

FANTASY MAGAZINE

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FICTION

The Probability of One

Jen Brown | 1400 words

Chained doulas pull a child from the womb in low-gravity orbit; a babe of the Many Mouthed Empire, unencumbered by duty. Defiant, I face the birthing altar—jaw, clamped; gaze, glassy.

(I mustn't. Look.)

I dreamt of children, once. Now it's as if Mama Caarine gazes through the newborn's eyes; as though my brother, Zjor-Anu, thumbed his birthmark through their skin. Wailing, the child twists Ma Sitau's lips, trembles tiny fists, Black as mine—

End this, I think, swallowing sorrow. End them all, and don't look back.

“It is done, my Devourer.” Chains clanking, the Head doula addresses our queen, drifting opposite the altar. “Proffered genomes have coalesced.”

From the visitor's gallery, guests speculate—stodgy ambassadors, gossiping tradesmen. Even God King Myus has come, despite his disdain at my “involvement.”

“Then his talents have passed down?” Clearing afterbirth from her thighs, the queen trembles. “Darius, this rite you mentioned, the one your people wake their newborns with?” She snaps bloodied fingers. “See it done. Unlock your ancestral abilities.”

The chamber quiets.

There's no damned ceremony. Never has been. But, desperate to conquer my kinfolk, she feasts on lies. As long as I keep to Tenawe family wisdoms—*by God, Darius, don't go looking through the language of particles*, they'd caution—I'll manage this betrayal.

Approaching the altar, I mumble quantum tongues, beginning the “rite” with a verb neither galactic kings nor scholars understand.

The newborn shudders, womb-warm.

Once, I wanted you, I send, quavering quarks in quantum fields. Gravitons cease tunneling, cowed by my consonants. *Now, I want their destruction.*

The babe whines.

I need but speak aloud, coaxing electrons into a vacuum state, reducing this newborn, the chained doulas, our queen and king, their delegates, *myself*—into fleeting wavelengths. I need but commit regicide. Infanticide, really.

My vision blurs. *Another time, I mouth, in another life, I'm sure I loved you.*

With a breath, I blight the God King's galley.

Or, I mean to.

But the doulas cry in mother tongues of annexed Opanii, Drue't, and Uru-Wain solar systems; and our queen approaches the altar, curious; and the babe wails with Sitau Tenawe's mouth, scrunches Carrine Tenawe's eyes, helming Zjor-Anu Tenawe's ferocity; and I hesitate a fraction too long, and—

Foolishly, I look.

••••

Thou shalt not predict with the language of particles, my mothers warned, well before empire claimed us. Before we fell to armed kings. Before they refashioned our cities, bastardized our dialect.

Before annihilation, there was only—summer. Ceaseless heat, blotting our housing spires with damp. Sweating light rails, shuttling elders from celestial temples. Sunday service, and all.

Worst thing I'd survived was young heartbreak.

Lord, Ma sighed. You lost him, Caarine. He's in that head of his, again.

Crossing our kitchen, Mama cuffed me. Stop fretting that little ex.

“Ow!” I’d pouted, not realizing I’d miss the weight of her hands one day. “I’m not ‘fretting’ Lamar. I’m good.”

Then listen good, Mama continued. Quantum fields—within, around, through us—stuttered. Back then, I barely strung particle-paragraphs together. Listening was harder. Talk through atoms all you want, she said. It's how we share ciphers and stories and songs. But look where you shouldn't, trace atomic trajectories, seeing where they were years ago or where they'll be? You'll change everything. You'll change yourself. Understand?

Ma *mm-hmm*'d from her stool, salting our kitchen with the scent of smoked collards.

I had so many questions. Would I become the man I’d hoped? Would Lamar take me back; kiss quantum proposals through my skin? Would we do what we’d promised—graduate; join interstellar ambassadorships; grow old together, surrounded by children?

Could I have seen the Many Mouthed Empire coming to swallow us?

Now, prying past electrons, I ignore my mothers’ warnings. *You gon' fuck around and find out*, they’d probably say. So, fuck it. I’ll find out.

Matter slows, arresting the diplomats, doulas; even the God King. Time parts, putty-soft, in my hands, and I reach for Tenawe eyes, mouths, and birthmarks; for a child, bearing our genome.

A hundred-thousand-futures daub my eyelids. Atoms—in and around me—reorient, flung aside.

“Let my son be known as Myiad, God Prince of all,” someone—God King Myus, I realize—declares. Gendering my child at imperial conclaves, his words cross time; sharp, yet formless. Suddenly, I can’t feel my legs. Numbness steals my fists.

Fuck. I'm slipping.

Biting my tongue, I grasp at nuclei. *You're alive*, I remind myself; *futures can't harm more than your past already has*. Like cupping sand through fingerless fists, I string quarks between clauses, emerging someplace, somewhen. Whole, yet heaving.

Unfamiliar skies stretch, overhead.

Myiad, God Prince of all, materializes, too, blurred and wavering as though his atoms can’t bind. Leaden tongued, I’m incapable of asking if *he* is even correct—kinfolk gender ourselves as a rite—but there he looms, between bosons, steering some massive ship.

Chemicals rain from the gun ports, drizzling crops—dying okra and now-diseased tomato. Flattened green beans. Wilting turnips.

“More.” Myiad grimaces. Grins, maybe, bearing teeth. Snot carves his lips, marring the gum line. “Let ‘em starve.”

No, I quantum-scream; fling; shout, unwilling to watch another world die. I beg for flesh and sinew; for a birthing chamber, orbiting uncaring stars—when I’m pulled, navel-first, through sunlight.

••••

Language pries me out of darkness. A quantum plea, piqued clumsily.

Ouch! Dad, this mess is hot.

Summer swaddles me; floors and walls bleed into focus. Sunbaked concrete peeks in from an open window. Opened, because this place is not a ship. Opened, because neither smoke nor bombs cloy the air here.

“You really just gon’ watch me struggle?”

It's Myiad, I realize, speaking quantum pidgin.

I sway, creaking floorboards underfoot. It's those checkered tiles Mama always hated. The ones Ma promised she'd replace.

It's—home.

Inside a kitchen that once savored of salt, Myiad stands, fractal-sharp, wearing Ma's old apron. *Stay out my damn kitchen*, faded lettering reads. Steaming yams burn his fingers. Myiad tries—fails—to properly knife their boiled skin. “Little help?”

“What?” I ask, hoarse. Bereft. Bewildered by such clear skies; by Myiad's desperate *Dad*, still trembling quantum fields.

“The yams.” Shifting, Myiad kisses his teeth. “Can you help?”

Butter softens near discarded pots. Bowls of cinnamon and nutmeg teeter at counter's edge. They'll fall, if he's not careful.

“Mitts.” I frown. “Y-you need oven mitts.”

Myiad wipes yam on Ma's apron. “But how do I get them in the pan?” *Look!* He exclaims, tickling my arm hair. “They're falling apart.”

“Why are you doing this?” I ask, broken.

“What? Cooking?” Myiad whips around, grinning more brilliantly than starships, than glittering, colonized worlds. “You said: *we must eat before practicing quantum conjugations*. All serious, and shit.” He laughs with Ma Sitau's lips.

Upended by his gentle ribbing, so much like Zjor-Anu's, I stutter: “You speak the language of particles.”

Myiad regards me for sixty-two seconds, wherein I bleed into this moment one blood vessel at a time. “Well, yeah. You're teaching me.” He frowns. “Remember?”

My throat constricts. I don't know *when* I am. Only that Myiad could raze universes with quantum tongues, if he willed it. And, apparently, I'm complicit.

You'll break worlds with it, then. Spoken words escape me; I send only photons, threading us with light. *You'll reave, at your Many Mouthed Empire's behest*.

Sensation leeches from my pores. Again, I slip, a granule adrift in Myiad's maelstrom of lives. Yams splatter between us, slipping from his hands.

“Never.” He blinks, face blurring. Fading. “Dad, I—*never again*. We talked about this; you, *you* showed me—histories. Legacies. I wouldn't—don't you remember—”

••••

A sigh, and a laugh, and something resembling the distinct cuff of Ma's palm, remakes me inside the birthing chamber. In my arms, Myiad cries, infantile. The queen gathers him, unknowing of where—and *when*—I've been; ignoring my sweat-slick brow.

“Did it work?” she asks. My ears ring around Myiad's mewling. “Darius, does the child bear your gifts?”

He has the makings of a hundred travesties—and one triumph, I want to say. Instead: “It's there,” I manage, licking tears. “He has it, Queen Devourer.”

Visiting dignitaries applaud. Shackled doulas ululate, on command.

Somewhere, somewhen, I must blight this room. A final cataclysm, furiously rippling spacetime. Possibility prickles my skin. Never again will Many Mouthed diplomats gather, so unguarded.

Here, *now*—I bow, embryonic before my son.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Brown (she/her) weaves otherworldly tales about Black, queer folks righteously wielding power. An Ignyte Award-nominated author, her short stories have appeared in *FIYAH Literary Magazine*, Tor.com's *Breathe FIYAH* anthology, *Anathema: Spec From the Margins*, *Baffling Magazine*, and other places. Find more of her stories at jencbrown.com, or follow her tweets about cats, media, and libraries at [@jeninthelib](https://twitter.com/jeninthelib).

The Weight of It All

Jennifer Hudak | 4847 words

Elizabeth is the first person to notice I'm inside her.

"Tell me how to do it," she whispers.

It's a shock. No one has spoken to me directly in ages. I'm nothing more than a whisper when I slip beneath her skin. I'm less than a breath. I should be undetectable, but somehow, I'm not. It might have been a relief—to be acknowledged, to be known—except that Elizabeth clings to me with her bony fingers and won't let me go. I struggle to escape her, but no matter how hard I push, she's got me trapped inside her body.

"How do I do it?" she asks again.

Do what? I ask back.

And then, because I'm inside her, because I flow through her blood and lymph and spinal fluid, I know:

That she hates the way her waistband digs into her midsection, the way her hips press against a stranger's on the subway. That she refuses to look at herself in the mirror. She feels as if her own body despises her, angry and unruly.

She wants to be able to slip wherever she wants, unnoticed as a puff of air. She wants to feel limitless. She wants to be nothing.

Stupid girl, she wants to be me.

••••

All I am now is lightness. I take up no space. I leave no mark. If there's anything solid about me, it's bone, angular and empty in its coffin. No muscles twitching, no ligaments or tendons holding me together.

No weight. No weight at all.

And, yes, sometimes, when my need for physicality becomes desperate, I'll dip inside a person and hide behind their skin. Just temporarily. Just to remember how it feels. I know I shouldn't, although I don't know *how* I know. There's no rule book for the dead, after all, any more than there's a rule book for the living. But we all sometimes want what we don't have, and right or wrong, I have the means to take it.

A body, I mean. Although "take" is a strong word. I just duck inside and hide for a little while. Allow gravity to claim me once again. You have no idea what a blessing it is to jump and to feel the ground echo through your feet when you land. To relax your head into a pillow so fully that the fabric creases your skin. To slosh water over the edge of your bathtub, because your body takes up so much room.

Yes, your body.

Can you remember a time when, at long last, you relaxed your belly and took a deep breath? When you allowed your thighs to spread on your seat, and reveled in the fullness of yourself, in the space you claimed? That was me. Feeling weighty. Feeling alive.

••••

The second day I'm trapped inside Elizabeth, she meets some friends out at a bar. She wears a

tunic dress and scarf and cardigan and leggings and boots, layers upon layers of fabric stiffening her limbs. As Elizabeth nurses a sparkling water with lime, I use her eyes to spy on the others sitting at her table. They lean in to each other with familiarity, jostling the table and laughing with their whole bodies—taking up *space*. I twitch inside the taught confines of Elizabeth’s rib cage, cramped and claustrophobic. If I’d picked someone else—*anyone* else—I’d be free to hop from host to host. I’d stretch my legs beneath the table and lick salt from the rim of a glass. Travel on beery breath to experience a kiss from both sides. Sway along with music I don’t even care for, but what does it matter when there’s a beat, when there’s a body to move? Instead, I’m stuck with Elizabeth, who perches on the very edge of her chair, shifting from sit bone to tailbone to sit bone again. I can feel the other bodies calling to me—muscle and organ and blood, all singing sweetly, *Come to us, come be with us*—and it’s almost too much to bear.

Elizabeth feels me stirring and tightens her grip. “Don’t even think about it,” she mutters beneath the din.

The waiter arrives with a platter of nachos for the table. Everyone else digs in, but Elizabeth edges away from the platter and sucks on an ice cube.

“No wonder you’re so thin,” says one of her friends. “I wish I had your willpower.”

“Oh, I’m just not hungry right now.” She’s lying, but I’m the only one who knows the desperation with which her stomach growls and twists.

“Well, you look amazing.”

The others agree: “*Amazing.*”

The only person who doesn’t say anything is Cary. Cary is the one who invited Elizabeth out tonight; they’re the one who knows her best. They sit directly across the table, scratching their shaved head and clinking their rings against their glass. Their eyes narrow when Elizabeth orders another sparkling water. When Cary looks at Elizabeth like that, I shrink back. I’m going to have to be careful about them. Even in the dim light of the bar, they see more than I thought they would.

But I don’t have to worry about avoiding Cary, because after that night at the bar, Elizabeth stops going out. For a while, texts blink on her phone regularly with invitations: to an evening of board games, a weekend hike, a chat over coffee. I press myself against the underside of her skin, imagining dice cradled in palms, feet sinking into muddy trails, blood rushing with a jolt of caffeine. But Elizabeth politely demurs every time: she’s tired; she’s already made plans; she’s got too much work. The light tap of her fingers against the screen is like a feather tickling an excruciating itch.

Why won’t you do something? I plead. *Anything.*

“It’s too much.” After a pensive moment, she shakes her head and amends, “It’s not enough.”

Just let me go, then, I say.

“So you can find someone else to haunt? No way. I’m doing everyone a favor holding on to you.”

I know that’s not the reason she’s keeping me here. She’s not protecting anyone. This isn’t altruism. But it doesn’t matter. Gradually the texts sputter and thin like a tap running dry. It’s just me and Elizabeth and this husk of a body we share.

••••

When Elizabeth eats, she does so furtively, snatching tiny mouthfuls like a squirrel. She counts out almonds and measures berries into half-cup servings. I grasp at each morsel, but I’ve barely tasted it before it’s gone. I don’t understand it, because she owns dozens of cookbooks, and has bookmarked hundreds of recipes from food bloggers. But she won’t prepare a meal without first visiting one of

several nutrition websites, calculating the calories for each ingredient and adding them all together, then dividing the recipe to come up with the portion size she'll allow herself. It takes hours, these calculations. Hours of stillness, focused only on the heady math of calorie and gram. Hours when she forgets her body in its chair, hours when all she thinks about is her body—the slope between her hipbones; the comforting, persistent growl of her stomach.

It's too much. It's not enough.

To tempt her, I envision the dishes of my childhood, sending them in flickers of thought and memory: warm challah and apple cake dripping with honey. Gloriously fatty pastrami edged in peppercorns, on deli rye, with a plump sour dill on the side. When that doesn't get a reaction, I send her thoughts of Wonder Bread; the factory was in my town, and when the wind was right you could smell baking bread as far away as the mall, mouthwatering and wholesome even though we all knew the supermarket travesty it'd turn into.

Elizabeth opens up a new tab and searches for a recipe for sourdough sandwich loaves. She spends two more hours online, saving recipes for a New England apple pie with cheddar cheese baked in the crust; a Greek eggplant-and-potato casserole with a linked recipe for the lemony herbed white sauce; healthy breakfast muffins chock-full of oats and dried fruit and flax seed.

She will never cook any of the recipes she saved. She knows this, and I know it, too.

I flit to and fro inside her like a moth trapped in a lamp and beg her to move, to eat, to *feel*. I look at the recipes she's dissecting into sterile nutritional units and twist inside her.

You're torturing me on purpose.

She wraps herself around me, all wiry muscle and sinew, and squeezes. "You came into *my* body. You should be happy to stay here."

Stupid girl! I scream at her. *This body is wasted on you. You don't deserve it.*

"Take it, then," she whispers back to me. "I don't want it."

I gather myself into a ball and float down into the pit of her stomach. I'd trade places with Elizabeth in a heartbeat, if I could. I'd take her body and go dancing in a crowded club, where I'd throw myself against other bodies with reckless abandon. I'd swim in frigid water until my lips turned blue, and then bake in the sun. I'd eat a greasy pile of eggs and hash browns and unbutton my jeans while I digested. Let Elizabeth float free. Let her enjoy her weightlessness, her emptiness, her nothingness.

But that's not the way any of this works. We are who we are, and all we can do is suck at the dregs of each other.

••••

Elizabeth's friend Cary still checks in every couple of days:

< come out tonight Liz >

< afternoon off lets go get ice cream >

< I miss your face >

< u ok? >

< ? >

Elizabeth answers in apologetic excuses. Yes, she's fine. Sorry she's been so busy. No, she can't do anything this weekend. Cary doesn't argue, but they don't give up either; they keep texting, and pinging her on social, and tagging her in their group chat.

Finally, they send a text that just says, < open up friend I'm here >

Elizabeth grips her phone and curses under her breath. It's been days since she's seen anyone other than the grocery clerk face-to-face. Her hair is greasy and her skin smells funky but she throws on a bulky hoodie and answers the door.

Cary stands with their elbows out and their feet planted wide so that they fill up the hallway. I can practically hear the blood pumping forcefully through their veins, feel the press of their waist against their jeans. They give Elizabeth a quick once-over from behind their sunglasses, and then say, "Let's go get a coffee."

"I can't." Elizabeth stays just inside the door, as if she's afraid of catching what Cary has. As if she's afraid of catching *life*.

"Liz. Come on; what's up with you?"

"Nothing's up with me. I'm just busy."

Cary pushes their shades onto the top of their head. "Something is up. You look like shit."

"Wow, thanks."

"You barely talk to anyone anymore," Cary presses. "Just, talk to me. Come out for coffee."

For a second, I can feel Elizabeth wavering. I feel her wanting to drink a thick, sweet latte and tell Cary everything. *Do it!* I scream at her. But then she stiffens and says, "You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine. I'm just busy."

"Busy," Cary says flatly.

"Yeah. Busy." Elizabeth has had one hand on the doorknob this whole time, and now she starts to slowly swing the door closed. "Look, I have to go. I'll see you around."

Cary puts their sunglasses back on. "Okay. If you say so, Liz. I'll see you." They walk down the hallway toward the stairwell and I ache for their easy strides. I ache to feel the retort of concrete against their rubber soles as they thunder down the stairs, ache to feel them take a sip of coffee, scalding and bitter.

But I can't, no matter how much I try. Elizabeth won't let me go.

Live, I scream at her, but she doesn't answer. I'm not even certain what it is that I'm asking her to do. What does a dead girl know about living?

••••

Elizabeth has so little body fat that she can't sit on her office chair without padding it. Most of the time she doesn't sit at all; she stands in front of her desk, shifting from foot to foot while working. She used to march in place, but she doesn't do that anymore. She used to wear ankle weights, but she's stopped that, too. It was too much for her. She's exhausted all the time. She's wasting away, and as she does, I'm wasting away too. I've lost track of how long I've been inside her. I've forgotten what it feels like to be anywhere else.

And I keep thinking: If something happens to her while I'm inside—if she stops being alive for real—what happens to me? I don't *think* Elizabeth's body could still hold me once she herself has left it. I don't *think* I'd be trapped inside her corpse, slowly turning to dust inside someone else's coffin, but there's no way to know for sure, and the not knowing is terrifying.

One day when she's so tired she can't resist me, I stretch myself into her limbs, into each of her fingers and toes. The sensation of movement is glorious. I pinch the softness of her leggings, lightly scratch her nails down the dry skin of her arms. I stretch her body from fingertips to toes and feel a satisfying crack in her shoulder joint.

"What...what are you doing?" Her voice is thin and reedy.

To be clear, I know I shouldn't do this—actually possessing someone's body is most definitely against some nebulous rule—and normally I refrain. But I tell myself I'm out of options. I test my control by making Elizabeth take a deep breath. To inhale, and increase her capacity. To exhale, and settle.

Don't worry. It's for your own good.

Moving clumsily within her, I shuffle us both out of the apartment and guide her toward the bakery down the street. Elizabeth follows the bakery on Instagram, but she's never been. When she sees the awning, she whimpers.

“No.”

You have to.

The smell of yeast and sugar washes over us as soon as we open the door. Elizabeth starts to salivate, and right away I know I've won.

I turn her head to scan the glass case full of the bakery's offerings, waiting to see what catches her eye. We look at plate-sized half-moon cookies, elaborately-frosted cutouts, decadent slabs of coffeecake and delicate petite-fours. We are paralyzed by choice. In her state of perpetual emptiness, everything looks delicious; nothing looks possible. When I see she's not equipped to make a decision, I guide her toward a thick slice of babka, richly-swirled with a cinnamon-sugar filling.

“That one?” Elizabeth asks me. The woman behind the counter interprets it as a command and nods as she opens the case from behind.

It's delicious, I tell her. I send her a vision of my mother preparing babka, rolling the sweet filling into the soft buttery dough; slicing each roll down the center to expose a shocking line of cinnamon sugar before twisting the rolls together and nestling them into a pan. *You'll see.*

Once she's paid, we go outside and sit on a park bench. Elizabeth removes the babka from its grease-stained paper bag and holds it with trembling hands. I wait a second, to see what she does, but when she just sits there I get impatient. I push myself into her fingers and guide her to pinch off a morsel of the sweet bread and rest it on her tongue. Her taste buds tingle and I shiver with it. The butter coats her mouth and the sugar crunches between her teeth. She swallows. Her stomach acids rush to dissolve the bite into its digestible parts. Her blood washes through her body, anticipating the influx of sugars and fats.

Again, I urge, and together, we eat until the pastry is gone. Until we are both satisfied. Until we are full.

• • •

After we get back to her apartment, she shoves her finger down her throat and vomits the whole thing back up into the toilet.

Acid burns her throat and eats at her teeth, and I beg her to get a sip of water from the tap, but she's too exhausted to stand. She falls back on the cold tile of the bathroom floor. She's losing her hair, and she fingers she thin patch at the crown of her head.

“I'm sorry,” she cries. “It's too much. It's not enough.”

I know, I tell her, and I do. We can never be enough, not any of us. We take up too much space; we take up too little. We bump into walls and tables, and yet we make no mark upon the world. We fall, powerless against gravity's pull, and we float away from everything we ever wanted. We fall, over and over again, and nothing can stop that.

••••

With me inside her, Elizabeth grows lighter and lighter. Even her voice softens, becomes quiet as the scrape of a page turning. She meditates, and barely indents the cushion where she sits. While I struggle to feel her borders—the clothing against her skin, her legs folded against themselves—she disassociates from her body altogether, imagining herself floating above it. Little by little, she’s turning herself into a ghost, and I can’t stop her, and I can’t escape.

And then, one day, she releases me.

I feel it like a breath of fresh air from a cracked window: the strength of her grip is gone. There’s nothing tethering me to her anymore, nothing at all to make me stay in this fragile, failing body.

“Go,” she says. Her voice as thin as her wrists, as fine as the downy hair beginning to coat her body. She shifts, trying to take pressure off the protruding knobs of her spine. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

I’m already halfway out of her body, everything in me screaming for freedom. But in spite of myself, I pause. I hesitate. Why, why do I hesitate? I’m not supposed to be here, inside her. I’m *supposed* to be free. And Elizabeth, she isn’t designed to be inhabited by someone else’s spirit. Her body, like everyone’s, is built to house one permanent occupant.

Meanwhile, a million other bodies call to me, their voices shining like comets: *Come to us, come be with us*. They’re as thick as syrup in the air; the weight of them is intoxicating. Before I have a chance to second-guess myself, I pull free of Elizabeth like a clog pulling free of a drain.

••••

None of the other bodies feel right. The skin pinches and pulls, or else gives like spent elastic. Everything chafes, muscle and organ and bone alike, as if I’m wearing a suit full of sand. And it’s not just individual bodies; it’s every body, *any* body. And still, they sing, loud and insistent:

Come be with us, with us, with us . . .

Why do they keep calling to me? Why do they *pull*? It makes it difficult to concentrate. Wherever I am, I feel as though I ought to be somewhere else. Wherever I am, I don’t *fit*. I don’t belong.

Ever since Elizabeth. She was the last one, the last body I inhabited before it all went wrong.

Before I even fully realize what’s happening, I’m pulling myself out of my latest host and drifting back toward Elizabeth’s apartment. I find her sitting in her bed, propped up and cushioned with half a dozen pillows, her laptop open but sleeping. She twitches when I plunge back inside her.

What have you done to me?

“Why are you here? I told you to go.” Her voice is so quiet, I’m not sure I’d be able to hear it if I weren’t listening from beneath her skin. I make up for it by screaming.

I can’t feel anything. No weight, no gravity, not since your body. You poisoned me.

“Maybe *you* poisoned *me*.” She laughs weakly. “Did you think of that? Maybe you turned me into a spirit after all.”

I punch at her sternum. *You’re not a spirit. You’re nothing like a spirit.*

“Listen: can’t you hear them? Can’t you hear the angels?”

There’s no such thing as angels.

“There are, though. They’re calling to me. Listen.”

I shrink back in shock. The voices—they’ve followed me here, like they’ve followed me everywhere, needy and insistent. But I had no idea Elizabeth could hear them, too.

They're not angels, and they're not calling to you.

Her phone lights up with a text from Cary, and I shove myself into her head to make her turn and look at it. *This is the only one calling to you. Your friend. Not some spirit. Not some angel. An actual person.*

She squeezes her eyes shut, plunging me into darkness. "It's the angels. They're here to give me what you wouldn't."

No one can give you what you're trying to get! I shriek at her. *You're human. You have a body—a body! It's trying to tell you exactly what it needs, and you're not listening. You're destroying it. You're destroying yourself.*

"If I'm destroying myself, then so are you." She winces and shifts on her pillows. "What are you, anyway? Why are you here? Hijacking people just to feel like you still have a body. Well, you don't have a body. You can't. You're dead. You're dead and you can't be alive anymore. So just get out."

She clenches all of her muscles and curls her hands into fists. Her body contracts around me, a fierce peristalsis. It's squeezing me outward, and even though I weave myself around Elizabeth's rib cage to try to hang on, I'm slipping.

"I said, get out!"

She takes a deep breath, and grits her teeth and *pushes* . . . and her body expels me, flinging me out of itself.

I stare at Elizabeth from outside her. She's a sickly shade of gray, and she's panting on her bed, a prisoner inside her skin. Meanwhile, I hover above, bobbing like a cloud near the ceiling. The voices have not stopped calling. They're louder than ever, clanging like bells.

Shut up! I scream. All of those bodies, eating and having sex and running so hard their lungs burn. All of those bodies, *living*, when I can't.

Come be with us. Come to us . . .

I can't, I yell back. I can't. I don't want to anymore.

Us . . . us . . . us . . .

I stop. The tenor of the voices has changed, or maybe I'm just hearing them differently. Maybe it's that I'm finally hearing them myself, rather than through someone else's ears.

The voices aren't coming from bodies at all.

They're in the air. They're swirling on breezes and gathering in clouds and floating in mist. They're everywhere.

They're like me.

*Come to us, come be with us, come be us
be us*

Reminding me who I am, what I am. Beckoning me to expand. To become expansive. To stop gripping on to this life.

Calling on me to let go.

Elizabeth's phone lights up again, and I glance at the text.

< I'm coming over. I'm worried about you. Please talk to me >

Elizabeth won't even look at it. Even though I'm no longer inside her, I know she won't answer the door when Cary arrives. I realize how far we've both shrunk inside ourselves. Both of us aching for what we can't have. Both of us trying to control whatever we can in this maelstrom of chaos we call existence.

We're destroying each other. We're destroying ourselves. Neither of us is okay.

I flee from the room in time to see Cary marching up toward Elizabeth's door. They ring the buzzer

once, and then, after a half a minute, ring it again. No one answers. Cary shifts their weight, shoves their hands in their pockets. “Fuck,” they mutter, and start to turn away.

I dart down and dip inside them, as gently as I can. This is the last time, I promise myself.

From within Cary, I send them thoughts of Elizabeth’s wan face, of her listlessness, of the clumps of hair that her brush pulls out every time she remembers to use it. I send them a mental picture of Elizabeth’s shoulder blades jutting through her skin like wings. Of her dark, hollowed eyes, sunken into the skull of her face.

She’s trapped in there, I whisper, willing my voice to reach Cary somehow. *She can’t get out on her own.*

I don’t know if they hear me or if they decide all on their own, but Cary faces the door again and pounds against it. “Open up, Liz!” they call. Their hand aches from striking the door again and again, and I wrap myself into their fist to give them strength. “Please, open up!”

Finally, Elizabeth answers. Her thin, drawn face peers out from behind the door. I’m not used to seeing her from someone else’s point of view, and she looks shockingly out of proportion: eyes enormous in her skeletal face, stick-like wrists disappearing into bulky sleeves. Cary sucks in a breath.

“Jesus, Liz. Are you sick?”

At first, Elizabeth just stares at them dully. But then she blinks, and her brow furrows, and she leans closer. She looks in Cary’s eyes—*inside* Cary’s eyes—and it’s a look I recognize. Elizabeth *sees* Cary. But she also sees *me*.

“You came back,” she whispers. “Why did you come back?”

Maybe she’s talking to me or maybe she’s talking to Cary. Maybe she’s talking to both of us. It doesn’t matter.

“I’ll always come back,” Cary says, speaking for us both. “I wanted to make sure you’re okay. Are you okay?”

Elizabeth doesn’t say anything for a long moment. From the outside, her face is inscrutable. I wish I could dip inside her, just to see what she’s thinking. Just to give her the tiniest nudge. But I know, even though I don’t know *how* I know, that I can’t. Elizabeth needs to make this choice on her own.

After an uncomfortable silence, Cary says, “Hey, you know what? It’s okay—you don’t have to answer that question if you don’t want to. Just maybe come sit with me for a bit, yeah? I miss you.”

Tears leak from Elizabeth’s eyes, and she swipes at them with the back of her hand. “I miss you, too.”

••••

I leave Cary when the two of them sit down on Elizabeth’s front stoop. I wish I could stay for a while, to find out if Elizabeth will tell Cary the truth, if Cary is equipped to hear it. If Elizabeth will let herself get help. But it’ll take years, I know; years in which Elizabeth will get better, and get worse, improve and decline. Nothing about life moves in a straight line.

A very foolish part of me thinks that she might need me to guide her.

But I’m not a guide. I am, as Elizabeth told me, dead. And unlike Elizabeth, I don’t have lots of choices. I have this one, last, final choice, and once I make it, there’s no going back. Even though there’s no rule book for the dead, I know this is true.

I listen to the voices (*come with us, come be with us, come be us, us, us*) and the air around me tears like tissue, revealing everything I’ve been hiding from myself.

I cast one last glance behind me at Cary, at Elizabeth, trapped in their bodies but trying to find a way to breach that divide. My love for them—for their beauty and their frailty, for their imperfection and their impermanence, for the brightness of their souls shining through—is immense, so immense that I worry for a moment that the weight of it all will hold me down. But it doesn't. It buoys me up instead, propels me skyward. It's frightening, the speed at which I'm rising, floating away from everything I know. Frightening to know that I still have a choice; that for one final moment, I'm still me.

The last thing I do is send a thought to Elizabeth:

Can you remember a time you felt like fleeing your body, your life, yourself, and then—even for just a moment—you let your borders expand with a single, delicious inhalation?

Maybe that was me.

Or maybe it was just yourself. Feeling weighty.

Feeling alive.

I don't know if she'll listen. I don't even know if she'll receive my message at all, or if it will disperse on the wind. The not knowing is terrifying. It's also the point.

And then, like a snake shedding her skin, I let go.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Hudak is a speculative fiction writer fueled mostly by tea. Her work has appeared on both the *Locus Magazine* and the SFWA recommended reading lists, and has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Originally from Boston, she now lives with her family in Upstate New York where she teaches yoga, knits pocket-sized animals, and misses the ocean. Find out more about her at jenniferhudakwrites.com.

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

This Blue World

Samantha Murray | 740 words

You leave while it is still dark. Your lover sleeps on his stomach, the sheet draped only to his waist.

You don't want to go. You want to slide back into bed and listen to him breathing. And for him to make you coffee later, dark and sweet.

But you've never let anyone haunt you. And you're not about to start now.

Your car takes a few tries to get going, as if it is reluctant to move out of his driveway, as if it wants to stay, to not glide down his street in this blue world that exists just before dawn.

There is light in the sky when you pull off the highway and wind through the suburban streets to your house. A woman is walking down the road, and she is surrounded by her ghosts. You try to count them unobtrusively . . . eleven? Crowding and cluttering behind her. She doesn't look that much older than you, and how easy is her heart, did it just throw itself at anyone who came along? You wonder if any real people are waiting for her at home, or if their ghosts were the only part she kept.

••••

You've always been able to see them. Most people can only see their own ghosts; only a rare few can see those that belong to other people.

You'd confronted your mother once, when you were not much more than five. "But you should only love my dad," you'd declared stridently, flushed and righteous. You knew which ghost was your dad, although he'd died when you were a baby. You'd curl up next to his ghost sometimes and tell him about your day. He never spoke back to you, and his eyes were always on your mother.

"I do, my dear," your mother answered. And yet there was another ghost in your house, too. A younger man, with hair that fell forward over his forehead. "Once, it was something that was true," your mother said when you'd huffed and puffed about it. The ghosts lingered, even once you stopped loving them. "I wanted to deny it later. Pretend he never meant anything to me, just a crush, an infatuation, a fling. But here he is, so . . ." she shrugged.

"Do you haunt him too?" You'd asked. You hadn't thought of this before, it was a new idea with tricky edges.

Your mother looked very far away and oddly younger. "I should think it likely," she said, with a very non-mother-like smile that you hadn't seen before.

••••

You are in the middle of making yourself a cup of tea—peppermint, your tea of choice for afternoons, when you look up and see him. Sitting in your window seat, one hand folded under his chin.

Too late. You are too late. Your hands grip the benchtop and you bite down hard on your lip. *Too late.*

Surely your heart is sinking, but if that is the case why is it hammering so hard in your chest?

You should have left earlier. You knew this; how many times did you ignore the little instinct telling you *time to go, time to go?* But your railing and recriminations slam into the fact that it is just so damn good to see him.

His ghost follows you around all afternoon. Not intruding, not doing anything much, a quiet, gentle presence. But there. All the time there, as he would be, for the rest of your life. No matter what. You realize you are trembling. *Too late.*

••••

Later, much later, your doorbell rings. Your lover stands there, and you are struck by how real and vital he is compared to his ghost, which is so calm and still and soft around the edges. “Hi,” he says, “I didn’t realize you were gone for a while because . . .” he pauses, but you already know. Because there you are, behind him, standing in the golden slanted light of late afternoon.

Oh.

You were surprised, when you first met him, and attracted, both, that he didn’t have any ghosts tagging along, either.

And now here you are, haunting him.

“You never invite me over here,” he says, sounding more uncertain than you’ve ever heard him. But of course, most people cannot see other people’s ghosts, only their own. He doesn’t know that he haunts you.

He doesn’t see what you see. Your ghost, going over to his, taking his hand.

“I will do,” you say. “Come in.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Murray is a writer of science fiction and fantasy short stories. Her fiction has been seen in places such as *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Interzone*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and *Escape Pod*, among others, and has been collected in *The Year’s Best Australian Fantasy & Horror*, and *The Best Science Fiction of the Year*. Samantha is a two-time Aurealis Award winner, and her work has been translated into Chinese and Vietnamese. You can find her on twitter @SamanthaNMurray. Samantha lives in Western Australia in a household of unruly boys.

How to Join a Colony of Sea-Folk, or Other Ways of Knowing

K.S. Walker | 2400 words

Step One: You Wait

You are patient and your love, true. There is nothing you cannot withstand.

Step Ten: Believe This To Be the Sea

Standing at the top of the dunes, hands wrapped against the railing—frost-slick and weathered—you can believe it. At your feet are stairs and stairs and stairs that zig-zag down through the pale yellow dunegrass like a great scar. Beyond that: a shallow strip of beach. And further: a wider strip of ice and frozen snow sprinkled with wind-blown sand. Beyond further: blue. Deep and endless. But not still. The lake is restless. Gone milky with roiling so that the surface mirrors, almost exactly the color of the clouds, which are pregnant with raindrops and near bursting.

You know there is land on the other side of the horizon, closer than you think. Perhaps a day and a half on foot, if you travel round the southern, narrow, boot-shaped edge of this lake. It's out there. Somewhere. But for you, who grew up in a nation both landlocked and arid, where fog is foreign but dry heat very familiar, it may as well be the sea.

Besides. Aren't all the world's waters connected? Fed by the tears of Mami Wata's former lovers (they are numerous, envious creatures). It's what you'd heard. And more than that, it feels true.

Step Nine: Arrive at Dawn

Or dusk. Depending on the stories you've heard. Either should work. But you are chasing a new beginning. Is that selfish? You've tried closure and last rites and saying goodbye and none of those felt honest. So, dawn it is.

Step Two: Arrive at Dusk

Or dawn. It doesn't matter. The horizon is unbroken and empty as ever.

Step Seven: Write a Letter

No matter how many times you've started you are certain that all of your words arrive on the page wrong, an insufficient explanation of the bruise you've been cradling behind your ribs since the day you accepted your love would not come home. Yes, you have been happy. Fulfilled. And yet, there is an ache. A tenderness swelling between your connective tissue. You believe there is a way to ease it.

Your son, Tove, would call it a hunch, but your hunches are usually good.

You can only hope that in time Tove will understand. Perhaps he will even think of you in the spring, come festival time. Drape the altar with strings of cowrie shells and your favorite head wrap and the kora your love left behind that you always did intend to learn to play. Leave dishes of roasted yams next to grilled fish and winter apples, cups full of maple-wine next to a photo of you at his age, and him, squirming in your arms. Yes, that too. But for now, it will suffice for him not to worry.

Step Eleven: Find the Perfect Tidepool

The rosy edge of morning finds you taking slow steps through the damp sand. It slides and shifts beneath your feet. You look north, then south along the beach. Shore stretches out in each direction, unbroken, dimpled by last night's rain. Ultimately you choose north. Away from the lighthouse. It already failed you once; too many nights spent wishing for it to lead a ship to you. You won't give it a chance to fail you again.

There ought not to be tidepools here at all. But over the winter ice formed, broke, crashed against the coast and repeated its strange percussion again and again until the shoreline was remade into something new. This close to spring, water has found ways through the ice dams. Of course. Water always finds a way. Channels have formed, bridging lake-sea to lake-sea-shore, and shallow tidepools are the result. You pass half a dozen, knowing without knowing that none of them will do.

Sea birds swoop low on swift wings. A chickadee chirrups its name in the woods behind you. Thin flat chunks of ice that would look more at home in the polar-deserts, if not for the sand that dusts across them, slush against each other in a way that is both lazy and indulgent. You stare at the lake beyond. Understanding comes.

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Your first step onto the icy mound is tentative. You'd rather not send a foot crashing down into the freezing water. Well, not before you really have to. It holds and you take another. The snow and ice have built into a ridge here. The lake-sea crashes against the new, temporary shore. You follow this ridge until you come to a place where water has been trapped. A part of the ice shelf has sunk deeper. Bubbles trail up through the fissure. You turn the coin over and over again between your fingers.

Step One: You Wait

You are patient and your love, true. This is nothing you have not done before.

Step Six: Tire of Waiting

You tried to explain this to Tove once, and he looked at you as if you'd gone mad. He thinks he knows tired because he has one child walking and one barely sitting up and one more on the way, and yes being a new parent is a very particular sort of exhaustion but he does not understand the type of tired you are of decades of waiting for your lover to come home.

It is a tired that turns bones into brittle things and threatens to hollow out hearts into echo chambers and he does not see it because he has never seen you do anything but endeavor to love and heavens almighty has your life been full of love, so much love, but there is that ache that cannot be eased, and that hunch, that knowing, that will not give you peace. You and your love were ordained by the stars and something so godlike will weigh so heavily when circumstances have torn you apart and further, you *know*, you know it the way platelets will clot a wound and the way bearberry pollen will make you sneeze, and the way a crow's beak is black and flames burn blue and the coin wrapped inside your fist is cold, that it was nothing so simple as being lost at sea.

Step Twelve: Prepare your Offering

You hear her before you see her.

You know that Mami Wata is sometimes Papi Wata, and often both at once, but the temple your love worshiped at always sung of *her* divine light, and so you came to think of the god as *her* too. It's right for you in the moment, anyway. Which is also how you know that *this* is the place. Her song carries not so much as words, but rather more like a sigh released with each bubble that pops at the surface of the water. It is something you feel more than you hear.

You've brought two offerings: hot drink brewed from roasted kola nut and chili peppers, the grounds and seeds still swirling in the bottom of the jar, and also a flagon of raw elk's milk. The elk's milk is near yellow against the water as you pour it into the tidepool.

Nothing happens.

Step One: You Wait

You are patient and your love, true. You've waited before. It is nothing to you now.

Step Three: Become a Pity

They waited with you at first. The entire town held vigil, waiting for the ship to return. The last letter you received was dated from a port-town weeks ago. They were days late passing through the straits that would bear them from sea to lake to home to you.

Eventually the casual observers left, then the neighbors and close friends. Leaving you with the other widowed partners too stubborn to call themselves such.

Then the vigil thinned until there were no others, only you and the stubby wax candles that dotted the stairways down towards the dunes.

Fall rains turned to early snow. You let the November winds do your howling. You did not beat your fists upon the sand but rather clutched them tightly at your sides. The press of fingernails and the ridged edge of a golden coin into your palm grounded you then as much as anything.

Step Thirteen: Try Again

The bubbles in the tidepool grow fervent, then stop all together. You add the spicy kola nut beverage to the pool. Even lean forward to dip the jar in the water and wash out the excess grinds. You wince, imagining the heat on your tongue and the bitter aftertaste. Only a god would enjoy a drink such as this.

It is a start, you think, but also there is a buzzing growing – along the backs of your legs, across the cups of your knees. You move your foot. A gentle tapping at first. Enough to ease this yearning. And then it hits you. This feeling is an urge and you let it take you. Waves crash up over the icy edges that jut lake-sea-ward. That gentle rhythm will do. You stamp once and crouch so that as you turn one arm swoops upward, palm to sky, while the other is tucked hand over heart, and your elbow traces a circle near knee height. You laugh and do it again. Then you tuck your hands near your waist and let your shoulder work your body back upright; then arch your spine, heart to heavens. The wind picks up and you clap and throw your hands towards the clouds. You roll from your waist to your shoulders and back down again. This is a dance for a god. Euphoria lights through you. You know the stories. You've been too long from her ceremonies but you know how this goes.

Step Four: Believe the Stories

When you love someone long enough it is not uncommon to begin to see the world as they do. You were brought up agnostic but you could not deny the blessings Mami Wata bestowed on your lover. It would be nothing for them to go on a walk along the beach and find a nautilus shell, preserved and weather-polished, or go fishing only to remove pearl after improbable pearl from the mouths of catfish and bluegills. Once, your lover came home with a fat salmon. Nothing in the mouth but in the belly—not one, but two golden coins, nearly as large as your palm. The front stamped with a symbol for fertility and the back a head with two human faces, and a body that ends in a double tail. No currency you knew of. *From beyond*, your lover insisted.

When their ship did not return, you knew in your gut that a shipwreck was the least likely answer. Mami Wata takes care of her own.

Step Five: Try Again

It takes courage, you suppose, to welcome someone such as you, who is known to have one eye turned toward the lake-sea, to their bed. And you are grateful, so grateful that Ko did not give up on you. Your decades together were peaceful. When you are feeling gracious to yourself you admit that it took courage on your part, too, to try for love again.

Step Fourteen: Steady that heart of yours. Isn't this what you wanted?

It is. So why does your chest tremor in fear? The bubbles in the tide pool have increased to the point that they burst at the surface and each pop releases a note of song. At least, you choose to believe it is song. The force of each note sends tremors beneath your booted feet. The time has come. Ask.

Step Fifteen: Ask

Mami Wata! Sacred mistress of many faces. Divinity of the waters of the word. My love did not come home, and I know why you might want to keep them. They are everything good and bright, like a sliver of sun on a winter day, but it is time. You have kept my love. Now take me too. We will be together. Dancing along the currents. Singing songs to the lost and lonely. Tangling limbs in lengths of seaweed. Take me too.

Step One: You Wait

The wait is instantaneous compared to this lifetime you have spent in suspension.

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Heavens above and waters below, you were not ready. The fissure in the tidepool grows and what at first you take for the bright light of the afterlife is revealed to be an eye. More massive and just as awful as you'd imagined. A pearlescent iris set in a face the same shades as the nutrient rich soil at the bottom of rivers and stars almighty, how could you not know she was so close? Were those gusts wind or her breath? Were those waves or wakes left from her mighty tail. Has she been waiting? Is she like you?

Step Eight: Burn the Other Letters

You know them all by heart. You know the swoop of each character. You've worn the edges thin with your handling. There is not a word your love meant for you to have that is not already a part of your every cell. Those letters beat in your veins. Fire across synapses. You can't think of a thing more true. You won't need them where you are headed.

So burn them.

But take the coin.

Step Last: Go

The archipelago on which you have been making your case shifts and breaks free. Faster than you can comprehend you are moving free from the shore, and it's only when water splashes against your belly that you realize you are submerged and sinking still. Icy islands cast shadows when viewed from underneath. You gasp, and that is when you understand that you can breathe. Mami Wata flips and shoots deeper, with you cradled between the webbed fingers of a gentle hand. The darkness grows, but there is light beyond it. As you grow closer, shadowy shapes resolve into silhouettes part human and part of-the-sea. And if your ears are to be believed—there is music, too. Above the drum beats and string plucking one voice rises. Sung with strange lungs and still, you know those words.

They were written to you first.

You would know that voice anywhere.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.S. Walker writes speculative fiction. You can often find them outside with their family or inside starting a craft project they may or may not finish. K.S. Walker has been published or is forthcoming at *FIYAH*, *Uncanny*, *The Deadlands*, *Translunar Traveler's Lounge*, and various anthologies. You can find them online at kswalker.net or on Twitter [@kswalkerwrites](https://twitter.com/kswalkerwrites) and Instagram [@kswalker_writes](https://www.instagram.com/kswalker_writes).

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

POETRY

The Hole is the Beginning

Angel Leal | 329 words

Whenever a mother does not have a child
but needs a child, she goes to the hole
and there is always a baby
waiting for her.

She who needs them knows instinctively
where to find this hole. Once they have,
and the child is rolling in their hands,
they understand that the child cannot be ordinary.
They may clothe it with an ordinary love and sing to it
their most common lullaby. But the child drank
from a mountain instead of their breasts. Rather than
from their bones, the child ate desperately the nutrients
of a pond. This child, despite their surroundings,
will have a drop of river water in their blood,

and it will make them a bit quieter
than the children romping around them.
You may catch them too, now and again,
smiling with the others and enjoying
the same warm sand.
But you will also see them suddenly
swimming too far in
with the wild face of someone
searching for something they need.

It will frighten you to death some nights.
But the child needs to look,
will always need to look.
When they're older, they will start to find it.
Sometimes, they'll find a kind of gift:
a voice, a tender pliable voice,
that can make hardened men
feel boyish enough to look at the stars.

Other times, it may not seem like a gift:
the child with a sexless beauty
whose face somehow reminds you of the rain.
The child whose voice is like thunder
but whose hands are like hummingbirds.
These children may not feel connected,
but it's their otherness that connects them.

When they do go out into the world
they feel an odd loneliness
almost immediately.

Before they go, hold them.
Before they leave, touch their ears
with the same lullaby you sang before.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angel Leal is a Latinx genderqueer poet from Texas. Their previous work is out or forthcoming in *Strange Horizons* and *Kaleidotrope*. At the moment, they're inspired by the works of Megan Milks and Kai Cheng Thom, insects found in their backyard, and local folklore from their haunted hometown.

I Kissed a Dragon

Sharang Biswas | 189 words

I kissed a dragon once
in a desert hammered flat by stars.
His breath, hot with experience,
scraped
but
made me feel
vibrant.

I kissed a vampire once
with techno caking our ears and vodka perfuming our bodies.
The spew of my blood
numbed
but
made me feel
endless.

I kissed a mermaid once
at a beach where fresh adults set free their virginity.
The roundness of his lips
soothed
but
made me feel
entombed.

I kissed a fairy once
on a carpet squirming with spent streamers.
His gasp as my teeth encountered skin
thrilled
but
made me feel
guilty.

I kissed a goblin once
among the grumblings of a TV I had switched on to ignore.
The crumple of his hair against my chest
tickled
but
made me feel
dirty.

I kissed you once, twice, three times
and though you still sing to me like you used to,

the lacuna of your kiss
stings wide
and

still makes me feel.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharang Biswas is a writer, artist, and award-winning game designer. He has won IndieCade and IGDN awards for his games and has showcased interactive works at numerous galleries, museums, and festivals, including Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens. His writing has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Baffling Magazine*, *Eurogamer*, *Dicebreaker*, *Unwinnable*, and more.

EXCERPTS

EXCERPT: Pawns and Phantoms

Misha Handman | 2378 words

Todd Malcolm would be the first person to tell you that he's no Basil Stark. He's just a bouncer, part-time detective's assistant, and brawler who does his best to get by on the mean streets of 1950s Everland, relying on a keen eye and a quick temper that gets him into trouble as often as out of it. Everland is a dangerous place to poke at secrets. Colonized by corporate interests in the 1930s, it is an island of industry, fading magic, and political and corporate greed.

When Todd gets mixed up in an arson one night and gets fingered for the crime, he's thrown in over his head. With Basil Stark, Everland's premiere detective, caught up in his own problems, Todd is going to have to rely on an eclectic collection of friends and allies to clear his name and untangle a plot of blackmail and murder that threatens to overwhelm everyone that he loves.

Joined by his good friend Glimmer the fairy and Vance Carson, known throughout Everland as 'that other detective', Todd will have to contend with federal agents, angry tigers, murderous mermaids, and shadowy threats at every turn. Does Todd have what it takes to handle this case, or is he just a pawn in a dangerous plot?

Coming August 18, 2022 from EDGE Publications.

Saturday, August 18th

I've never been arrested in the West Precinct before. Usually, when I get arrested it's because I got into a fight downtown, so they haul me straight into the First Precinct. The First Precinct is real fancy — it was built right at the start, when they thought Everland was going to be a big deal, and a lot of money got spent on it. It's got a big open-front area, a carved mural of the last battle against the Pan, glass-faced offices, wide corridors, the works. Even the cells are nice. They're roomy, they get some light, and you don't usually have to share.

West Precinct was built about five years ago, when they realized a lot of poor folks were still moving in and they needed somewhere to leave them. It got put together on the cheap, and it looks it — grey bricks, low ceilings, small windows, those new fluorescent lights that make your eyes hurt. I don't get to compare the cells right away, because as soon as I arrive they dump me in an interrogation room, and I stay there for the next few hours cooling my heels while they decide what they're going to charge me with. Then a couple of bored-looking cops come in to take down my version of events, there is a lot of eye-rolling and smirks but no actual attempts to beat a confession out of me. Once they've got the details, they leave.

The next guy who strides in looks familiar, but I can't quite figure out why. He's tall, almost as tall as me, but a lot skinnier. He's dressed like a high-priced lawyer — black suit and tie, a pair of square glasses that he adjusts as he drops the manila file folders he's holding on the table and looks me over. His hair is slicked-back smooth, and he's got a bit of a smirk. I already hate him. "Well, well, well. Todd Malcolm, our would-be arsonist."

I grunt and clench my teeth. "You've got it wrong," I say. "The other guy is the arsonist. I just jumped him to keep him from getting away."

“The ‘other guy’ is a respected member of Second Star’s scientific staff,” the man says, sitting down across from me and flipping open his files. “Respected, intelligent, pillar of the community. Whereas you have quite the file.” He glances down at his pile of papers. “Todd Malcolm, born in nineteen-twenty-six, moved to Everland in nineteen-twenty-eight. Son of James and Ginny Malcolm. Father was a millworker, signed up for the draft in thirty-nine, killed in action nineteen-forty-three. Mother still works in the Holland Factory uptown.” He flips through the pages. “Your arrest record is ample. Drunk and disorderlies, mostly, but a few for assault and battery, one for petty theft, three for drug use, some trespassing.” He shakes his head. “Tell me something, Mr. Malcolm. Which of the two people I’ve described sounds like someone who would set fire to a low-rent club in the bad part of town?”

I frown. “You’re the guy from the docks.”

The man raises an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“You were down at the docks yesterday, meeting some American government guy. That’s where I know you from. You were glaring at me then, too.”

To my surprise, the man smiles a bit. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a cigarette, lighting it up. “You’re smarter than you look, Mr. Malcolm. I suppose you’d have to be to work at a detective agency, even if you’re mainly hired muscle.”

“So, who the heck are you?” I ask. “You don’t look like the local cops I know.”

The man takes a drag on his cigarette. “I am, in fact, a member of law enforcement, if not one of your local beat cops. Agent Harper, FBI. I’ve been called in to handle a complicated situation. Yesterday, I was meeting a few of my men who came over to assist. And then, just as my team is assembled, we have a break in the case. How coincidental.”

“You’re investigating arsons?”

“What I am investigating, Mr. Malcolm, is less important than your presence in my investigations. You’ve moved up in the world recently, haven’t you? One of your friends was murdered last winter, and somehow you came out of it working for a local legend. How very lucky for you.”

I’m halfway out of my chair before I can stop myself. The man tenses, but he smiles again when I force my fists open and sit back down. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I growl.

“How did you know that bar was going to burn down?”

“What?”

Harper gives me a long look. “Don’t take me for a fool, Malcolm. The Rust Bucket used to pay protection to Quentin Lark, a local mob boss. Perhaps you remember him. He also died last winter, in mysterious circumstances, just after a series of public confrontations with your employer. Is Stark giving up on his neutrality and moving back into the mob game? Is that why he’s started hiring toughs?”

“Buddy, you are so far off course you’re at sea.” I’m too surprised to stay mad. “Mr. Stark’s no mobster. If that place was a mob joint, maybe that’s why it got burned.”

“By the respectable researcher you assaulted.”

I don’t have an easy answer for that one, so I look down at the table. Harper laughs, finishes his cigarette, and grinds it out on the table’s edge. “So why don’t you tell me why you were at The Rust Bucket.”

“We’d just wrapped up at the Golden Hind. It was close, and the drinks are cheap.”

“If that’s the way you want to play it,” Harper says. He stands up, leaving the cigarette butt behind, and gathers his folders. “I’ll be back once the investigator’s initial report is complete. Maybe by then you’ll have a different answer.” He walks out of the room, and a couple of officers come in to take me

away.

The cells are about as grimy and dark as I expected based on the rest of the building, and I spend the whole day alone in them. Someone comes by to give me a stringy beef sandwich at one point, and a few hours later I get some lukewarm soup, and then I'm pretty much left to try and figure out where things went wrong. They won't even let me call my boss to let him know I won't make my shift.

The sun is getting low by the time Agent Harper gets back, with a couple of cops in tow. He gestures, and they unlock the door. "You're free to go, for now, Malcolm," Harper says to me. "But you're still a person of interest in this case. Don't leave town."

I snort. "Where would I go?"

"You have Piccadilly friends."

That catches me. I didn't think about Holly's place as being somewhere you couldn't get arrested, but I don't actually know what would happen if a bunch of police tried forcing their way in. I just shrug and nod. "Sure. Nice meeting you guys."

Harper puts a hand on my shoulder as I turn to follow the cops. I'm still keyed up and feel the urge to throw a punch, but I keep my fists from curling and turn back to him. "Yeah?"

"One more thing." Harper leans in close, like he doesn't want anyone to hear. "You tell Stark to stay the hell out of this. It's a federal case."

Wednesday, August 29th

The good news is, we don't have to pretend we haven't heard the news for long. The shootout made the news, and I wake up to a headline in the *Everland Times* reading: "CITY'S LAST PIRATE: A MURDERER?" According to the story, federal agents raided a suspected smuggling operation and found Mr. Hope dead and Basil Stark on the scene with a smoking gun. The reporter speculates that Hope was Stark's informant at Hawthorne, helping him do something very vague but definitely terrible; then, when he got scared and tried to back out, Stark killed him. It also helpfully says that police are looking for information about any associates that Stark might have.

I head down to Mr. Stark's office to check in, which turns out to be a mistake. A reporter jumps at my face as I get up to the door. "Excuse me! Do you work in this building? Are you familiar with Stark Investigations?"

"I'm a janitor," I growl, pushing past him. I can see a second reporter behind him, scenting a story, and I slam the door in their faces before anyone recognizes me from my own mugshots in the paper. Then I turn around and see a *third* reporter in the hallway upstairs, knocking on the office door and yelling questions.

In for a penny, in for a pound. I storm up the stairs and yell, "Alright, clear out, show's over!"

The reporter turns to snap at me, and then adjusts as he has to look up a heck of a lot further than he expected. "You can't intimidate the news," he says.

"This is a place of business. There's no story here. Clear out." I growl the words, and the guy takes a step back.

"C'mon, man," he says, holding up his hands. "You work here? I need a lead. *The Times* scooped us. There's someone in the office, and they're not opening the door. If you could just get me a lead."

"I'll get you a lead down the stairs if you don't stop bothering folks around here." I take a deep breath. "Look, you want a lead? How many times has Basil Stark gotten arrested, and how many times has he been convicted? I'd go sniffing around Hawthorne if I was you."

The reporter sighs. "That's the best you're giving me? Fine, fine." He presses a card into my hand. "If you change your mind, let me know."

I wait until he's down the stairs and out the door before I knock on the office door. Holly lets me in after a minute. "You should have come up the fire escape," she says, leading me into the main office. Glimmer is crouched by the window, watching the reporters outside balefully.

"Yeah, probably. How's it going in here?"

"Everland only has three newspapers, six radio shows, and a lifestyle magazine, but somehow a hundred people want a scoop. The phone's ringing every time I put it down." She shakes her head. "Glimmer wanted to drop things on them, and it's all I could do to convince her not to."

"Maybe she should. It would definitely change the story," I say. Holly glares at me, and I raise my hands defensively. "Or not."

"Well, we've got permission to visit Uncle Basil in jail, but not for very long, and we need to be there by eleven. Think we can shake these guys?"

"I think they'll be watching the stairwell," I say. Then I smile slowly. "Hey, Glimmer, you still want to throw things?"

Glimmer grins and hefts a mug.

"No, that's my favorite one!" Holly says quickly. She goes into the kitchen and comes out with three more mugs. "Throw these ones, they're ugly and Uncle Basil won't get rid of them. And don't actually hit anybody, please. We don't need you arrested, too."

Glimmer salutes and promises to be a distraction big enough for us to get away.

"Just keep safe, huh? We'll meet back at . . . let's say my place," I say. "Don't think anyone knows to check there."

Holly and I climb out onto the fire escape and start carefully making our way down. From the other side of the building, we hear a cacophony of fairy swear words and the sound of a mug smashing into the street, along with the surprised shouts of the news folk. I peek around the corner in time to see Glimmer take off, with two reporters in hot pursuit. "Right, coast is clear."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Misha Handman has been involved in writing for most of his life. He started by writing comics for his friends in elementary school and was promptly drawn into the artistic world by their approval, moving on to produce short stories and collaborative works. He has lived in cities across Canada, including Victoria, Ottawa, and Toronto, and refuses to pick a favourite no matter how much his friends bother him about it. For now, Victoria is his home. Misha is a firm believer in the power of genre fiction to both entertain and provoke thought and is a voracious reader of a wide variety of works.

NONFICTION

Interview: Locus Awards Top Ten Finalists, Part Two

Arley Sorg | 5098 words

The Locus Awards are one of the few major awards that feature a range of novel categories, including Best Fantasy Novel. Awards inevitably reflect the tastes of the people who decide on recipients: the selections for the World Fantasy Awards reflect the tastes of a given year's jurors; each year's Hugo Awards reflect the tastes of Worldcon memberships; Nebula Awards nominees and winners reflect the reading habits of voting SFWA* members.

The Locus Awards are a bit different. Ostensibly a readers' poll, the Locus Awards are decided by an open vote: anyone can participate, and there are no requirements, other than the ability to cast the vote. This means these awards potentially reflect the tastes of a broader range of individuals—but presumably still folks who love genre fiction. So, who better to talk about fantasy fiction than the top ten finalists of the Locus Awards in the Best Fantasy Novel category?

We invited the authors of the top ten Best Fantasy Novels (according to the Locus poll) to participate in a brief collective interview, to discuss their work, their careers, and other things. We asked them all the same ten questions, with the request that they respond to at least seven of them, and let them pick whichever questions they want to answer. We are breaking the interview into two parts, across two issues, for space.

Last month we presented part one; this month features part two.

We hope you find their responses as interesting as we did!

*The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association

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Locus Awards Top Ten Finalists, Best Fantasy Novel Category interview, Part Two, featuring (alphabetically): Ryka Aoki, Fonda Lee, Naomi Novik, C.L. Polk

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Ryka Aoki

What are some of your favorite works or authors that use fantastic elements (from the past or more recent, whichever you'd like to talk about), and what do you like most about them?

RA: Hayao Miyazaki is one. I love how his worlds do not adhere to what we imagine as right or wrong or beautiful or ugly. His work alters our way of seeing the world, and I am grateful for that genius. Toni Morrison is another. I know that Morrison might not seem fantastical—much of what she addresses is anything but faraway and make-believe. However, there is the fantastic in how she writes about it. Her language is so lush and rich and musical and evocative . . . it reminds me what words can do when one treats them with love and respect.

How did you get into writing narratives with fantastic elements? Was it something you always did, or was there a transition, or a moment of inspiration?

RA: I think growing up queer and trans one is always wondering, “why am I this way?” and “how did I get here?” As a child I might not have known who I was, but I knew I didn’t fit in. It is a very lonely place—not fitting in, and it seems unfair. So . . . was there a reason that I was made like this? I’ve always loved stories that gave me new possibilities to answer that question.

What was “breaking in” like for you—did you sell stories or novels right away, did you have connections, was it random, or was there a period of submissions and rejections and trunked work?

RA: There was a lot of work and a lot of luck involved. I spent years working with small presses and hand-printed ‘zines. Journals, presses, publishers . . . I got rejected all over the place. I did get some acceptances, though, and the entire time I was growing, and writing and learning—even though it didn’t seem that way at the time. And I was living. People around me soared and sailed and some died . . . one feels differently about one’s art when that happens. So when the chain of events began, everything that led to *Light From Uncommon Stars*, I think I was as ready as I would ever be.

What, for you, are the most challenging craft elements in writing novels, and how do you deal with those challenges?

RA: I have a poetry background, and I still write like a poet, which can be daunting when writing a novel. I usually feel like a slowpoke. Knowing this, I try to create a routine where I can work on pieces of the novel—almost like a poetry collection—before bringing them together. And I hope the results are worth the wait.

The Locus Top Ten Finalists is the result of a readers’ poll—readers voted your book as being one of the best books out there! (CONGRATULATIONS, by the way! =)) Please talk a bit about the way you use the fantastic in your book, and what you like most about the way you’ve utilized it.

RA: I use the fantastic in a very day-to-day way, because I feel all of us are magical once we get to know each other. So many people have talents and skills and stories that can seem unreal. This is why I blend starships and donuts and demons and kiwi boba. Because I believe in the magic of this world. And yes, I will always believe in the fantastic, no matter what is happening around us.

What was the main inspiration for this book, how did it develop, and were there a lot of changes from initial concept to

RA: I wanted to write a tale about space aliens, violinists, demons, and donuts. But *not* your ordinary, everyday tale of space aliens, violinists, demons, and donuts . . . Instead, I wanted to make the space aliens Asian refugees, the violinists transgender runaways.

I wanted to evoke the names and faces of people I’ve known all my life. In *Light From Uncommon Stars* I wanted to share my hometown, the miso soup, kiwi boba, weekend menudo, and Chinese BBQ

duck. I wanted to share the donuts, and the donut people, of my childhood.

Most of the changes and adjustments were all giving myself permission to tell the story I wanted, without worrying about what was expected. That let me create relationships and voices that I am proud to bring to my readers.

What is one piece of advice you'd give to readers, and separately, one piece of advice you'd give to writers who are just starting out?

RA: To readers—try to address each author individually. It is easy to think of and to market blocks of books—queer writers and women writers and writers of color—and it can be a convenient shorthand. But each writer is SO different and I think going into each book—no matter that the cover copy says—with open arms and hearts and minds will make your reading experiences even more magical.

For writers just starting out—start building a trusting and loving relationship with who you are tomorrow. It's a long road, and you'll sleep a lot better at night if you know the “tomorrow you” will preserve and expand and improve upon the words and stories you write today.

For some of the authors on this list, this may be their first award nomination. For others, it's just one of their recent awards nominations. Do you feel like awards make a difference in terms of writing fiction, or in terms of career?

RA: Awards and nominations can help sell books, and that is always good for a writer's career. Personally, I think awards mainly let me know that some readers really like my work. And then I can get an interview like this where I can say thank you. <3

What else are you working on? What do you have coming up that you'd like people to know about?

RA: I'm working on my next book for Tor right now! J Super excited about it—I think it's some of my best writing yet—but I can't talk too much about it now.

Also, I have a newsletter “Ryka's Most Excellent World” where I chat about science and the arts and life as a working writer. Sometimes I even post new stories there. Please check it out!

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Fonda Lee

The Locus Award is the result of a readers' poll—readers voted your book as being one of the best books out there! (CONGRATULATIONS, by the way! =) Please talk a bit about the way you use the fantastic in your book, and what you like most about the way you've utilized it.

FL: Thank you! Winning the Locus Award is deeply meaningful to me because I think of *Locus*

readers as some of the most knowledgeable and well-read speculative fiction consumers out there, so the fact that they voted for *Jade Legacy* on a ballot full of good choices is something that'll always stay with me.

In the Green Bone Saga, I employ the fantastic in a limited and grounded way. The island nation of Kekon is the only place with bioenergetic jade, which endows those who're trained to use it with superior abilities like those you might see in a wuxia martial arts story: the ability to leap over walls, channel energy, deflect bullets, or punch through concrete. What I enjoyed most about the magic I put into my books was how *non-magical* I was able to make it seem in the story. I wanted this precious substance, jade, to seem very much like an ordinary, day-to-day part of the world and the culture I'd created.

What was the main inspiration for this book, how did it develop, and were there a lot of changes from initial concept to final product?

FL: I began with a concept for the world that was really an aesthetic created from a mashup of concepts that excited me. I envisioned a modern era Asian metropolis with gangs and magic-fueled martial arts. Men in suits smoking in alleys. Business deals made in private dining rooms and politics at the edge of a blade. Luxury cars and guns, nightclubs and blood feuds. Clan warfare, family drama, and duels to the death. I didn't have any plot or characters when I first began, just *vibes*. I'm really proud to say that the vision I started out with did become fully realized, but the biggest change along the way was the growth in breadth and depth of the cast of characters, and the amount of time (thirty years) that ended up being covered.

For readers who haven't read this book, who mainly have the cover and blurb to go by, what would you like them to know about this work? What is important or special to you about this book?

FL: The marketing for the Green Bone Saga tends to emphasize the martial arts action and the mafia genre comparisons, especially to *The Godfather*. What's most special to me, however, and what I think has truly resonated with readers, is the Kaul family. This trilogy is a family saga at its heart.

How did you get into writing narratives with fantastic elements? Was it something you always did, or was there a transition, or a moment of inspiration?

FL: I've been reading fantasy since as early as I can remember reading, and writing fantasy since as early as I can remember writing. I was in fifth grade when I wrote my first fantasy novel while riding the bus to and from school each day. I was that bookish kid spending all her physical time in the library and her mental time in the made-up world of her own imagination, so fantastic elements were neither a sudden revelation nor something that I slowly and consciously adopted; they were simply always there.

What was “breaking in” like for you—did you sell stories or novels right away, did you have connections, was it random, or was there a period of submissions and rejections and trunked work?

FL: I went straight into writing novels. My first complete attempt was a fantasy novel that I queried without success and that ended up trunked. The following year, I wrote what would become my debut, a young adult science fiction novel called *Zeroboxer*. I signed with my agent off of a cold query. We did a round of revision and then went on submission and sold the book in a month to a small press for a modest advance. I wrote another book and sold it to a larger publisher, for a better advance. Another book followed, then another . . . While it certainly hasn’t all been smooth sailing, and there’s been plenty of rejection along the way, I haven’t looked back. Even when it’s hard, this is a job I enjoy.

What, for you, are the most challenging craft elements in writing novels, and how do you deal with those challenges?

FL: I find drafting to be the most challenging part of writing a novel. I’m one of those authors who enjoys revision (and especially enjoys having *finished* the book!), but who struggles with the first draft because a) I’m a slow writer, and b) the more experienced I get, the easier it is to see how much everything sucks when it first comes out on the page. Intellectually, I know that it’ll improve in the revision process, but in order to get through the painful first drafting phase, I really have to be disciplined about forcing myself into the chair, tuning out distractions (*so many* distractions), and above all, lowering my own standards and giving myself permission to write badly so that the first draft gets *done*.

For some of the authors on this list, this may be their first award nomination. For others, it’s just one of their recent awards nominations. Do you feel like awards make a difference in terms of writing fiction, or in terms of career?

FL: Awards, in my opinion, may not result in a noticeable increase in book sales in the short term, but they absolutely do make a difference when it comes to getting recognized within the industry, and to a lesser degree, among readers. Having awards to one’s name opens up opportunities, sometimes unexpected ones. That might include a solicitation to submit for an anthology, a request to teach at a workshop, a foreign language translation of your novel, an invitation to speak at a conference, or an agent or editor expressing interest in your next project. There’s also the psychological and emotional value of the award, which boils down to knowing that your peers and/or readers like what you’re doing. That knowledge can sometimes be a huge balm on the days when the solitary work of writing is especially difficult.

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Naomi Novik

What are some of your favorite works or authors that use fantastic elements (from the past or more recent, whichever you'd like to talk about), and what do you like most about them?

NN: Some of my favorite authors from my earliest fantasy reading include Tolkien, Ursula LeGuin, Tamora Pierce, Robin McKinley, Patricia McKillip, Anne McCaffrey, and Mercedes Lackey, among many more. Right now, there's amazing work from Martha Wells, Zen Cho, Katherine Arden, Seanan McGuire, and N.K. Jemisin, whose Broken Earth Trilogy is fundamental.

When I read fantasy myself, I love the experience of being transported to a world that you couldn't otherwise go to. Whether it's a past world that no longer exists, one that has yet to come into being, or one completely imagined—I want to immerse myself in the world of the story and believe in it. When you pick up *Dragonsong*, for one example, the reader fully steps inside of Pern and inhabits it. It's a real, living place, and every character you meet is carrying their own story inside of them. If a world is wholly believable, you can ask the reader to come along and accept fantastical elements, like the existence of dragons.

How did you get into writing narratives with fantastic elements? Was it something you always did, or was there a transition, or a moment of inspiration?

NN: I write what I can write, when I can write it! Fantasy doesn't necessarily need to have elves, magic, wizards, or dragons; it's where the author has the power to craft the stage for their characters, and the stakes of their situation. The appeal for me is that your world and your characters can grow together.

What, for you, are the most challenging craft elements in writing novels, and how do you deal with those challenges?

NN: The best piece of writing advice I've ever received is: SET SOMETHING ON FIRE.

I always let the characters lead the story. My plots are determined by what the characters need or want, what happens in reaction to their actions—which is shaped by the world around them. So if I find myself struggling with what is happening next, or what should be happening—it can be useful throwing unexpected catastrophic events at them: burning down something they care about, or turning things upside-down around them. Even if you don't end up keeping it, you find out what is important to your characters.

The Locus Top Ten Finalists is the result of a readers' poll—readers voted your book as being one of the best books out there! (CONGRATULATIONS, by the way! =)) Please talk a bit about the way you use the fantastic in your book, and what you like most about the way you've utilized it.

NN: In the Scholomance, I've tried to create a genuinely terrifying setting by taking things that many of us fear in actuality, and amplifying them to a whole new level by means of the maleficaria—life-threatening creatures that prowl the school preying on students. Some of the maleficaria embody real, visceral anxieties that we have, like unseen things that come wriggling out of our food or

crawling out of the drain while we are showering. Others prey on students in places where they feel the most vulnerable, like walking the more remote hallways of the school without the company of friends, or just as they're curling up into a comfortable big chair in the library.

What was the main inspiration for this book, how did it develop, and were there a lot of changes from initial concept to final product?

NN: Schools of dark magic have fascinated me since I was ten years old! I first encountered an evocative illustration in a volume from *The Enchanted World* series by Time-Life Books, depicting scholars of dark magic studying in pitch-black darkness—locked away from sunlight for many years with no teachers or contact with the outside world. At the end of their studies, the last student is taken for payment by the Devil. Later, I came across a mention of the Scholomance itself in footnotes of *THE ANNOTATED DRACULA*. (Dracula went there!) The legend has stuck in my head ever since: why would anyone choose to go to this terrible place? How would they survive it? The answer has to be: Because it's worse on the outside. From there, the world outside of the school developed. The school evolved as a character, like any other character.

The biggest change was when I realized I had to write three books instead of two! It was originally planned as a duology, but *A Deadly Education* ended where it had to—and that is how one ends up with a trilogy.

For readers who haven't read this book, who mainly have the cover and blurb to go by, what would you like them to know about this work? What is important or special to you about this book?

NN: The importance of building community and finding connection with one another is very much a part of this story. When we come together to face struggles, we can meet challenges that would otherwise be insurmountable for any one of us alone. In the Scholomance, this imperative is made literal, not least of all on the last day of senior year.

I also hope that readers identify with the anxieties that confront El: having nowhere to sit in the school cafeteria, or finding yourself with nobody to walk with to class. In the real world, these situations can really feel like a matter of life-and-death; in the Scholomance, they actually are!

What is one piece of advice you'd give to readers, and separately, one piece of advice you'd give to writers who are just starting out?

NN: FINISH THINGS. Write a lot, and finish a lot. And if you have to pick one, finish a lot. In the beginning, if you have not yet sold anything, learn to finish things—and then let them go, even if they aren't perfect. Finish everything you start, until you get good at finishing things. We all just have to sit down and write. You have to write something bad before you can write something good.

What else are you working on, what do you have coming up that you'd like people to know about?

NN: My next project is called *Folly*—very generally—a story about how people and place shape one another. It’s still very much in early stages; I’m normally a pantsner—it may be my first foray into full-scale world building.

I’m currently constructing the world from the ground up—continents, climates, historical contexts, where the mountains and rivers are.

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C.L. Polk

What are some of your favorite works or authors that use fantastic elements (from the past or more recent, whichever you’d like to talk about), and what do you like most about them?

CLP: My favorite SFF author is Tanith Lee. I was obsessed with her books, and I have lugged around a stack of yellow-spined paperbacks for decades just to keep my collection wherever I went. I loved her prose, most of all, and the quality of her voice. I’m very interested in writers who have great ideas and enviable prose, and there are so many to choose from these days.

How did you get into writing narratives with fantastic elements? Was it something you always did, or was there a transition, or a moment of inspiration?

CLP: It was something that I always wrote, even when I was a little kid. If there wasn’t a magical, supernatural, or speculative element in the story, I didn’t write it. That’s not true. I did write one story that didn’t have any of these, and I never even tried to share it with the world.

What was “breaking in” like for you—did you sell stories or novels right away, did you have connections, was it random, or was there a period of submissions and rejections and trunked work?

CLP: I sold my first story ages ago, in 2002. It was the first short story I had ever written with the intent to sell it to a magazine, and after a quick no from *Strange Horizons* because they didn’t publish horror, I sold it to *Gothic.net*. A few years later I sold a science fiction story to Eric Flint to *Baen’s Universe* . . . and then nothing for ages. I wrote a few stories for *Shadow Unit*, and then a few years after that, I sent out *Witchmark*.

Honestly, I didn’t send out many stories, and I would trunk them after a handful of rejections. A lot of people worked hard at selling short fiction, but I wasn’t one of them!

What, for you, are the most challenging craft elements in writing novels, and how do you deal with those challenges?

CLP: Trusting the process is the most challenging. I spend a lot of the drafting process worried that everything I’m doing is wrong. Maybe that’s not craft-aligned enough, but it’s the hardest part

because I can't just study it like I can for things like story structure and characterization. Those things, I figured out by trying different things. Trusting the process doesn't have an easy fix.

The Locus Top Ten Finalists is the result of a readers' poll—readers voted your book as being one of the best books out there! (CONGRATULATIONS, by the way! =)) Please talk a bit about the way you use the fantastic in your book, and what you like most about the way you've utilized it.

CLP: Well, the magic of the Kingston Cycle and the presence of the Amaranthines are tied together, though I don't know if that's obvious from reading it. I had a very basic starting point for the magic, and expanded on that beginning until I stopped writing whatever came to mind to say aloud, "oh gosh, that's horrifying," and then promptly started working on a story based on that.

But the result wasn't really so much about the magic as it was about power. I've said it a few times—Fantasy stories are stories about power, when you get down to the roots, and so the stories I write explore what happens as a result of this world having people who can do the impossible.

What was the main inspiration for this book, how did it develop, and were there a lot of changes from initial concept to final product?

CLP: *Soulstar* is the final book of the Kingston Cycle trilogy, and so it's the book that finishes the series. But specifically, this book's main inspiration was activism and community building. I wanted to write about the people who see the need for changes their society and government doesn't care about or doesn't want, and go ahead and do it anyway. I wanted to talk about collective action for social and political change. I know that isn't a usual thing for fantasy, but I liked the idea.

For readers who haven't read this book, who mainly have the cover and blurb to go by, what would you like them to know about this work? What is important or special to you about this book?

CLP: Firstly, it's not the first book in a series; it's the last. There are two other books to read before this one: *Witchmark* and *Stormsong*. It's special for me because I didn't really think that I was a series writer, but as it turns out, sometimes you can turn that into an opportunity to explore a form in a different way.

What is one piece of advice you'd give to readers, and separately, one piece of advice you'd give to writers who are just starting out?

CLP: For readers? If you're looking for something different, there are a lot of online resources to help you find if someone's already done that (they probably have) but it's going to mean breaking out of what the internet believes they know about your reading preferences and have helpfully algorithmed the others away.

For writers? Apply as little success pressure on your work as possible. Write it because you want

to see how it turns out. Your writing world and priorities change after the publishing deal. There isn't really much reason to start simulating those conditions now, when you're never going to get another chance to experiment and play around like the one you have now.

For some of the authors on this list, this may be their first award nomination. For others, it's just one of their recent awards nominations. Do you feel like awards make a difference in terms of writing fiction, or in terms of career?

CLP: Unfortunately, I'm sure they do. An award final ballot nod or win does make a difference. It increases your visibility across the field, and that has several effects. Some of them are really good. But award nominations are stressful, no matter what. If I can give a little more advice? Making the shortlist is the win already. You did it.

What else are you working on, what do you have coming up that you'd like people to know about?

CLP: I have a novella coming out with Tordotcom Publications! It's called *Even Though I Knew The End*, and it releases on November 8th. It's a short book about a series of horrid murders and the detective who uses divination magic to track down the killer, because if she succeeds, she'll get her soul back from the Devil.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arley Sorg is a 2021 and a 2022 World Fantasy Award Finalist as well as a 2022 Locus Award Finalist for his work as co-Editor-in-Chief at *Fantasy Magazine*. Arley is a 2022 recipient of SFWA's Kate Wilhelm Solstice Award. He is also a finalist for two 2022 Ignyte Awards: for his work as a critic as well as for his creative nonfiction. Arley is a senior editor at *Locus Magazine*, associate editor at both *Lightspeed & Nightmare*, and a columnist for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. He takes on multiple roles, including slush reader, movie reviewer, and book reviewer, and conducts interviews for multiple venues, including *Clarkesworld Magazine* and his own site: arleysorg.com. He has taught classes, run workshops, and been a guest for Clarion West, the Odyssey Writing Workshop, Cascade Writers, *Augur Magazine*, and more. Arley grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado, and studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in the SF Bay Area and writes in local coffee shops when he can. Find him on Twitter [@arleysorg](https://twitter.com/arleysorg). Arley is a 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

Author Spotlight: Jennifer Hudak

Mayookh Barua | 925 words

Welcome to *Fantasy Magazine*! We're so happy to be able to bring your story, "The Weight of It All," to our readers. I am so intrigued by the point of view of this story and am so curious to ask you what inspired you to take that decision. Could you also tell us how this story came to you?

The first draft of this story was written for a flash fiction contest. The prompt had to do with grief and grieving, which made me think of ghosts; what might a ghost grieve? I imagine that ghosts would very much miss the sensation of having a physical body—of possessing weight and mass. The idea stuck with me, because when my eating disorder was at its worst, I desperately wanted to escape my body, and I worked hard to make myself lighter and lighter—in effect, to become insubstantial. Weirdly, it helped me in my recovery to think about how angry a ghost would be that I was devaluing the one thing they would desire so deeply. But of course, a ghost's desire for a body would be just as impossible and toxic as a person's desire to escape one. Needless to say, this idea was far too large to cram into a 750-word flash piece! But that's where the seed came from.

There is an interesting discussion around body and space that happens in the story. Could you elaborate on some of the ideas that you addressed and also those you weren't able to, if there are any, and also tell us about the relationship of these two themes in respect to your story?

It's no secret that only certain types of bodies are allowed to take up space in our society. If our physical presence deviates at all from the societal "default," we are made to feel conspicuous. And while there's no way for the vast majority of us to align with the norm, that doesn't stop us from trying: to be less loud, less clumsy, less obvious, to use fewer resources and attract less attention; in short, to shrink ourselves. It's a violent impulse, and the visceral imagery in this story was intended to make clear the effects of that violence on both our bodies and our psyches.

If there is one feeling you want the audience to take away from this story, what would you wish for it to be?

I'm going to cheat and give three: 1) That we deserve to take up space, just as we are. 2) That it's okay not to be okay. And 3) That none of us can do this alone.

I can sense that this is a very personal story as you deal with the very prevalent but sensitive topics of eating disorders and suicidal thoughts. What was the process of writing this story like for you? Was it cathartic or difficult in fundamental ways?

This is the second story I've written in an attempt to process and understand my eating disorder. The first one, "Getaway," was written soon after my diagnosis, and it's pretty grim. It was important

to me that “The Weight of It All” end on more of a hopeful note. In that sense, writing this story was very cathartic. It enabled me to look back on the person I was not so long ago, and realize how far I’ve come. It also made me think about what gives me a sense of hope—what makes me see a brighter future for myself.

In the same vein, what is your advice to writers who might be trying to work with topics that they find difficult or challenging because of how personal they are?

I feel like not everyone should be asked to plumb the depths of their own pain. But if they want to—if it’s helpful to them—I think it’s okay for the experience, and the story, to be messy. A lot of people disliked “Getaway” because it *didn’t* end with any kind of hope, but that’s where I was at the time, and that was the only story I could tell. That being said, even though “The Weight of It All” is very much *my* story, I wanted to make sure it didn’t feel offensive or “off” to other ED sufferers and survivors. Several people with eating disorders did give me important feedback about an early draft of the story, and it made me rethink the story’s original ending. It’s a tough balance to achieve, but I feel it’s an important one.

What are you working on now, and are there any other projects we can look forward to seeing from you in the future?

I have a story coming out this fall in *The Future Fire* that I’m excited for people to read. I also have stories forthcoming in *Wyngraf*, *Worlds of Possibility*, and *Kaleidotrope*. And, I’m in the process of revising a novel: a portal fantasy in which three generations of women go on an adventure together. It’s a long way from finished, but the more people who nudge me about it, the more likely I am to finish it, so please do nudge!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Mayookh Barua is a North Carolina-based writer from India who identifies as a proud queer man. His areas of focus mainly lie in and around art, queerness, cinema, and the politics of a family. He has previously published at *Crooked Fagazine*, *Mezosfera Magazine*, and *District-Berlin*.

Author Spotlight: K.S. Walker

Phoebe Barton | 780 words

Welcome to *Fantasy Magazine*! We're so happy to bring your story "How to Join a Colony of Sea-Folk, or, Other Ways of Knowing" to our readers. Can you tell us what inspired this story and how it came about?

I wrote this story over a late-winter weekend spent in a tiny cabin on the shore of Lake Michigan. It was warm enough to rain the whole time but cold enough that there was still ice and snow along the shore. I really wanted to encapsulate part of that weekend—the juxtaposition of sand and snow, the awe of a lake that's trying its best to be an ocean—Lake Michigan is a magical place for me.

Early in the story I realized I would be weaving between the past and the present, and that's when I started to get curious about the structure. In retrospect, deciding to label each section as a step helped keep me organized in a way that I might not have been able to otherwise. I wrote by going back and forth between two documents, one with the steps listed in a chronological order so I could see what parts might be missing, and the other document with the story in the order it felt more natural to tell it—much the way you see it now.

The most stressful part of writing this story was when I'd discover a step that made sense chronologically, and then have to figure out where in the non-chronological telling it might make most sense for the reader.

The strongest emotions I pulled from this were desperation and yearning to see the world in a new way—I figure those are the "other ways of knowing" from the title, and natural companions of the sea. Were you trying to focus on these emotions in particular, or did I completely miss what you were going for?

I was hoping to leave the reader with hope and yearning, and perhaps a grief that hasn't gone away, but has changed, and left the narrator changed.

Mami Wata's presence in this story felt to me like the sea as seen from the shore, vast and cool and mysterious. What led you to make her such a strong presence in it?

This is an interesting question! I've had a Mami Wata story lurking in my bones for a minute. When I started writing I didn't know this would be the one. though. The first working title was 'something, something, sea-witch' actually, and at first I was thinking it would be an Ursula-type figure that the main character beseeched. But as the tone of the story solidified, I realized it needed to be a benevolent figure, and Mami Wata fell into place naturally.

There's a strong current here that no matter how much we long to escape the world we're in or find a better one, we can't wait for it to come to us; that, like water, we have to shape the world to us. Did you have this consciously in mind when you were writing, and is there anything else you were hoping to get across with the story?

Current. I see what you did there.

Ah, but seriously you flatter me! I love that this is what you pulled from the story. I'd be lying if I said that was consciously in my head as I was writing. I was very focused on balancing grief and hope in this story, and I think you need both, in a way, to begin to enact change on the world around you. A dissatisfaction with the way things are and a strong belief that there can be something different. So I think that connection makes sense.

Is there anything you're working on now that you'd like to talk about? What can our readers look forward to seeing from you in the future?

I am shin deep in drafting a novella right now, and there's a first draft of a dark fantasy weird western that's been giving me the side eye for a few months (I'm coming back to you, I promise). But really my heart is in short fiction. I have a feverish flash story coming out later this year at *The Deadlands* as well as a story featuring a different sort of grief and heartbreak forthcoming at *Baffling Magazine*.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Phoebe Barton is a queer trans science fiction writer. Her short fiction has appeared in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed*, and *Kaleidotrope*, and she wrote the interactive fiction game *The Luminous Underground* for Choice of Games. She serves as an Associate Editor at *Escape Pod*, is a 2019 graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, and lives with a robot in the sky above Toronto.

MISCELLANY

Coming Attractions, October 2022

Fantasy Staff | 60 words

Coming up in the October issue of *Fantasy Magazine* . . .

Flash fiction by Stephen M.A. (“Short Swims From Great Heights”) and Avi Burton (“Quantum Eurydice”); short stories by Kelsey Hutton (“Queen of the Wilis”) and Aigner Loren Wilson (“The Black and White”); and poetry by Abu Bakr Sadiq (“Wolves’ Heaven”) and Ernest O. Ògúnyemí (“The Road”).

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The Editors

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