ivory cube marked with ebony dots. “By whatever means available we generate a random number so as to allow the influence of Chance.”

So much for facts.

One last effort to plead for rational thought processes. "Will it help at all to acquire what you need using your own resources?" Ghuzā's eyes were as void of expression as her sister's. More plainly this time, Rosalie asked, "Can you not buy the food and building materials needed with your own funds?"

"Secretly? No. And the sultan will not be made to look as if he cares less than anyone for his subjects."

"We live on an island," Matuka said, as if the implications should be obvious. "And on that island we live within a closely watched compound."

"But via agents?" Amrita's question was once more to the point.

"Any we could employ are also closely watched—at least as to their business transactions," Ghuzā answered.

"Does the sultan watch us as well?" Rosalie asked.

Ghuzā's plucked brows arched with surprise. "But of course! However, he considers you not much of a threat to his European masters. If he knew—if he could conceive how many varying classes of people are united in their dislike—"

A long, loud, two-noted hoot drowned out the Sheikha's voice. It repeated three times.

"According to this signal we arrive shortly," Matuka announced in the sudden silence following. Now Rosalie realized what the sound had been: a steam whistle such as blew back home in Kisangani at the start of each work shift.

"Yes." Ghuzā lifted one wide-sleeved arm as if she spread a wing. "Have your party gather by the boats. You may disembark with us in the first group to leave for shore."

★ ★ ★

The damp sand felt cool to Rosalie's bare soles. Golden, with a glint like diamond dust, the long strand lay before her in shining splendor, reflecting the sky where wetted by the sea. Behind her and inland lay the stubby ruins of the ancient Arab settlement of Qanbalu; between those broken walls and the shore the Sheikhas' servants

labored to complete the erection of their pavilion, an edifice of saffron-tinted silk embroidered in scarlet and blue. Also behind Rosalie but anchored in the bay to the south floated *Nyanza*, kept from coming nearer by Pemba's thick girdle of reefs.

Freeing one hand from the handle of the parasol she wielded in the role of Rosalie's maid, Amrita lifted a pair of field glasses to her eyes and turned them *Nyanza*-ward. "Your brother is in the boat now being lowered."

"Good." The sooner Laurie was removed from the picture the better. She reached for the glasses to watch him being rowed off herself, but Amrita wouldn't relinquish them.

"Wait. It seems—" Amrita frowned. "—it seems they make for us, not the lagoon and the road." At last she let loose her hold and Rosalie was able to take possession of the glasses. Amrita was right! Though foreshortened and distorted by the magnifying lenses, the newly lowered boat did appear to be headed directly toward them. Up from its center protruded Laurie's head, unmistakable in his unfortunately ostentatious white Foreign Service helmet.

Why? Was this change of course at his direction? Or was it dictated by those who gave the *Nyanza's* sailors their orders?

The pavilion stood. The servants who had protected the two Sheikhas from the sun furlled their oversized parasols outside its awninged entrance; their mistresses must be within. Too bad. There would have been less difficulty in approaching to consult them out here. "Shall I request an audience?" Amrita asked. Rosalie assented.

But the big women on either side of the awning shook their heads in refusal and said something to Amrita that was impossible for Rosalie to hear. Not that she needed their exact words.

Amrita came back to her side. "The ritual has already begun. Their Highnesses are not to be disturbed."

No one else was within earshot. "What do you suggest?" Rosalie asked. It was a most unmistresslike question.

"Let's assume, since they said nothing of revising the kidnapping plan, that your brother has instigated this side trip. What does he

want of us? Can you guess?"

"At a hazard, our escort and guidance. Or perhaps an introduction to the Sheikhas? The separation on board *Nyanza* wasn't at all to his liking."

"If we can keep him from causing an incident with the Sheikhas, what do we care if we're with him when he springs the trap?"

"Yes." Rosalie made a show of ordering Amrita to follow her to the spot on the beach where *Nyanza's* second boat looked likely to land. There they drew the backs of their robes forward between their legs and tucked the hems in their sashes, making them into a sort of pantaloons. They splashed out through the low surf together.

Nine men sat in the boat. Or eight if you counted Kafeel not a man but a boy. All the passengers but Laurie were brown-skinned, the two who rowed verging on black. Her brother gave an embarrassed laugh. "Have you always behaved like such a guy, Rosie? Why not wait for one of these strong fellows to carry you safely to me?"

The rowers had stopped and shipped their oars. "To you?" The question confirmed for her that the Sheikhas were neither this boat's controllers nor Laurie's goal. Kafeel grasped Rosalie by her left arm and pulled; she gave her right to the idle rower on her side of the boat. As they hauled her aboard Amrita underwent a similar process on the other side.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, nowhere we haven't been invited." Laurie grimaced. "Don't worry. Your country's precious diplomatic relations aren't being compromised." Her country was Everfair. Not, therefore, his.

"Though I don't see why we couldn't have simply anchored at Whatsit Bay instead of here."

"You mean Mkoan?"

"Whatever you may call it—where that fuel carrier's supposed to have had those spills. Where there's every indication we'll find what we're looking for."

Amrita busied herself straightening Rosalie's attire.

“So to the lagoon, then?”

“There’s transport there, right?” Laurie nodded to Kafeel, who spoke in Kee-Swah-Hee-Lee to the men crouched in front of the rowers. They switched positions. Then the new rowers brought the boat quickly about and sped them off on their new vector.

Hérons and heavy-beaked pelicans flew in tight circles above the lagoon’s opening. The tide was falling; bleached coral and rocks covered in strange growths thrust upward, several times breaking the sea’s surface. One of the former rowers had moved to the boat’s prow, whence he called directions to his replacements. Rosalie leaned over the stern, longing to trail her fingers in the cool water. Once they were within the lagoon’s stillness, the bottom appeared close enough to touch.

And then it was. It must be: the boat’s keel scraped over the rippling sand; the man at the prow and three others jumped into the shallow water and hauled the vessel, now lighter, a few feet farther in. Kafeel leapt also, laughing when he fell short of a dry landing.

“Miss?” The second set of rowers had also left the boat. They’d formed a chair of their arms and waited for Rosalie to seat herself on them. She clambered into their embrace. Still facing the boat as they faced the way they waded, toward the shore, she watched the remaining sailor help Laurie seat himself on a sturdier piece of human furniture composed of the arms of four men. That last sailor swung himself over the side also as Rosalie was deposited on the beach, and carried Amrita pickaback to her side.

Atop a steep rise, Kafeel waved his arms to signal that he’d reached the road. Rosalie heard Laurie swear below his breath as they followed *Nyanza’s* sailors up the trail. At first its loose sand slipped beneath her feet. As it climbed it became packed dirt. When they reached the patchy hillside jungle, she stopped to retrieve her shoes from Amrita and tied them on, mindful of poisonous insects and snakes. Her brother seemed glad of the halt. As she stood from stooping to her laces he beckoned her to the boulder where he sat.

"Will we need to camp here overnight?" he asked, after inquiring how she did.

"Here?"

"Not *right* here. On the island." A nearby bird screeched. He flinched.

"There are villages," she replied as coolly as she could. "I'm sure some merchant or diver would put us up." At his glum face she relented. "And there's an inn in Mkoan proper—but I believe *Nyanza* will sail to meet us there this evening." No need to start his suffering yet.

The road stank of oil. Rosalie hadn't thought of that. Twice a year since the discovery, Pemba's road crews applied what they'd collected to keep down the dust. Later in the season the smell would dissipate, but now?

Laurie noticed it. Rosalie tried to explain away the oil as salt water-tainted salvage from drums that had floated ashore after the disaster. He wasn't stupid, though. His pale eyes darkened with suspicion.

His suspicions were probably increased by the arrival of the promised transport: three of the steam bicycle-and-cart combinations typical of Everfair's capital, Kisangani. She'd expected that because of their coal-fueled boilers he'd take them as proof that the existence of oilfields on the island was nothing but a rumor. Instead he made the connection: machines from Everfair at the disposal of a woman from Everfair. A woman with better access to the royal house than he had yet to gain.

"How shall we split ourselves up?" she asked, hoping that if Laurie were allowed to decide their seating arrangements he'd relax his guard a little and go along with the itinerary.

It worked. At the sacrifice of Amrita's companionship. Rosalie wound up alone with her brother in the cart he decided was most comfortable; the others had to cram into the rest of the fleet with, he insisted, the food hampers Imran and his mother had provided. These he demanded to have placed inside—not strapped to the

carts' exteriors. "Keep off the flies," he declared, easing onto the cushioned seat opposite Rosalie.

"Sure you don't mind riding backward?" he asked anxiously.

She didn't. It shouldn't be for long.

But her small store of patience was tried sorely. Mile upon mile they jogged through Pemba's high hills. Laurie interrogated her sharply when they passed the land being cleared for aircanoe operations. She didn't conceal anything; this part of Everfair's aid to Zanzibar was common knowledge. About the clove plantations surrounding the road after that she had little to say. The sapling palms set out for the season in the trees' shelter were better not mentioned. Laurie filled the resulting silence with a monologue, droning on for what seemed hours about his fiancée, Theresa: what Ellen—"Mother"—thought of her; how delicate her complexion and sensibilities alike; how familiar she was to him because of the generations of friendship between their families, yet how mysterious because so essentially feminine ... all the clichés and platitudes she'd been able to avoid when his guest in England by the simple expedient of withdrawing to her room.

At last came the descent into the valley before Limani. As planned, both the cart's and the bicycle's brakes failed. Holding firmly to the cart's door handle as they jounced ever faster down the rutted road, Rosalie wondered if this was when she would finally become religious. Or at least pray and pretend to be.

Their cart was first in the convoy. The others were far behind, out of sight when at last they crashed into a glossy-leaved bush.

Rosalie checked herself over and found no obvious injuries. Laurie was another matter. His silly helmet—which he'd worn, contra etiquette, in her presence inside the cart—had prevented any serious damage to his head. The same with the fat padding his figure overall, but the two last fingers on his right hand stuck out at a very curious angle, and the thumb on his left was bent back parallel with his wrist. Maman's wife would know how to splint those injuries.

Her brother's eyes blinked at her, dazed. In a moment he'd begin to feel his pain. Rosalie still held the door's handle. She opened it and climbed out, which took only a slight effort. The cart was canted off its front wheels and rested more on its far side than on this one—but not much more. Shaking her robes back into order, Rosalie looked around for the bicycle driver. Gone. As instructed. Excellent. Now to improvise, as Mam'selle would say.

"Help! Help!" She let her voice wobble as if in fear—easier than exiting the cart had been. "We're hurt! Someone, please!" That should be enough to let Imran know she was here with Laurie.

There he came, muffled in scarves like an old woman. "Shut up!" he commanded in Kee-Swah-Hee-Lee, sounding much gruffer than usual. No, he would not be recognized.

"It's all right," she replied in the same language. She attempted to whine pitifully. "My brother made all the others ride in the later carts. No one's around to understand."

"Hah! But I'd better stay in disguise just the same, hadn't I."

White-faced and shivering, Laurie poked his helmeted head above the cart's doorway. More overwrapped men appeared out of the forest, waving shonguns. A wince contorted his features and his shoulders heaved; he must be trying to pull something out of a pocket—a weapon perhaps?

They needed to remove Laurie from the road before the rest of the party arrived. But when a pair of them approached to take him out of the cart he ducked down below the doorway. "Rosie!" he called. "Get back in here! I've got a pistol in my jacket. You needn't even fire it, just point—"

Rosalie shrieked and threw herself at Imran. Quick of mind, he caught and held her before Laurie's head was up again. His knife's edge grazed her throat, drawing real blood. But not much. "Perhaps we'll have to drag the cart into the jungle and dislodge him there," she growled defiantly.

To her brother's sincere-sounding cries of distress she answered, in English, that the black devils said they would kill her unless he,

too, surrendered.

A true gentleman, Laurie stood when he heard that.

"Mind his hands," Rosalie warned the men extracting him from the cart. "And see if you can find his pistol." She hoped her Kee-Swah-Hee-Lee instructions sounded like terrified pleas. She hoped her pretended scuffling with Imran looked like she fought in ineffectual earnest to block their departure into the forest.

When they'd gone far enough off the road that Laurie's shouts shouldn't be heard by anyone investigating the crash, they came to a little house, temporary, woven of boards and covered in palm leaves. But they didn't go inside it; rather, their supposed captors shoved them to the ground near the house's firepit. Then they stood over them, shonguns at the ready.

"You managing, my girl?" Laurie asked.

Rosalie shrugged. "I'm frightened is all."

"What do they want?"

"Money, I gather. Ransom."

"Well they won't get it!" Despite his words, Laurie looked unsure of that. Rosalie hoped he was right. Her brother's release played no part in this scheme.

Imran's mother emerged from the house. Bizarre designs in red and white paint covered her face. They served no purpose except to transform her into a stranger—though Laurie had probably not noticed her at the guesthouse anyway. She had to be surprised to see Rosalie there, but no one could have told by looking.

In Kee-Swah-Hee-Lee the old woman asked Rosalie, "How did this happen? Don't you want to go home?"

Imran made angry-looking gestures. "At the worst we expected one of the sailors!" he snapped. "They could have been explained. We'll have a hard time making your brother believe you've betrayed him despite the fact that you did."

"What's he saying?" Laurie twisted his head to watch Imran pace between the empty fire ring and the house.

"They're arguing about how much we're worth."

"Nothing!"

"Then we're dead." To Imran: "I think he's going to try to escape. Can you tie him up?"

"I'll get something." Imran's mother walked into the hut.

"We'll run for it!" Laurie staggered to his feet. "Opposite directions!" A heavily built man knocked him to his knees with one hand and raised his shongun threateningly with the other.

Imran's mother returned, several scarves draped over her forearm. "Perhaps that's an idea. You, at least, could magically get away.

"Make him hold his wrists together."

"She—she wants to bind you," Rosalie told Laurie. "Perhaps if you cooperate they'll treat us more humanely?"

While the son and mother trussed Laurie tight at every joint they discussed how to handle setting Rosalie free. At the last it was decided simply to put him in the house where he couldn't see her leave.

"Tell them they can't separate us! It's my duty to protect you," Laurie insisted as he was carried away.

"They say it's their religion!" Rosalie lied. "I can't talk them out of it!"

With her brother safely disposed of she followed the man who had subdued him to the road. The embers in the steam bicycle's fire box needed hardly any coaxing. By nightfall she was in Mkoan, once more with Amrita; by moonrise they were in a boat being winched back aboard *Nyanza*.

* * *

Nyanza's return to Unguja, the Zanzibar archipelago's largest island, went much more quietly than her journey out. The persistent kaskazi filled her sails.

As courtesy dictated, Amrita and Rosalie came to the Sheikhas' cabin when again invited. Late and cool as the hour was they sipped

warm chocolate seasoned with rare cubeb rather than partaking of the customary sherbet.

Amrita accepted a second cup. "What was the result of your divination, if I may inquire?" she asked. Her empty hand fell with seeming casualness on Rosalie's white-robed thigh. Rosalie let it lie there. It did her no harm.

"You most certainly may, for we obtained our results using your friend's gift." Ghuzza pulled the tortoise pendant from the folds of her embroidered tunic. "We are to seek the will of the people." Which Rosalie knew, on Pemba, was in favor of palms over petroleum.

With a sigh she resigned herself. As Laurie had unintentionally demonstrated, things might have gone much, much worse.

Amrita was standing, tugging at Rosalie's sleeve, so she stood with her. Together they retired to the deck. The brisk breeze gave Amrita an excuse to tuck a shoulder under Rosalie's arm. For now this appeared to content her. As the silver moon slipped into the sea they passed Prison Island, Laurie's ultimate destiny. One day she would have to take Maman there for a visit.



Copyright © 2024 Nisi Shawl

Art copyright © 2024 Jabari Weathers

About the Authors

A. T. Greenblatt is a Nebula Award winning writer and mechanical engineer. She lives in Philadelphia where she's known to frequently subject her friends to various cooking and home brewing experiments. Her work has been nominated for a Hugo, Locus, and Sturgeon Award, has been in multiple Year's Best anthologies, and has appeared in *Uncanny*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Lightspeed*, and *Clarkesworld*, as well as other fine publications. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

Genevieve Valentine's first novel, *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti*, won the 2012 Crawford Award and was nominated for the Nebula. Her short fiction has been nominated for the World Fantasy and Shirley Jackson awards, and has appeared in several Best of the Year anthologies. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

Rich Larson was born in Galmi, Niger, has lived in Spain and Czech Republic, and currently writes from Montreal, Canada. He is the author of the novels *Ymir* and *Annex*, as well as the collection *Tomorrow Factory*. His fiction has been translated into over a dozen languages, including Polish, Italian, Romanian, and Japanese, and adapted into an Emmy-winning episode of LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS. Find him at [instagram.com/richlarsonwrites](https://www.instagram.com/richlarsonwrites) or [patreon.com/richlarson](https://www.patreon.com/richlarson), or sign up for email updates [here](#).

Nisi Shawl (they/them) is a writer of science fiction and fantasy short stories and a journalist. They are the co-author (with Cynthia

Ward) of *Writing the Other: Bridging Cultural Differences for Successful Fiction*. Their short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, and numerous other magazines and anthologies. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

REACTOR

**Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe.
And related subjects.**

★

Reactor is a premier, award-winning genre magazine,
publishing critically acclaimed short fiction from
new voices and fan-favorite authors alike, alongside
book reviews, essays, rereads, and more!

Visit ReactorMag.com today and join the conversation!



Copyright © 2024 Michael Cisco, A. T. Greenblatt, Genevieve Valentine, Rich Larson and
Nisi Shawl

Art copyright © 2024 Natalie Foss, David Palumbo, Mary Pelc, Zelda Devon and Jabari
Weathers