

APEX MAGAZINE

PROMO 2020

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FICTION BY:

BETH DAWKINS

MAURICE BROADDUS

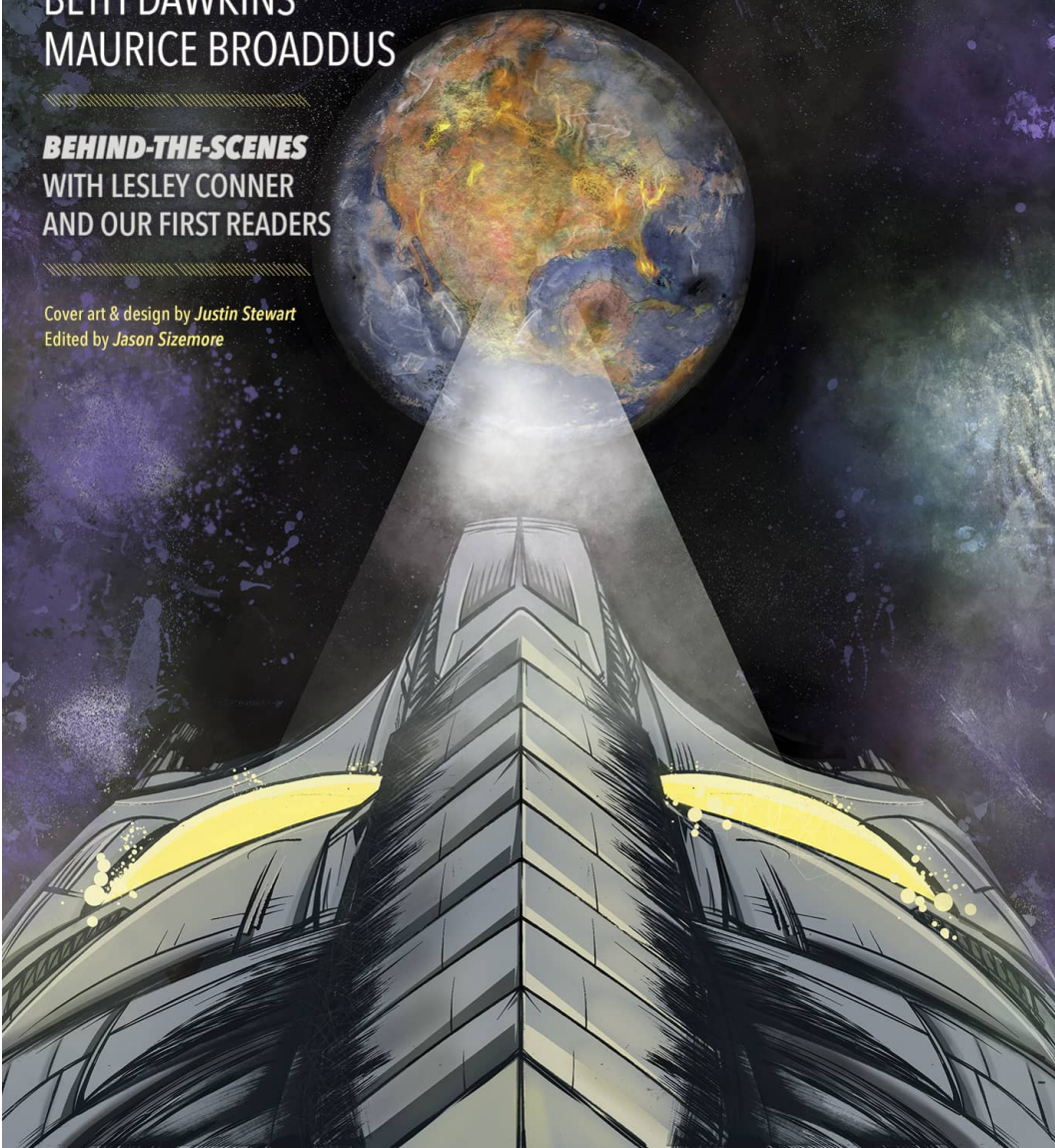
BEHIND-THE-SCENES

WITH LESLEY CONNER

AND OUR FIRST READERS

Cover art & design by *Justin Stewart*

Edited by *Jason Sizemore*



APEX MAGAZINE

PROMOTIONAL 2020

MAURICE BROADDUS
BETH DAWKINS

Edited by
JASON SIZEMORE

APEX PUBLICATIONS

FROM THE EDITOR

EDITORIAL

900 WORDS

JASON SIZEMORE



I have a story to share. It's one filled with tragedy. Of loss and injury. Of resurrection.

While stories in *Apex Magazine* often don't feature happy endings, mine does.



IN APRIL OF 2019, *APEX MAGAZINE* RELEASED ISSUE 120. THIS WAS a special issue guest-edited by prominent anthologist and dark fantasy author Maurice Broaddus. It featured a litany of prominent African Diaspora Futurists: Suyi Davies Okungbowa, Lashawn W. Wanak, Steven Barnes, Tananarive Due, Wole Talabi, Tobias S. Buckell, and Troy L. Wiggins. Two stories picked up award nominations and another made the *Locus Magazine Recommended Reading List*.

As publisher and editor-in-chief, I could not have been happier with the direction of the publication. The zine was meeting the two important goals defined in our mission statement: to make a positive difference in the world *and* to entertain

our readers. In addition to that, the zine was also profitable, money that could be pumped back into the zine for expansion.



Issue 120 released in May, 2019

But life had different plans for me. I had a major health scare. In February, 2019, I went under the knife for 13 hours to have a diseased mandible wholly replaced with a resectioned piece of bone from my left fibula. This left me mostly immobile for almost two months. It was six months before I was able to work again.

Even though we announced that *Apex Magazine* was on hiatus after the publication of issue 120, many in the genre community read this as “permanently closed.” It was a logical assumption. Similar situations had played out hundreds of times in the small press world.

But ...

... I had a lot of time to think during those six months of convalescence. I considered the hard lessons I’d learned in ten

years of publishing *Apex Magazine*. The friendships formed. The bond with my editors. The excitement of working on a piece of fiction with incredible authors all around the world, some new at the craft, others grizzled pros.

Unofficially, by late 2019, I had decided to stage an *Apex Magazine* comeback. But the only way that would happen was via the financial support of the genre community. My medical bills and inability to freelance for six months had drained the *Apex* monetary reserves. A crowdfunding campaign would be necessary.

Enter 2020. Lesley Conner (my managing editor) and I had a failed Kickstarter for an anthology in February. The world was in the midst of a pandemic. *Apex Magazine* had been on hiatus for over a year. I was nervous. What if genre readers had migrated away from the kind of fiction we publish? What if *Apex Magazine* couldn't come back? Despite my nerves, I hit the button to launch our campaign in late-July 2020.

Five hours after the launch of our Kickstarter, we hit our funding goal. The genre community had spoken loudly and decisively.

Work began immediately on the relaunch of *Apex Magazine*. I'm pleased to share that issue 121 comes out January 5th, 2021 and has original fiction by PH Lee, Cassandra Khaw, Merc Fenn Wolfmoor, Elana Gomel, Fargo Tbakhi, and Alix E. Harrow.

The issue is fantastic. I think you'll love the relaunched (and dare I say *improved*) *Apex Magazine*! Our website has a new, more accessible design. Our podcast production will be better. Lesley Conner has resumed her role as managing editor. We've added Shana DuBois as nonfiction editor to improve the consistency of our essay content. Maurice Broaddus joins us as special fiction editor. Andrea Johnson, AC Wise, and Russell Dickerson rejoin the team for interviews and short fiction reviews. The gang is back and ready to work!

I'm grateful for this opportunity to bring *Apex Magazine* back to the community. I'm thankful that my health has improved and I'm able to work again. And when I think about all my friends and colleagues who love and support me ... Lesley, Maurice, Shana, Justin ... I feel lucky.

But best of all, I feel happy.



THE ISSUE YOU'RE READING WAS PAID FOR BY 776 KICKSTARTER backers who helped us reach a series of stretch goals that culminated in a bonus promotional issue filled with two original stories, a round table interview, and an editorial. This issue is dedicated those 776 backers.

Maurice Broaddus makes his last fiction contribution to us for the foreseeable future (since he's now part of the editorial staff) with "Legacy of Alexandria." This story, a near-future, pre-apocalyptic piece about finding resiliency, purpose, and identity through books, has all the hallmarks of Broaddus short fiction: a strong social statement, a talking animal, and incredible action set pieces. "The Legacy of Alexandria" feels like the *right way* to kick off the return of *Apex Magazine*. Maurice's story "Pimp My Airship" appeared in the second issue of the zine, so it is fitting that he is around for the big relaunch.

Beth Dawkins is a fantastic young writer from the great state of Georgia who has been making a name for herself with wildly imaginative and smartly written science fiction. She submitted "Small Hopes and Dreams" just prior to our announcement that the zine was going on hiatus. I fell in love with her tale of strange little aliens, poverty, and societal expectations and I even based the entire theme of a Kickstarter anthology around the piece. Unfortunately, the Kickstarter did not fund. A few months passed and Lesley and I decide to do a Kickstarter to

relaunch the zine. I knew immediately I still wanted to publish “Small Hopes and Dreams.” Finally, after nearly two years of waiting, Beth will see its publication in *Apex Magazine*.

Finally, Lesley Conner has compiled a comprehensive, fascinating round table discussion with the *Apex Magazine* slush team (or Team Slush, as they call themselves). Prior to our hiatus, we received 1,200-1,400 submissions per month. Since our return, that number has ballooned to around 2,000. Our tireless, eternally-optimistic slush readers (and Lesley) have done an incredible job giving every submission we receive its due and impartial consideration and helping Lesley and I find the best of the best for publication. The team shares a bunch of writing tips for escaping the slush, discusses the how and why of being a slush reader, and unwittingly share an overwhelmingly positive and community experience.



BECAUSE KICKSTARTERS ARE TIME-CONSUMING AND WE WOULD rather be making an amazing zine for you than banging the drum for backers, we ask that you consider subscribing to *Apex Magazine*. Subscriptions are \$24 annually and nets you six bi-monthly regular issues and two upcoming bonus issues (Indigenous Futurists edited by Allison Mills and International Futurists edited by Francesco Versa). Our issues contain six original stories, two reprints, three interviews, two essays, a short fiction review column, and an editorial.

Head over to <https://apex-magazine.com/product/apex-magazine-subscription-one-year/> and subscribe today! Subscriptions are also available via Weightless Books [here](#) and will soon be available on Amazon Periodicals.

ORIGINAL FICTION

THE LEGACY OF ALEXANDRIA

7,200 WORDS

MAURICE BROADDUS



A community organizer and teacher, Maurice Broaddus's work has appeared in *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Weird Tales*, *Apex Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Black Static*, and many more. Some of his stories have been collected in *The Voices of Martyrs*. He is the author of the urban fantasy trilogy, *The Knights of Breton Court*, and the (upcoming) middle grade detective novel series, *The Usual Suspects*. He co-authored the play *Finding Home: Indiana at 200*. His novellas include *Buffalo Soldier*, *I Can Transform You*, *Orgy of Souls*, *Bleed with Me*, and *Devil's Marionette*. He is the co-editor of *Dark Faith*, *Dark Faith: Invocations*, *Streets of Shadows*, and *People of Colo(u)r Destroy Horror*. His gaming work includes writing for the *Marvel Super-Heroes*, *Leverage*, and *Firefly* role-playing games as well as working as a consultant on *Watch Dogs 2*.

Rahim dragged a shopping cart of his belongings along the cracked sidewalk. With the highways flooded, he followed the dense foliage lining the creek which wouldn't be much cover for him much longer if he were intent on making his way deeper into the neighborhood. If it were night, he'd be following the drinking gourd, finding the brightest jewel in the sky and following its direction. By some movement stirring his spirit he couldn't explain, he just knew it was the right way. He opened the game app he'd designed. Its signal piggy-backed on an obsolete network no one bothered to shut off.

Despite its hazy quality, the air wasn't noticeably cold, barely a breeze, but his ears grew cold. Rahim adjusted his rebreather unit. His hand-me-down unit — a first generation oxygenator — nearly covered his entire face. The preening susurrus of voices froze him. Ducking behind the thick underbrush shielding the road, he hid from the security check point. Indiana was a free state, so climate refugees could supposedly pass through unmolested. However, that didn't stop self-styled patrols from taking it upon themselves to "detain citizens for repatriation." Knights of the White Camelia, soldiers in the army of the Lord. Rahim's ancestors knew folks like them back in the day, calling themselves cattle hunters.

The gun-toting boys waved through a truck laden with supplies. Kerchiefs covered the faces of those who bothered to protect themselves at all. In a testament to their rugged image of manhood, most went without masks. Rahim knew most knights began their watch at 6am, not because anyone told them, but because they wanted to play soldier as accurately in their minds as possible. All he had to do was wait for them to become complacent. Bored.

Their presence would not deter him from finding the library.

Under a canopy of low hanging branches, the leaves were pale with settled ash. A rogue breeze rustled them. Cascading violence rose as the earth itself became a rabid animal off its leash. The environment weaponized as uprooted trees blew into houses, power lines ripped free, thrashing about as electrified whips. On any given day, wind sent cars tumbling like urban boulders. Another wildfire alert for Illinois caused mandatory evacuation. One hundred-year storms happened every other week. The filthy air, oppressive and sickening, caused him to adjust his mask. Rahim wrapped Muttley tighter in the blanket. Named for a character from his mom's favorite childhood cartoon show. The geriatric dog — blind in one eye and half deaf — cocked his head to one side. The gray of his chin gave him the bearing of an old man. Rahim had papers, these days everyone did or at least neighborhood passports, but cattle hunters often disregarded or trashed them if the mood suited. And too many roamed the area these days. Rahim took a tentative step, careful to avoid the errant branch whose snap might give away his position.

As he settled in, Rahim's back ached and a dull pain knotted his gut. The scars striating his arms began to itch. If he were spotted, his description would be passed ahead to other scouting militia members. He couldn't remember the last time he had changed his clothes. At this point, he considered naming some of the stains on his shirt and pants since they'd been with him for so long. His knees sore from running, he rustled through his meager belongings. He had scavenged a few onions he was prepared to cut and rub on his feet to throw dogs off his scent.

Surviving and thriving is what we've always done, Muttley said in the voice of Rahim's mother. That was not a good sign.

Rahim wiped his forehead out of habit, used to his profuse sweating under the baleful glare of the sun. But he had stopped

sweating. A vague nausea threatened to overwhelm him. His temples throbbed, each pound worsening his burgeoning headache. His skin took on an unseemly pallor. He checked the game app on his wrist. He still had a long way to go, a trek made longer having to avoid the roving patrollers.

A cleric had declared the global rise in temperature as part of a coordinated attack by American technology, exacerbating already fraying tensions between nations. Or regions. All it took to spark another series of wars. Politicians leapt on the distraction they presented, an excuse to lay claim to resources, claim safer lands free of megadroughts and hurricanes. The pandemic of despair gripped the sprawl of the city. All of the chaos supported by the city's homegrown militia of faith.

By 9AM, the cattle hunters were half-asleep at their posts.

Rahim hid his cart among the underbrush the best he could. The encampment would make as good a base for him as anywhere else. He had little that he really cared about. Carefully he lifted his special console. His father was an engineer. That gift, his way of knowing how things fit together, was all that Rahim had left of him. He slipped his platform into his backpack along with his other most prized belongings. He'd make the rest of the trip as light as possible. Muttley nuzzled against his leg. He picked the dog up, but turned away from him since the canine's poorly kept teeth made his breath smell like warm death. He hoped the dog would keep any further words to himself as they headed out.

Getting to the library was all that mattered anymore.

Climbing down the embankment, Rahim headed to the river's edge, wading a bit into its waters, following its winding course deeper into the neighborhood. The landscape changed so much in so little time. Rahim remembered how his mother required him to join her on a weekly pilgrimage to the downtown spire of the Indianapolis library. An architectural chimera

of half-glassy, techno tower alongside the original half-temple, neoclassical design. All kinds of people traveled through the library. A crossroads of inspiration, both portal and passage, the library comforted them. An easy place to rest and just be. It held the promise of teaching them how to fix the things in their lives. Near the end days he passed through unnoticed, little more than background noise. That was then, that library long destroyed.

Now he hoped to find rest at the Thmei Academy.



THE OBSCURED SUN REDUCED THE NEIGHBORHOOD TO A SERIES OF dour shadows in the shape of houses. No lights. Rahim approached a rise — not quite daring to be a hill — leading to an empty lot adjacent to a house. Across the street, two other houses, nondescript by most accounts, hid under a stand of trees and bushes. The surrounding pre-fab houses with their designed obsolescence didn't stand a chance against climate reshaping. But these remaining homes were over a hundred years old, built in an earlier age, meant to last.

A free-standing gate, unconnected to any fencing, blocked the sidewalk.

You sure you want to go in there? Your life may forever change if you do, Muttley said.

Hitching his backpack higher on his shoulder, Rahim unlatched the gate and followed the concrete path leading to the front steps of the dull beige two-story home. Before he could knock, the door swung open a few centimeters. A young man, little older than Rahim, glared with an appraising eye.

“Open?” Words did not come easy to Rahim. This one scraped against his throat.

“Who are you?” The man ran his fingers through thick, unkempt curls. He chewed on a toothpick.

Tell him you're a patron, Muttley said.

“A ... patron.” His heavy-lidded eyes stared past the figure blocking the door.

“Then you'll know when it is.” The docent — what Rahim understood the young man's guardian role to be — started to close it.

“Let the boy in, Khamal,” a woman's voice called out from behind him. “We can't be who we say we want to be unless we're open to all.”

Rahim lowered Muttley to the ground. The docent eyed the pair of them, but stepped aside and allowed them entry. The hiss of the air purifiers stopped them in the entryway. Rahim held his arms up as the enclosed space formed a bubble. The mechanism whirred, scrubbing the air. Only once they were through the seal did he remove his mask.

Blackout curtains outfitted the windows to make the house harder to spot at night. Rahim ran a lone finger across the scars on the wood tables where students worked. Books stacked floor to ceiling and lined much of the workspaces and any free flat surface. TV trays used as reading tables, windowsills as carrels. Charts and paintings of Africa hung along the walls. A course of ambient noise filled the room. Pages turning. The crunch of an apple eaten. Covers slapping shut. Grunts of frustration or snorts of agreement, body fluxes as an amen corner.

They crossed the living room, an interlude of promise. Turning the corner was a revelation. When he rounded it, rows of bookshelves filled with books. Ideas and stories.

Rahim loved browsing the shelves. So many titles. *The Chaos Point*. *The Alchemist*. *Mumbo Jumbo*. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. *Clarity as Concept*. *Stamped from the Beginning*. *Her-Bak: The Living Face of Ancient Egypt*. Khamal gestured toward the

woman shelving more books. The head librarian. She was thin, her skin the color of burnished bronze, so much darker than his own complexion, Rahim grew self-conscious. Streaks of white ran through the hair visible from within its kente-patterned wrap. Her outfit seemed more like being swaddled in enjoined red and black rolls of cloths. Her dignity unperturbed by the end of the world.

Don't just stand there like a fart in a closed room, Muttley said. Tell them who you are.

Brushing off the occasional leaf, he ran his fingers through the tangled knots of his hair. "Rahim."

Is that who you want to be? Now's your chance to remake yourself in any way imaginable, Muttley said.

"There's a tradition among rabbis to stop going by their given name, but by the title of their book. The name of my book is Dona Jywanza." She finished shelving a book and stepped closer to them. "Ms. Jywanza, to you. That there's Khamal. Don't let him intimidate you. I still remember him as Keegan, that clumsy little boy who used to run around here. I lost track of how many times he drove his bike into the telephone pole. Cracked his nuts real good."

"I'm glad to see you still tell that story," Khamal said.

"That shit cracks me up every time I remember it."

"It's ... big." Rahim ran his hand along the shelves. Muttley waddled as best he could behind him.

"Me, Hakeem Buhari, and my husband built this place. We were all prolific readers back when books were in threat of extinction. I owned the Weusi Bookstore. I used to go to library sales to find books, mostly of the African experience, like anything by Third World Press. My husband's now passed."

Out here, in the middle of the neighborhood? Muttley asked. What, all the secret villain lairs were taken?

Rahim stalked to the window. Anxiously studying the outside, he jumped at the librarian touching his shoulder.

"It's okay, you're not much for your own words." She backed up a few steps to allow him more room. "Libraries are built where they are needed most. The Paul Dunbar Library used to be a little east of here, the first library to serve our community. A little west of here was Public Library No. 1. It was the oldest library in the city. They burned it long ago."

Rahim wiggled his fingers and lowered his hands in a pantomime of raining.

Use your words, Muttley said.

"Fire." Rahim waved his hands at the shelves. "Why?"

"Burning books has always been an effective weapon against a community. We are people of the books. Reading trains readers and they don't realize it's happening. Books are us trying to understand ourselves, a way to build resistance and resilience. To destroy our libraries is an attempt to erase us: our culture, our history, our stories." The librarian strode over to a different section of books. She tapped her lip with her finger. "Let me try it this way: In 213 B.C., the Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang burned any history books that disagreed with his version of events. And nearly four hundred thousand scholars. In the 1500s, Hernán Cortés torched Aztec manuscripts. Diego De Landa followed and set fire to every Mayan book and image. During World War II, Nazis destroyed over a hundred million books. Special book burning squads."

Rahim knew all about how war took the greatest toll on libraries. History was replete with tales of lost libraries. Destroyed because they contain ideas someone finds problematic. Libraries, churches, synagogues, mosques. Home schools.

He plucked a copy of *Iceberg Slim* from the shelf.

To understand the capitalist system, you have to understand the pimp game, Muttley said.

"Baby, you don't look good." Ms. Jywanza ushered Rahim to a couch, shooing away the young people seated there. "Khamal, bring him some water. And something from the garden."

Rahim collapsed onto the couch. Her face locked in a frieze of concern, Ms. Jywanza daubed his forehead. Muttley made two failed attempts to scamper onto the couch before giving up and licking his lips. Khamal handed Rahim a glass of water. He chugged it greedily, causing Ms. Jywanza to admonish him.

"Easy. You'll make yourself sick. Sicker." She turned to Khamal. "Heat exhaustion. He must be all but hallucinating."

Rahim glanced down at Muttley. The dog settled in beneath him and rested a paw over his snout.

"Here." Khamal shoved a plate in front of him. "Everything was grown in our garden across the way."

Rahim excised the tomatoes from his sandwich with the delicate precision of a surgeon. Muttley whined softly and soon he scooped the dog up to sit beside him. The dog's long tongue lashed through the thick fur around his mouth. Turning away from his rancid breath, Rahim slid the tomatoes onto the couch for Muttley.

"Well, at least they didn't go to waste." Ms. Jywanza sighed. She withdrew a spliff from behind a fold of her head wrap. After lighting it, she offered Rahim a puff.

He waved away the smoke.

"I'm old school, I guess." Ms. Jywanza fixed her attention on him even without looking directly at him.

As the food settled in his belly, a wave of relief settled over him. He dared a hope that he might find what he needed here in order to belong. He cocked his head, unsure how to word the question which hadn't fully formed in his mind.

"I should probably begin with how this place came to be." She handed the spliff to Khamal. "I'm a woman of many

stories. Maybe I was born in a manger made of books. Maybe I was library educated, my home a library in practice.”

Rahim stared at her like he’d encountered an astral anomaly.

“Not feeling that? Okay, let’s try this: around the third century A.D., a group of Christian hermits moved into the Scetes desert of Egypt. A monastic community grew out of their gathering. They became known as the Desert Fathers. There was a grand tradition and with that in mind, I’ve declared myself an Urban Mother. The keeper of the books.” Ms. Jywanza strode to one of the wall posters labeled *Africharts*. With a casual swipe, the image whirred like a spun globe. The image settled on the outline of Egypt. “Not much is known about Egypt’s Library of Alexandria. What it looked like. Where it was. Whispers about it having a half million documents; over one hundred librarians. But in 48 B.C., Caesar burned the Port of Alexandria. Not that he intended to, and the fire spread to the library. That was the first of four times it was burned. Each time it was restored, except for the last in 640 A.D. By then, the library scared people. It had become so much more. A communal brain, a near living thing of ideas and traditions and knowledge. So Caliph Omar set it on fire. They say it burned for six months. But you can’t burn an idea. Its legacy lives on.”

Rahim struggled to sit up. When he reached a more comfortable position, he’d forgotten what he’d started to say. Though raised alongside siblings and community, he’d become reclusive. Once they were taken from him, he no longer interacted with people.

“So, Mr. Man of Few Words,” Ms. Jywanza checked his temperature again, “what brings you here?”

“A book.”

"Well, you've come to the right place." Ms. Jywanza arched a skeptical eyebrow. "Any idea which one?"

Rahim shrugged.

"That's alright. You don't have to know. The books can choose you. That's what I love about libraries. They point us to a better way of being with one another. If I stumble across a book I love, I bring it here so others can read it. That way I have other people I can discuss it with." Ms. Jywanza gave him a surmising gaze. Tapping her chin, she turned and flicked her finger against a shelf before presenting him with a book. "Have you read this?"

He took the book into his hands. *Metu Neter, Vol. 1: The Great Oracle of Tehuti and the Egyptian System of Spiritual Cultivation.*

"I read Metu when I was eight."

"Who the hell gives *Metu Neter* to an eight-year-old?"

"My mom."

"Oh." Ms. Jywanza's voice lowered, like someone who didn't want to extinguish flames they took so long to get going. "Your mom sounds like an interesting teacher. Where is she?"

"Her ... library has burned." Rahim read somewhere that in Senegal, this was a polite way of saying that someone had died. It still seemed too small a phrase to describe the totality of her death. The boom of explosions rocked his home school. The roar of flames. The terrible cracking of timbers as the ceiling collapsed. The last image of his mother, her shoving him out the window as the beams toppled. He screamed for her until he lost his voice. The scars along his arms itched.

"I see. I'm sorry." Ms. Jywanza took a long drag from her spliff and slowly released a thin plume of smoke immediately dispelled by the air purifiers. "We are each a library, a collection of stories, books of memories, to help each other figure out who we are and who we want to be."

How you feel and what the culture demands won't bring her back.

Rahim turned to Muttley, but the dog stuck its head halfway under the couch.

“Wait,” she said with dawning realization. “You were part of Bayard, weren’t you?”

The Bayard Rustin Home School. Rahim hadn’t thought its full name in a long time. He did not commit to an answer, only stroked Muttley’s thinning fur. Freeing himself from the clutches of the couch, the dog issued a thin stream of drool.

“You can’t wipe all the tears away yourself. The stories remain as long as we survive to tell them. Talk about it in your time.” She handed him a different book. “Start here.”

The Chaos Point. The way she said those last words made the book sound like an old friend.

The weight of the book felt comfortable and right in his arms. Cradling it since it had been damaged, the spine still cracked when he opened it. Hoping for the heavy press of fresh ink to waft up, to be intoxicated by the spell of books, he inhaled it. “How do I check it out?”

“You take the book. You read it. You bring it back.” Ms. Jywanza cocked her head to the side. “You planning on stealing it?”

“No.”

“That’s your promise to keep to the community.”

Rahim noted the young people gathering toward the rear door. “What goes on out there?”

“Anyone can read or participate in book study. But for the next level work, you need to bring something since everyone has to contribute for the betterment of the community. A demonstration of your commitment.”

“Something?”

“What else?” Ms. Jywanza smiled a wry grin too slick by half. “A book.”



RAHIM STUFFED HIS BACKPACK WITH HIS CONSOLE. THE RITUAL OF it all reminded him of how the trips to the library with his mother bonded them. Sent his mind racing among the stars; fueled his imagination. He'd done it. He'd found them. Now he only had to make them understand what he was offering. Not that he saw himself as an inventor, like his father, he was more like a tinkerer. Refining and figuring out new ways to use existing technology. Tucking his book into the back of his waistband, he couldn't wait to show Ms. Jywanza his best project. It wasn't the thing to show at a first meeting. If that didn't allow him into the work, he didn't know what would. With any luck, this would be the last time he'd have to make an encampment, be on his own. His thoughts had him so caught up, he didn't hear the cattle hunter's approach.

A single shot froze him in his spot. Rahim closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable pain of a flechette projectile to rip through him. A type of bullet designed to rend like spinning daggers as they tore through flesh. It never came. Rahim stood up slowly, his hands raised in a "don't shoot" pose.

"Turn around. Slowly." A burly man, a frayed whip looped on his right hip closed in on him from a stand of trees. Once the man got close enough, he spat at Rahim's feet. Holstering the revolver on his other hip, the man's body heaved with assumed authority. No badge, only intent. And a gun. He brandished his long hunting knife for greater effect. "Don't move, or I'll cut you up the middle and let the crows get you."

Rahim wasn't scared, at least not the way he knew he should've been. He recognized the idea of the threat the man represented, like experiencing fear from a distance. He understood his mind worked differently from others and hoped his near indifferent affect wouldn't be taken for bravado by the

cattle hunter. Rahim scooted over to stay between the man and Muttley, who sniffed about, anxious but not sure where to direct his growls.

“Look at you. You ain’t worth all this fuss. Took us a while to catch up to you. Yeah, I know you. I know all about your kind. Shiftless and lazy ...” The man’s eyes glazed over, lost in thought. The man palmed Rahim’s hands gruffly inspecting one then the other. “These hands ain’t never worked an honest day. You an’ your kind ... damn your eyes. Damn all your eyes.”

“Easy.” An older woman rode up on a horse black as a locked cellar, stopping short of the pair. With chiseled aquiline features, gray roots edged her blond hairline. The man stepped aside to allow her room to dismount with her practiced grace. “You don’t want to damage the goods. Less of a bounty that way, an’ you got a family to think about. Besides, it’s a boy and his dog.”

“What’s your name, boy?” the burly man asked.

“I’m no one’s boy.” Rahim’s calmness only irritated the man, but he wasn’t going to overreact to someone who’d only ever see him as a “boy.”

The man snatched the package. “What’s this?”

“It’s mine.” Rahim stepped toward him.

The man brought the knife to bear with the speed of a snake rearing to strike. “Not anymore.”

“We don’t have time for this.” The woman canted around them. “Take him or don’t. Operation Shield will be here in days. It will take care of all of them soon enough.”

The burly man ignored her. Digging around in the bag, he withdrew the console and peered into it. “What is this gunk in here? It looks like sludge.”

“It’s ... funkentelechy,” Rahim said.

“You making fun of me?” Eyes full of menace, the man reared at him.

Rahim held his hand out. A bracelet jangled about his wrist. Falling within himself, his mind cool and still, without anger or fear, he retreated to a place where he knew peace. And was free. The inky swirl moved. Rahim balled his hand into a fist. The undulating mass coalesced into spikes. Rahim made a slicing motion and the blades rose, severing the man's hand. The burly man dropped the console to clutch his gushing wrist. Rahim scooped up the console, jamming it into his backpack while the woman rushed to the man's side. A cloud of curses followed Rahim into the underbrush. The bag slung onto one arm, Muttley under the other, Rahim ran.



"WHAT IS IT?" MS. JYWANZA ASKED. "ARE YOU ALRIGHT?"

Rahim pantomimed something raining down and something exploding. In his head, his stories bristled with charm and he a bullshit artiste of the highest order, as his father once teased him. A teller of tales. A quick-witted rogue. But these days his thoughts raced, a jumbled knot, it was as if his tongue existed independently of him.

Ms. Jywanza asked, "I don't understand what you're trying to tell me."

"Knights," Rahim squeezed out.

"Damn cattle hunters. They follow you?"

Rahim shook his head. "Downstream a ways."

"You come up by the river?" Ms. Jywanza placed her hand on his back to usher him inside faster. She scanned the lot and the tree line before shutting the door behind them and activating the house air seal.

"Had to lose them," Rahim said over the sudden blast of air.

"The most dangerous way with the high streams and all. A bad riptide could whip you out to sea." Once the seal released

them, she ushered him to a nearby couch before inspecting him further to see if he was really okay.

Muttley took a few tentative steps toward the librarian. Assessing her as harmless, he walked toward the couch, bumping into the occasional chair. He smacked into the couch leg, growled at it, and settled in front of it, his eyes not quite closing to make sure it didn't come after him.

"They're coming for us. All of us. Again." Rahim curled on the couch, wrapping his arms around his raised knees, rocking himself. "Operation Shield."

"We've heard rumors. You know, during times of upheaval, folks with power take steps to push their idea of the future forward. So, we built contingencies. They've been coming for us because they fear us. They don't understand what we're about, but we know who we're up against." Ms. Jywanza lit another spliff. "The Liberation Investment Support Cooperative is a faction within the government. They have dreams of being an international cooperative, building infrastructure and developing terraforming work in earnest. I suspect they've been using all of the wars to cover their power grabs. Even helping fund the 'knights' to foment the chaos of the moment."

"How ...?"

"We have a long history of fighting misinformation. We are the library." Ms. Jywanza eased back in her chair to give him space.

Rahim slipped the backpack off. "I want to learn more. I need to be a part of the work."

"What do you have for us?" Ms. Jywanza's tone became solemn with the air of ritual.

Reaching around, held snug in his waistband at his back, he pulled out a copy of *The West and the Rest of Us*.

Ms. Jywanza inspected it. "Why this?"

Rahim glanced around to make sure no one else could hear

him. He couldn't trust giving words to just anybody. In a conspiratorial whisper he said, "To give the work a global perspective of our struggle."

"I'll trade you." She set the book on a windowsill with others waiting to be catalogued. She held her finger out as if checking the direction of the wind and flicked free two books. "Since the work also needs discipline and execution, I'll give you a choice between *The Fifth Discipline* or *Built to Last*. Usually, when someone is new to the space, they get thirty days in the water of the work. A time of discovery, learn the team members, see the various projects. This way an instructor can see their strengths and weaknesses."

"But ... no time," Rahim whispered.

"The work doesn't always allow for our personal timetables."

"Then I have something to show you." Rahim opened his backpack with an air of reverence, as if declaring a statement of faith. He withdrew his console and slid off the cover.

Ms. Jywanza leaned over the box. "Are those nanobots?"

"Yes, but they are keyed to my bracelet. If I concentrate in a certain way ..." He waved his arm. The nanobots took the rough shape of a rising wall.

"What do you call it?" She stepped back, but continued inspecting.

"Funkentelechy. It's a way of ... being. Makes you in sync with the nanobots."

"Fascinating. What's your plan?"

"Right now I can't get them to do much other than assume crude shapes. But if I can refine them ..."

"Or." Ms. Jywanza raised a lone finger and held it for an extra heartbeat before speaking again. "You don't do enough abstract reading. Tangential stuff just to stir your thoughts. Your creativity."

“No,” Rahim said sharper than he intended. “That’s not the work.”

“I understand. You feel this pressure to do ... something. The way you’re used to thinking, it’s about finding leverage points. To impact the system, to make huge changes with as little energy expended as possible.”

Rahim shrugged and nodded, unsure of the right response.

“Your mistake is that you believed that you have to go it alone. Your work alongside ours, as opposed to just *our* work. Together. A common Western mistake. You are one piece of a communal puzzle.” Ms. Jywanza turned toward the back door. “Meet me in Biographies.”

The Thmei Academy amounted to three houses and an empty lot. Each home accommodated a different section, but it was all communal space. Rahim opened up his game app and zoomed in. Attenuating its metrics as he went, he recorded his steps. He found that with enough data, he could map even the smallest space of a house in detail. As he walked across the street, Rahim had the unshakeable feeling that he was being watched. Muttley bumped into his leg when he stopped to visor his hand to check the hazy sky for drones. A hawk perched on the nearest lamppost.

Biographies wasn’t a rhetorical flourish. The room whisked him back in time. All of his ancestors, all of their stories, preserved forever. Not just a warehouse of books. The Thmei Academy was an engine with the gears being all of the patrons’ minds engaged. A small, cramped space, not easy to navigate, with everyone thrust into close, inescapable, uncomfortable, unavoidable proximity to one another. A wall of material included a collection of ephemera archiving the neighborhood: menus from all of the local black restaurants; vinyl records of Indianapolis bands from the 1970s; church bulletins for the 30 years Ms. Jywanza attended; funeral notices; and copies of *The*

Indianapolis Recorder going back decades. Rahim thumbed through discs of oral histories with such labels as Old Man Taylor's bridge and a file of Old Man Paschall's clippings chronicling the stories of the neighborhood.

"We are building toward a future. We don't know what it will look like, so we train leaders to dream it into existence. I believe the student selects the curriculum on an unconscious level. When folks roll into the space, they aren't told to read. What the elder urban mothers and fathers recognize is the spirit of the person who walks in. Khamal here came in when he was twenty-one. He attends classes at the Thmei Academy. Once he graduated, he asked for intern experience. Her over there, she's quite the rebel in training."

"How can you tell?"

"Ask her what she's reading."

On cue, the young woman raised her book to reveal the cover. *The Destruction of Black Civilization*.

"Like I said, it depends on the student and where they are in their development. She found a book in an abandoned airport and brought it back here. That's not an accident. She's on her own change in consciousness journey, trying to figure out what's next. But now we all have access to a copy of the book. That's why we love it when a student recommends a book. The library expands by the collective intelligence of the group."

"It knows as we know ..." Rahim said. "But people can just link."

"Don't let its ubiquitous nature fool you. All information does not get linked. Nor does everyone have link access. Besides, some people simply like books."

"Old people." Rahim smirked. He couldn't recall the last time he'd worked the muscles in his face to anything approximating a smile.

Ms. Jywanza mirrored his grin as if basking in a carefully

stoked campfire. “Yeah, yeah. The hegemony of text is dead. But information is only as good as its practitioners. I look at your ... funkentelechy as being part of the future. Helping to define who we are. We have always prided ourselves on being extensive readers, but there are ways of knowing, being, and doing that are intrinsic to us as human beings. We walk in spaces that have been defined by others who think they control reality. So we have to embrace our own way of knowing. What’s missing is you connecting to a story much larger than yourself.”

“They’re playing in dirt.” Rahim pointed out the window. A group of patrons gathered around a stretch of tilled soil. The hawk watched over them.

Ms. Jywanza looked over his shoulder. “It’s how we create our own sustainability. We grow our own food in the neighborhood through a series of networked gardens. We raise animals. Share houses. That lot is dedicated to farm dirt — reclaiming soil through food waste — which we then harvest and sell.”

“For terraforming.”

“That’s why they fear us. Our response is not rooted in our trauma, but in seeing the opportunities. Where they leave abandoned houses, we see communal living spaces.” Ms. Jywanza leveled her eyes at him. “We are obligated to find dignity and flourish no matter the circumstances. That’s what we’ve always done.”



THE REST OF THE THMEI ACADEMY GATHERED IN THE DINING room, a noisy gathering, doubling as communal meal and meeting. After a few minutes, the librarian stood, holding them in rapt attention as she ran through their session. She gave a brief synopsis of the book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology*

After the End of the World before opening up the discussion to apply its points to their present threat of climate reshaping.

"If you look at the data, you can't help but be pessimistic," Khamal said.

"If you are data driven. Data is a tool. Which is why we have to embrace a non-rational approach to living," Ms. Jywanza said.

"You want us to go insane?" Rahim asked.

"That's one way to be unpredictable," Khamal chimed in.

"No, I'm suggesting we bring about the kind of change we can, despite the data," Ms. Jywanza said. "Bring about the change we can in the space we find yourselves in. Do you remember what a hyperobject is?"

"An idea so large and complex that a person can't quite wrap their mind around it. Like climate change," Khamal said.

"Or God," Rahim said.

"Exactly. Now we live in the wake of one and go to war in the name of the other. Our way of life is threatened." Ms. Jywanza's eyes had a way of focusing when all play left them. "The Knights of the White Camelia feel deprived of what we have and are angry. And in that madness of fury and hate, they seek to dispossess us."

"What are they deprived of?" Rahim asked.

Ms. Jywanza whirred the Africhart again, settling in to make her next point. "Humanity."

A tapping at the window drew Rahim's attention. The hawk settled at the windowsill pecking at it. Rahim walked over to it. Muttley raised his head in slow alarm. The rising whir stirred all-too-familiar memories. Rahim turned back to them. "We have to go. Now!"

"What's that sound?" Khamal closed his book and backed away from the window.

"Drones."

“It must be Operation Shield,” Ms. Jywanza slammed a button on the wall next to her. Partitions, much like blast shields, dropped into place around the main shelves. “Most of you know the drill. The ones that don’t, follow those that do. Get away from the windows. Get to the basement if you can. As far inside as possible.”

A few patrons panicked and dashed out the front door. Against the empty lot they loomed as easy targets. The first flechettes exploded like a series of knives from their chests, cutting them down like wheat under a threshing scythe. The next volley of shots pelted the house like metallic hail. The explosions shook the house. Rahim crouched still, almost holding his breath. His hands covered his ears. Muttley tucked himself into his lap, alert, but trembling as he stared out the window. The reflection of the flames danced in his milk-glazed eyes.

Before long, wisps of smoke scarred the air. The barrage echoed in Rahim’s mind far louder with the echo chamber of memory. The gray smoke deepened to black, curling down the hallway like a crawling wound. Heat gathered with the flames crackling to life, flaring with renewed vigor as they lapped at the books along the windowsills.

The temperature within the library approached four hundred and fifty-one degrees Fahrenheit and the pages ignited. The air quivered with the shimmer of heat mirage. Wind rushed to fill the vacuum created by the flames. Cracks spider-webbed the glass. The hundred-year-old ceiling beams quickly spalled and buckled. Muttley issued a concerned whine.

Hands reached out to Rahim through the smoke.

“This way,” Khamal said.

The docent, more wraith than man, pointed toward the cellar door. The steps, low and rickety, descended into an unfin-

ished earthen basement. The cool rush of air ceased immediately, as if in a cave holding its breath. Other bodies huddled against him in an uncomfortable press. The patrons inched toward the rear of the basement, each one carried a stack of books as best they could. Rahim activated his game app. By his map, they marched beneath the house, yet were past its boundaries. They entered a long, a hastily constructed tunnel. He held tight to his backpack — and Muttley — as people jostled for position. The atmosphere grew thick with mold and mildew topped by the cloying smell of dirt. The air soured as he breathed the desperate gulps of Khamal's exhalations. The suffocating smell of unwashed bodies, the thick and gamey body odor coating his throat. Rahim fumbled to fit his rebreather in place.

The temperature climbed steadily in the crush of bodies. He imagined them as runaway slaves desperately vying for escape along some hidden passageway. Shuffling forward in baby steps toward freedom. Flies buzzed in his ears, about his face, with him unable to shoo them off because of his pinned arms. His shin scraped against exposed rock. The salt of his sweat dripped into his scars. Muffled cries haunted the darkness. The steps became fewer. The pressure to scream built in his chest. To just cry out, if only to be heard.

Muttley whined, a low howl, knowing something was wrong.

It began with a pebble, falling as innocuously as a rain drop on a clear day. It careened down the wall, bounced onto the head of Khamal, eventually skipping into the wedge of bodies. The silence reverberated out in a rippling pool. A low moan echoed along the chamber. The walls shuddered. The swell of bodies stressed the beams. The rafters supporting the ceiling bowed. Chunks of rock fell, a hard, unforgiving earthen rain as a wave of vibration swept through the strained cavern. People

screamed, some cries cut brutally short, their mouths filling with dirt. A chunk of rock crashed into the side of Rahim's head. The darkness swirling around in his head spread like the ebony wings of hopelessness beating ever closer. Entombed in this close place.

No one would be coming to rescue them.

Checking his game app, he recognized their location. The swell of the empty lot. They were close to where it had to open. Rahim crouched low, the effort strained his re-breather unit. He opened his console. In a low, though stern voice, he said, "Give me a little room."

Khamal stared at him. With a nod, he shouted. "You heard the man. Make as much room as you can."

Rahim edged toward the sealed entrance. He gestured as if wanting someone to stand up. The nanobot rose into a column.

"Think this will work?" Khamal asked.

"Only one way to find out." Rahim corkscrewed his wrist and the nanobots spun. They burrowed into the earthen wall. The mound of earth churned with their action until a thin shaft of light began to emerge. A cool rush of air followed.

"Everyone ... dig." Rahim closed his fist and the nanobots retreated to his console.

Hands plunged into the hole, drawing away the dirt, expanding the opening. Rahim shoved Muttley through the aperture and climbed through after him. He took the stack of books from Khamal, setting them aside to allow the man room to exit. The other houses were on fire, but from their respective escape tunnels, they had also formed living chains, handing books to one another like communion wafers. Passing knowledge down generations.

"We still exist, therefore we resist." Ms. Jywanza sidled up to Rahim. "It's an audacious, defiant act of hope to preserve books. To declare that these stories matter. To try to create a

present that connects us to the future. We are a story that endures.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“To wherever the next chapter takes us. They think we’re destroyed or dead. We have the chance to create ourselves fresh. Find someplace for ourselves. Maybe the moon. I think it’s time to think of myself more as a Nomadic Mother. But I make you this promise: I am here to keep your story safe.” She bent low to meet his eyes. “What about you?”

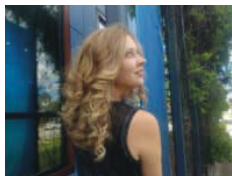
Do you know who you are? Muttley asked. Are you Rahim, who needs to make his own way or do you want be someone new?

Rahim gave their words a moment of consideration. “There’s a tradition among rabbis to stop going by their given name, but by the title of their book. The name of my book is Xola. It means ‘stay in peace.’”

SMALL HOPES AND DREAMS

3,400 WORDS

BETH DAWKINS



Beth Dawkins grew up on front porches, fighting imaginary monsters with sticks, and building castles out of square hay bales. She currently lives in Northeast Georgia with her partner in crime and their offspring. She can be found on Twitter @BethDawkins.

There are two kinds of people; those who go over the wall, and those who stay behind. No one who goes over the wall is heard from again.



FRIDAY NIGHT IS OURS, CARVED FROM TEENAGE BOREDOM. WE gather in an alcove on the side of a mountain. It's *the spot* where beer cans and used condoms decorate the worn paths to clear spaces, where couples make love and try their first heavy drugs. *The spot* is where we shed our childhood like snakeskin

and try on adult costumes. Sometimes the adult skin clings too tight, fusing until we're forced to change.

I sit back on a checkered blanket. Here, I'm not from a trailer park of cracked pavement and kudzu that devours every inch of yellow grass. At *the spot* I'm Marian, a fixture.

It's infamous for bloody brawls and silly hookups. Sometimes kids turn up dead among the rocks. One was found, face up in the grass, right beside his car, with puke flaking off his chin. Police tape kept us away for a month.

Tim cracks open a beer while the scent of marijuana lingers in the air. The girls take off their outer layers, showing off low-cut halter tops, smooth midriffs, and hipbones.

I light a cigarette to forget the hunger riding low in my gut. Music drifts in and out. Bodies start to sway up and down. A guy raises his arm, beckoning a girl to grind his crotch.

The town below eats at us, breaking us down to skin and bone. Our soulless parents danced here before and with each sway, each sip of beer, more of our spark dims.

"Where's Kerry?" I ask Tim.

"She hasn't told you?" Tim leans back and starts to unbutton his shirt. "I'm gonna wait for her to tell you."

I sit up, pulling a heavy drag from my smoke. It burns the inside of my throat in a way that reminds me that I'm killing myself.

"Let's take a walk." I take the beer from his hand and lead him to the tree line.

Alone, we can throw back pretense. Without our hard, outer shells we're weak and tender-skinned. Outside our circle of friends anyone could call us trash, we wouldn't care, but alone we whisper vulnerable things: people we find attractive, what we'd do with a thousand dollars, who we'd save, and who we'd let die. These small hopes and dreams make us as delicate as earthworms on asphalt.

Tim holds out his phone, illuminating our steps. Beer cans, bright wrappers for beef jerky, and chips litter the path like tossed confetti.

“Want to burn one?” he asks when we’re far enough away.

“Yeah.” I gaze up at the sky that blankets us like velvet. “Then you’re goanna tell me about Kerry. Her dad’s getting out in two weeks. She was really happy about it on Monday.”

I flick my butt into the path as Tim lights a joint. I tip his beer back, finishing the warm dregs. The pungent smoke fills the air between us.

The same skunk smell existed behind my mother’s bedroom door as I grew. I remember sitting against it as SpongeBob’s theme music played in the living room. I whispered the song while Momma laughed and coughed with Michelle’s dad.

“She’s pregnant,” Tim says, on inhale and hands me the joint.

Anger steals any mellow the pot might provide. I inhale, holding onto it. We were meant to escape together, not join the ranks of the fucked and damned. I drown my feelings with more smoke, filling my lungs until my eyes water.

Tim places his hand on the small of my back. He’s as boney as I am, as lost as I am. As fucked as I am.

“We’re getting older,” he says, as if seventeen is enough for him. “Hell, Misty took a test last month when she missed her period, I’m surprised she wasn’t pregnant.”

I shake my head, pissed that he thinks knocking up some chick is the same as losing Kerry.

A loud snap echoes to our left and we both pause, waiting for another footfall or beam of a flashlight. Maybe it’s the cops, ready to cart us off for a joint.

The song on the radio at *the spot* changes. In the space between the tracks we hear a deep, rhythmic hum, like a church

choir warming up. A flash of silver and green darts through the trees.

“Stay here,” Tim orders.

An angry rock song replaces the last and covers the sound of our steps.



IN SCHOOL THEY TAUGHT US HOW TO READ AND WRITE, HOW TO add and subtract. Even then, you knew which kids would make it out of town. They were quiet. Mindful. They shared their blocks and pencils, understanding that they'd have plenty.

“I'm Marian,” I told a beautiful little girl, sporting freckles across her nose and cheeks. We were in third grade. She let me borrow a pencil.

“I know,” she said, with a shrug.

She wrote her name on top of her paper. *Heather*. Even her handwriting was pristine.

Heather received top marks all the way through school until *they* let her out at sixteen after three days of tests. *They* controlled the wall, and gave her a ticket over it. No one sees them. No one talks about it.

I skipped two of those days to sit on Tim's front porch. We drank cheap vodka out of a plastic bottle, daring one another to take shot after shot until we both ended up on the bathroom floor, taking turns worshipping the great porcelain god.

Tim's mom owns an old, crumbling farmhouse that she inherited from her parents. She took in kids whose parents died of exhaustion or blew their brains out in bathroom stalls. The kids hung around the front porch like cats basking in the sun. In a few more years Tim would be in and out of jail for fights or dealing pot, unless he's moved on to meth.



SHE IS BATHED IN SILVER MOONLIGHT, BUT THERE'S NO MOON shining through the treetops. We hold our breath. She's silver, green, as if fireflies live under her skin. Her hair is a blanket of white feathers, speckled black and illuminated by her glow. She is naked, exposing extended legs, too long to be human. Her neck, like her legs, is elongated, as if her delicate bones are made for gallivanting through the trees. The word *gazelle* comes to mind.

She is who *They* are.

She hums. It's beautiful, deep, and soothing. The sound warms my skin and teases at passion until I want to wrap my legs around her. Maybe it's not her song. Maybe it's the way her hands touch the tree trunks, swaying, like she's free.

The hum changes into a cooing noise. They're words, I realize.

Another form comes out of the forest toward her. The second one glows a soft blue and her feathers are dark orange. They hold hands, lovers that meet in the wilds for sweet kisses and silent promises.

I think they are woodland nymphs, Valkyries, or simply forest spirits come to be as alive as we dream we could be. We watch them sing songs without words, in voices that make my toes tingle and my nipples harden.

When they disappear between the trees we kiss and shove our hands down one another's pants. We need to hold onto bliss, if only for a moment.



MY DADDY DISAPPEARED BEFORE I WAS OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER. Everyone knows someone who never comes home, and they never find a body. It's expected. It's accepted.

Kerry's sister disappeared when we were ten. Abby taught us how to put on makeup. We dressed in her halter tops and made kissing faces in the bathroom mirror. She put pale pink lipstick on me and warm red on Kerry. We left lip prints on the back of our hands. She'd spray us with apple body mist and tell us we were "Gorgeous!"

Even now when we get ready for a Friday night, we kiss the back of our hands and press them together in a silent salute to an outspoken sister.

Abby used to whisper, "They're always listening."

"Who?"

She'd press her finger to her lips and touch the crack between the wall and mirror. "They're everywhere, waiting for us to make a mistake, and when we do--" She snapped her fingers. "We're gone."

And then she was gone.

Did she see them, dancing in the forest?



BEFORE KERRY WAS PREGNANT, BEFORE WE SAW THE NOT QUITE women in the woods, we used to lay in Kerry's bed and wonder who *they* were. *They* sent tests for us to take. *They* decided when a doctor needed to be replaced. We always believed *they* were people, just like us.

We thought they were kings, like in storybooks.

"Priests," Kerry whispered, her button nose pointed at the ceiling fan.

I laughed, imagining old men in pressed white robes and gold threading, showing up to take us away.

"It's not funny. Religious men have started all kinds of wars, you can look it up."

"This isn't a war," Tim reminded us.

"If it was, we lost a long time ago."

That's the most we'd ever said, until that night.



KERRY WALKS UP TIM'S DRIVEWAY TO JOIN US ON THE PORCH. I'VE got a little boy's foot in one hand and tweezers in the other. The boy has a big splinter in the soft spot of his foot, right before the heel. His dark eyes glisten like wet glass, but he won't cry out, they never do.

Kerry stops before reaching the steps. "You told her."

Tim shrugs as if he doesn't care. We have bigger issues now.

The wind pulls at Kerry's thick, brown curls. I've always envied her hair and smooth skin. It's hard not to love Kerry. She's beautiful and ugly at the same time. Wide eyes and thick lips appear perfect until she sneers. She can make anyone cry with a few carefully chosen words.

"I'm not mad," I tell her. "W-we saw something last night."

"Are you going to help me or not?" the kid asks.

I roll my eyes and focus on the tiny piece of wood sticking out of the foot in front of me.

"What're you looking at, skank," the little boy says to Kerry.

Tim starts to laugh and I can't help the edge of my own smile at the boy's daring.

Kerry's grin is feral. I expect strong words and let the tweezers hover, waiting for emotional fallout.

"I'd shut the fuck up and let my friend help you. The last little shit had to get his foot amputated."

I lift my eyebrows and grab the end of the splinter with the tweezers. The kid sucks in a breath.

I pull, carefully, easily. In another life I could have been a surgeon.

"Bitch," he says to Kerry before running back inside.

Kerry sits beside me. She grumbles about being called a bitch and I hover the tweezers close to her eyes.

"It's small for all that fuss," she says.

I shrug and Tim lights a joint.

"Listen. We think we saw *them*."

I trade the tweezers for Tim's joint.

He coughs behind a cloud of smoke. "We won't say more than that, but we want you to come with us next time."

"I can't, not while I'm pregnant."

I inhale, not quite touching the joint to my lips.

"And you shouldn't be smoking that around me," she says, waving her hands through the cloud when I finally let it out.

I smile, letting smoke lag on my lips. "No one knows that but us. Come with us, it'll be for the last time."

Pregnancy meant an end to *the spot*. After a baby no one had the time to party. You were tied to the home, or a job. A baby meant adulthood, and adults had bars and backyard cookouts.

Tim let the tweezers hover over the lighter's flame.

"Fine," Kerry sighs.

"Fine," I repeat.



WE ARE AT *THE SPOT*. I WEAR A TINY, STRAPLESS BLACK DRESS THAT hugs all of my bones close together. I wear it with combat boots, meant to tromp through the woods.

Tim holds my hand and Kerry follows us down the beaten trail as the sun dies over the horizon. His fingers squeeze mine with every other step, as if he's making sure I'm beside him. Each time I look into his eyes I think he's asking me if I want to

take this chance. I might just be high. I tend to believe I know what people think when I'm stoned, as if I can read them by the pressure of their lips, the tilt of their cheeks, and how they squint their eyes.

Kerry's steps are like a whisper in our wake. She's our walking contradiction, light footed and heavy handed. She gathers curly hair behind her ear, escaped from a messy bun at the back of her head.

"This better be something," she mutters, and Tim shushes her.

"Fuck you, Tim."

Tim and I laugh. We're crass and careful. We have sharp tongues shaped by a wall that refuses to let us know what's on the other side.

Tim points between two trees. The forest casts shadows in shades of black and gray. We find where we saw the creatures before and hunker down next to one another. Kerry's knees bump mine. She smells of apple body mist and cigarettes.

I imagine the creatures we saw in control rooms, watching screens and collecting data to measure who to cull. Are we a herd? A zoo? Are we a theme park, where they wear our skin and pretend to be human?

Maybe they tag us and eat us, picking the smartest. Those with high test scores and the ability to question make it out. They take us early, and let the rest grow old.

If they discover us, we'll disappear.

Fear makes my fingertips cold. My gut twists. For a moment I think I'm going to puke. I'll pass out. The world is dark around me, folding in and spinning.

Then we hear a lone call, like a song. It has voice, tone, and depth. It's almost human. Another voice reaches out, a soft hum, like the one we heard before. It dances into our ears, and

the sound caresses our skin like lovers who know us best. I squirm with urgency.

Kerry gasps and I see one of them. It bounds like a deer through the trees. It's light green with pale feathers. Another follows behind the first, skin glowing like tiny pieces of sunlight. Its feathers are an array of red and orange.

They chirp, and I think it's laughter as they fall, scattering leaves. Their long limbs reach for one another, their glowing flesh touches, tumbles, and moves. They're making love.

Tim tries to pull us away, but I can't move. It's beautiful and confusing, not at all the embracing chaos of two people sweating against one another. There is no dance for us, no song, and yet this makes me want to tear at my clothing and try to dance.

"Marian," Tim whispers in my ear.

I twist around, but I'm too late. We're all too late.

They stand around us, fluorescence dancing under their skin. Up close I see their slender bones and the ribbons of blood vessels. They are as silent as a grave, gazing down at us with giant, black eyes. Each one has a different feather pattern.

Kerry is crying beside me. Tim, shaking, stands before us.



KERRY, FOR ALL HER BIG WORDS, WEEPS AS THEY MARCH US ONTO A well-worn path, closer and closer to the wall. She says she's pregnant, that she can't go.

A phrase replays in my head, like an announcement in a department store, "Remember, no one who goes over the wall ever comes back."

"Marian," Tim says. It's hard to hear him over Kerry's sobbing.

“No one who goes over the wall ever comes back,” I say to him and to those beautiful creatures that flank us.

The wall rises, dark and shadowed before us. What’s behind it? Maybe everything will be okay. I’m too jaded to believe that. I remember Heather, the beautiful girl who believed a perfect world waited for her. She just had to be smart enough to reach it.

A gate is set within the wall with flashing yellow lights.

Kerry drops to her knees. Her tears and snot mix with the beaten dirt path. She holds her midsection, a sign she wants the baby.

“Your sister could be over there,” I tell her, because she needs to hear it. We all need to believe.

There’s a chirp, high and soft that calls Kerry to her feet.

They sing and Tim steps forward. My feet move next, as if they’re a part of the song. I can’t stop. We’re theirs. Kerry doesn’t cry out. I try to scream but my throat and tongue refuse.

All the choices are gone, but we never had any from the start.

The gate opens, and so does a door, further inside. I hear the sound of a chain and light erupts from the doorway, bright as a spotlight. Tim walks forward, a silhouette of a man I’ve known all of my life.

It’s not fair. I should at least be able to hold his hand.

“Marian,” he forces from his mouth.

He’s there, and then he isn’t.

I squint, walking ever forward into a song that’s warm, too warm. Like Tim, I go forward. I try to say goodbye. My jaw refuses to open, my vocal cords won’t work. I step away from cracked sidewalks, broken beer bottles, from hungry bellies, and chemical death.

I step into oblivion.

NONFICTION

APEX MAGAZINE SLUSH EDITOR ROUND TABLE

6,000 WORDS

LESLEY CONNER



Behind the scenes of every successful magazine is a team of people who keep the gears of publishing grinding. The slush readers! They are the first stop for every submission, whittling the mass of stories a magazine receives each month down to a manageable bite for the managing editor and editor-in-chief. For Jason Sizemore and Lesley Conner, this task is critical. *Apex Magazine* typically holds open submissions eleven months out of the year, closing in December to allow the slush team a much deserved break and giving Jason and Lesley the time to catch up on their queues. Each month, we average between 1100 and 1400 submissions. Which is amazing! We want those submissions to keep coming, but there is no way we would be able to consider all of these stories without our slush readers.

Because slush readers don't seem to be discussed too often, and because it's always interesting to take a peek behind the curtain of publishing, Lesley gathered the slush team together and asked them a few questions about what it's like being part of the *Apex Magazine* team.



Lesley Conner: I think that a lot of people have an idea of what slush reading will be like, but until you are in it, it's impossible to really know. What were some of your expectations and how does that meet up to the actual experience?

R. Jean Bell: It is even harder than I imagined and I am barely started. We get some really nice solid stories but they just don't have that Apex feel and it's been hard sometimes saying no to them, because I know how it feels to be on the other side getting that first round form rejection.

Vanessa Jae: I was expecting to read a lot more stories like my favorite Apex pieces, but we receive many submissions which, although not bad stories, just don't have what I think of as "that magical and poetic feeling" to them.

Eva Roslin: This is a good question and I think one that has a lot of possible answers. Some people think reading the slush

pile must be the funnest thing ever, which — there are moments when I discover something that blows me away, there is certainly that thrill of rooting for that writer and that piece to make it to the publication stage. For the most part, though, I think there are a lot of misconceptions about what reading slush is like. It's hard work; there is always that element in the back of my head of not wanting to hurt another writer, or sometimes reading something that has some solid elements, but ultimately falls apart at the end or there's a major element that stops me from recommending the story to move up in the editorial process.

My expectations were that I did not know what to expect (*laughs*). It had been recommended to me that reading slush would help me develop a more critical eye and be a better writer, and I think it has shown me in a practical way why some stories work, but why many stories don't. I'm still learning that each time I read through the slush pile, but I feel like I have absorbed some good lessons that I can hopefully apply to my own work.

Lillie Franks: I expected the stories in the slush pile to be a lot more samey than they are. That's not to say there aren't some recurring themes among them, but I've never seen a story that didn't have at least something that made it different from what you'd expect. It's really amazing just how many people are writing and how many different angles and approaches they all find. Even if I don't like a story, I can always find something interesting or surprising about it. Nobody writes the same as anybody else, and that's wonderful.

Mike Baldwin: I think I've been in the Apex slush for five or six years now, and was thrilled to be asked back to read again

— I'm excited for the relaunch! When I first started I really wasn't sure what to expect, but I know I was looking forward to reading fresh and raw stories that pushed me to think. Over time, that has definitely held up to actual experience — there are so many wonderful stories out there, and while there are some common themes, no two stories are exactly alike — and it is so incredibly fun to see where writers are trying to take things. I've always expected to find great stories, but what I've learned along the way is that sometimes you have to reject wonderful stories because they just aren't the right fit. The pain of rejecting a good story is eased, and it's really cool, when I see those stories find their fit in another magazine down the road.

Kai Delmas: We were told to try and read 40 stories a month and I expected that to be a challenge, but doable. However, it turns out that the slush pile is quite addicting and I read more than 40 in the first two weeks. There are a lot of good stories out there, no wonder I wanted more.

Marie Croke: My expectations going into slush reading were that there would be clear delineations between what to pass up to the editors and what not to, but that was quickly blown out of the water on my first day. There are obvious stories that aren't quite there, yes, but a huge amount of stories that come into the slush are good, have something about them that is incredibly positive. But we can't pass them all up; our job is literally to help the editors by not passing every good story up. So we have to search for reasons why a story wouldn't work and very often it will come down to a piece just not feeling like an Apex story despite there being nothing intrinsically wrong.

Jane Pinckard: Slush reading is being a gatekeeper, and I take that responsibility really seriously. I try to read every story I

encounter with critical sympathy — sympathy for where the writer is coming from, but with an analytical lens. Before I started, I was worried that it would be really difficult, that I would be agonizing over stories and whether to send them on or not. It turns out that, while of course there are some stories that I think about a lot, and spend quite a bit of time on, most of them are pretty clear right off the bat whether they're a fit for Apex or not. Sometimes the writer's craft just isn't there (and in those cases I often wish I could send a little personal note of encouragement!) but often, the craft is quite accomplished, but the story doesn't have the right feeling for the magazine.

Keturah Barchers: I wish I could say that I was forward-thinking enough to have some articulated expectations, but I'm not. I do think I expected to be working in more of a vacuum, with very little contact with Lesley and Jason, and no contact with my fellow slushies. I'm delighted to be able to have so much interaction with the team and it's easy to ask questions if I'm feeling insecure. I did expect to read a lot and love it (that expectation has been met).

Rhian Bowley: I was a bit intimidated to start with, imagining hours of onerous reading for a strict editing team who didn't know me. Imposter syndrome was high. What I found instead was that having a long list of marvelous new stories to read was absolutely the best way to escape from 2020 (you know why), and getting to know Lesley, Jason, and the other slush readers, through the magazine's Discord, has been a delight.

Mike Bell: The experience has been lovely in the trust that Lesley and Jason afford us. I also expected a lonely journey of reading in solitude, but the slush team has been actively

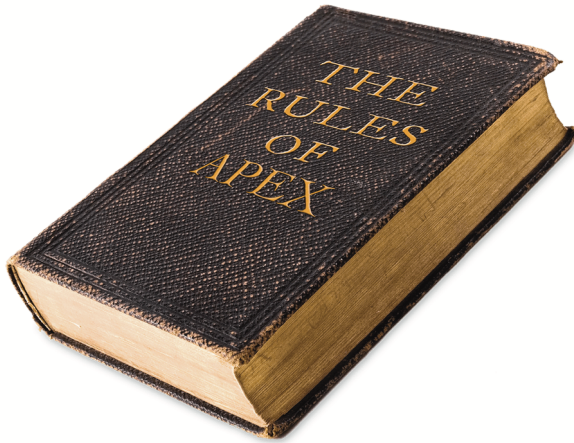
communicating and sharing impressions of different stories throughout.

Marissa van Uden: Two very wise mentors told me that slush reading would be super rewarding and a great way to learn and grow, but even so, I didn't quite realize how rewarding or how much I'd learn. I love talking about stories with people, so it's also a lot of fun — especially with this team.

Kira Parker: I didn't have a lot of expectations to start with: this is my first time in slush! I knew I would be reading a metric ton of stories and I had a decent idea what made a great fit for Apex. The sheer volume of submissions are exactly what I thought they'd be, but the depth and breadth, variance and color of everything we read always staggers me.

Lesley Conner: What is the most surprising/unexpected thing about reading submissions for Apex Magazine?

Rebecca E. Treasure: The number of submissions that do not follow the submission guidelines! Standard manuscript format is easy to follow, so the huge number of stories that don't follow those guidelines surprised me. Similarly, the vast differences between cover letters. A huge number of cover letters have a long bio or a synopsis of the story — totally unnecessary.



Eva Roslin: I think the most surprising thing to me has been how common it is for writers who seem to think that submission guidelines don't apply to them, or that they're exempt, or who feel the need to write 10-page cover letters. I can feel that energy leaping off the screen from some writers who think their story is gold and that it's going to be so brilliant that the slush team and editors are going to gasp with admiration, and offer them a contract on the spot. I hope that didn't come across as too harsh or cynical, but yeah — for me it is still staggering the amount of people who do not follow submission guidelines.

Lillie Franks: Before doing slush reading, I always thought that "I liked your story but it's not really right for this venue" was just a generic blow-off, but you definitely encounter a lot of stories that are great and would not at all work for Apex. I think I was also surprised by how many different identities are represented among the authors, and how many fascinating ways that was represented in their stories.

Ruth de Haas: How many people don't seem able to follow the

Shunn manuscript format properly! Please consider our poor tired eyes and make sure you double space your lines.

Mike Baldwin: I love reading, and am a lifelong fan of sci-fi, fantasy, and speculative fiction. I really got into the slush as a way of getting to read a lot of free stories. I expected I'd be recommending good stories, and passing on less than good stories. I've really been surprised, and didn't expect, that I would care about the stories. When I find a story that I connect with, and want others to read, I get invested. This will sound a little silly, but I feel so excited and proud if a story I found makes it through the gauntlet and makes it to print.

Kai Delmas: Honestly, a part of me thought there would be more bad writing in the slush pile. Sure, there are a lot of stories that still need some extra work, but a large portion of the submissions are quite good. That makes choosing the stories that get sent up the pipeline much harder.

K.W. Colyard: Definitely the community! Most of us, if not all, are writers as well as readers, and that's a lonely profession for sure. I think we're sort of used to feeling like we're pitching our stories into the Void. They go out to these faceless editors, these names on a screen who decide if our work is good enough, and then get back to us in a few weeks or months. I thought the slush-reading process would maintain that sort of editorial distance, but *Apex* has a Discord for its slush team! We can chat and discuss stories at pretty much any hour of the night, and we can get to know Lesley and Jason as actual people, rather than figureheads.

Marie Croke: My first day slushing, I searched through the online list of submissions and in the results of the first three

pages I found a total of three female-gendered names. There were a couple of ambiguous-gendered names among the rest, but it meant that out of thirty stories, only a small amount were from women. Now, that ended up being a fluke and most pages will have one to four submissions that look to be from women, but that first day really brought home just how homogenous the slush can be sometimes, not just according to gender, but in other demographics as well.

Jane Pinckard: That it's really fun, actually! I love reading people's stories, I love seeing the breadth of imagination and experience out there. Please keep sending them in!

Rhian Bowley: With hindsight, I don't know why I was so surprised at the international diversity of submissions, but it's been a characteristic that has stood out for me. And I am constantly surprised at how wildly different stories are. When I pull something from the submissions queue, there is no way I could ever tell what I am about to read.

Another surprising thing, though it shouldn't have been a surprise, it's just how many submissions there are. SO MANY. So many writers working on stories for hours and hours and being bosses at sending them out. As a writer myself I know how much time, hard work, and courage this takes; it is awe-inspiring.

Mike Bell: What's been so surprising and refreshing for me has been the incredible range of creativity in plot and voice. While there are certain tropes that we see again and again, there are just as many original approaches. It's a joy to see!

Marissa van Uden: Probably how emotionally invested the

whole team is in the submissions. There's genuine anguish when we fall in love with a story but one small thing doesn't quite work or it's just not quite right for Apex. We readers understand there's no time to send everyone personal notes, but it's still wild to realize that some writers will get form rejections and never know how much we adored their work.

Gabby Shriner: There are so many! It's definitely been crazy to see names that I recognize in the slush - authors and writers I follow and more rarely acquaintances or writers/editors at other mags. I don't know, it can be surreal. The rush of finding a really amazing story in the slush and passing it up to Lesley is also a feeling I never imagined could be as impactful and exciting as it is. The feeling of finding something awesome and really rooting for the writer of the piece is a special kind of thing, for sure.

Since I've been reading for Apex for, I think, over two years now, it is interesting to see similar threads running through submissions at different times. What's fascinating, though, is that it isn't really what you'd expect at all: not typically obvious or aligning with current events, or anything like that (though that does happen). I've only read one or maybe two COVID-related stories since we reopened for subs in July, and even calling them COVID stories would be a bit of a stretch.

breathes in a sigh of relief, crosses fingers But I have definitely read 2-3 werewolf stories submitted by people from Australia since July, and a couple stories that focus on the idea of plotting overlords that are actually just creepy crawlies in meat suits? I don't know what to make of that last one.

Lesley Conner: Are there any tips you'd give to writers to help make their stories stand out in the slush pile?

Rebecca E. Treasure: Beyond following submission guidelines and writing a short, simple cover letter? The first few paragraphs have to hold the reader's attention. The prose and the plot have to work together right away for me to read the entire story, otherwise I'll read the first five pages and then move on. Typos, awkward language, a meandering opening, no discernible plot, these are all reasons I've moved on from a story. The ending has to land as well — there have been amazing stories that didn't land the ending, and I wanted to reach out to the writer and beg them to finish their story!

R. Jean Bell: The obvious one is follow the guidelines.

But the less obvious one — work on developing the voice of your piece and bringing an emotional connection in early. If a piece has a strong, compelling voice and it is pulling me into the piece emotionally, it has the best chance of making it through. I've seen a lot of stories that work mechanically but just don't have enough voice and emotional depth to have me want to send them to the next step.

Vanessa Jae: A gripping first scene that makes the reader look forward to the rest of the story and a meaningful ending.

Eva Roslin: I know this is going to seem hackneyed or eyeroll-inducing, but I encourage writers to really take the time to make sure they are submitting the best possible version of their story to us. Get the story critiqued. Go through multiple rounds of edits. I know there's a temptation to just submit and "see if it sticks." I think it's very important now more than ever to remember that readers' attention spans and tastes have changed drastically. It has become so much more difficult to grab their attention and to hold it — to offer unique stories that

aren't the same pseudo-medieval Western European setting or the same spaceship or the same haunted house we've seen a million times before. There are some writers who are inverting these tropes in brilliant ways and using readers' expectations to create completely new experiences, which I think is brilliant. My main piece of advice would be to echo the above, and to remind folks to please follow the submission guidelines, not just for Apex but for all publications. They're there for a reason.

Lillie Franks: For me, what always tips a story over is the big picture of it. There are a lot of stories that feel like they have a really interesting picture or idea but when I think about the overall story, I find that the story didn't really draw out that idea. So my big advice is make sure that whatever the most interesting idea in your story is, that it's also the one at the center and that the story is telling us something about it, that it's at least trying to answer the questions it raises. That cohesiveness really makes a story stand out for me. Also, voice. Stories that have an interesting narrative voice always grab me. They make me excited to unfold the story in a way that a simple 3rd person narrator or an undistinctive first person doesn't.

Ruth de Haas: I've read a lot of stories that are beautifully well-written and packed with clever ideas, but what really makes something stand out is the strength of emotion. The best stories make you feel like you've been punched in the guts (in a good way)!

Kai Delmas: Have something to say. Give the reader food for thought that sticks with them for days. Emotions are key. If you

make the reader feel something deeply then your story will stand out.

K.W. Colyard: Have at least a passing knowledge of the major conventions and texts in your genre. The well-written stories I reject tend to come from writers who don't seem to know what people are writing today, and they mostly fall into two camps. Some try to channel classic authors and wind up sounding dated, for lack of a better word. Others try something that's already been very, *very* done — think “mad scientist builds a body out of corpse parts” or “it was all a dream” — and they don't do anything exciting or new with it. We already have an Isaac Asimov and a *Frankenstein*, and they're great. What we need are new writers and new stories.

Jane Pinckard: Ha, yes, if you mean, tips I'd give to myself, since I'm also a writer with stories on submission! The momentum of the story is so, so, so important. Every sentence has to pull the reader to the next. This can be done in a variety of different ways, IMO. A compelling voice can make me keep reading to learn more about the character or the story world, even if not much plot is present. A story question posed in the first paragraph that demands an answer. A mystery that I can't wait to learn more about. Make the reader unable to stop reading!

Keturah Barchers: The submission guidelines are your friends and are meant to help you succeed. A good title is important and that title should foreshadow your story in some way. The first three lines need to be powerful — make them shocking, make them mysterious enough to elicit curiosity but not confusion. The last paragraph, if it doesn't tie up all the story's promises and mysteries it fails as an ending. If you are trying to

go for the shock factor, the language in the ending needs to be dramatic and sudden.

Rhian Bowley: I know how many times has been said already, but please follow formatting guidelines. When one is reading lots and lots and lots of stories, for hours, the recommended layout makes reading on the screen the most comfortable, & the ones don't use it really stand out. I have a newfound love for Courier!

Beginnings and ends matter. Don't start your story with a character waking from a dream, and do take time to be sure the end of your story is the right one. I first heard that advice about endings from Wendy Wagner, and now I understand it. Quite a few times I have been reading a promising story where the end was either rushed or didn't match the promises the start of the story made.

Mike Bell: I've said this before and I stand by my cardinal rule of writing: the opening is the most important part of the story. If you want to stand out, your first line/paragraph must as well. It must jump off the page and shake me by the shoulders! The right first lines make readers hungry for more. Miss this opportunity and your reader may quit before page two.

Kira Parker: Have some through-line cohesion for your story. You need to have enough of a connection between elements to see the beginning from the end: be precise, be clear. No matter the results, your finale needs to feel earned.

Gabby Shriner: Absolutely! I might be repeating some other slush readers in this, but I want to emphasize the importance of reading submission guidelines, reading them closely, and

following them. You don't want not following the guidelines to be the reason your story was passed up. To some extent these next may be subjective-ish, but strong worldbuilding and voice/tone of the piece (length of your story depending, too) are important in determining an Apex story overall. Reading current and back issues helps out with this like you wouldn't believe, in terms of realizing what makes a story a great fit for being published in Apex. My big things tend to be strong characters and character development in a story, and if I'm not rooting for your protagonist or at least on their side/empathizing in the smallest way, it is going to be a no-go or an incredibly hard if not impossible sell.

Lesley Conner: I know many of you are also writers. Has seeing the submission process from the other side changed anything about how you submit your own work?

Rebecca E. Treasure: I don't know if it's changed the way I submit my work, but as I've written stories since beginning reading slush for Apex I've really focused on those opening pages. I don't want to give first readers any excuse to close that window! It's also given me a better perspective on getting rejections — sometimes a story is good, but isn't the right fit for Apex, and sometimes a story only has a few minor flaws. It really has to be the whole package!

R. Jean Bell: I will be making some changes, yes. Definitely in what I feel is "ready" to go on submission. I need to work more on that voice I mentioned. I will continue to be paranoid about sub guidelines — that won't change. But I'm going to be stressing less about those dreaded cover letters and I'm going to be working harder to study what I think a market is looking for. And knowing how hard it really is to make that cut to

second round—I'll hopefully be beating myself up less about the inevitable rejections.

Vanessa Jae: Yes, I used to think cover letters were way more important than they actually are.

Eva Roslin: Oh my goodness, yes. It has made me understand and appreciate the intricacies of the editorial process so much more. I have even more sympathy and understanding for the work that editors do, and why it's so difficult to get that elusive "yes." There are many perfectly good stories in the slush pile — there's nothing technically "wrong" with them or no major "ah, there's the flaw." But they just don't click. So much is dependent and subjective on taste. It has encouraged me to be less afraid or hesitant about submitting my work, but also has helped some rejections sting a little less.

Lillie Franks: I joke that I've learned from reading the slush pile that I am neither the best nor the worst writer to ever exist, and since those were the only two options I had considered, it's been an important experience for me. The slush pile really gives you an idea of the sheer quantity of submissions a magazine gets and why it is that, unfortunately, not every story that deserves the platform of a particular magazine can get it. So it's helped me deal with rejections and I think it has helped me be a little bolder because I no longer worry that I'm going to stand out and embarrass myself as a bad writer; maybe I won't get it this time, but I have confidence in my work.

Ruth de Haas: Submitting a story has always felt a bit like yeeting it into an unknowable void. Now I understand more of what happens inside the void, why some places might take longer to respond than others, what sort of things they're considering, and so on. I don't think I'll necessarily change

anything in how I submit my own work, but it's good to know more of how the process works from the other side. Also, I now understand that, if a market says "this wasn't quite right for us" that's not an empty platitude — I've seen several stories which were excellent, but just not quite right for Apex.

K.W. Colyard: *Embarrassingly* yes. I am talking to myself, six months ago, in the above. I grew up reading "head-hopping" writers, and I didn't find out until recently that that's something most contemporary editors and readers hate. I'm much more critical of how my prose sounds and what I do with perspective now, because I pull so many great ideas out of the slush pile, only to watch them fall victim to issues of word choice and flow. Reading slush is sort of like being in a giant workshop where you can read other writers' unpublished works, but can't comment on them at all. It has a way of reflecting your own flaws back to you.

Marie Croke: I'm a writer too and now, seeing things from the other side, it really slams home how matching up a story to a magazine is paramount. Some of these stories are going to go on and be published elsewhere, as well they should be because they weren't poor stories, they just didn't embody the feel Jason and Lesley are looking for. It helps to receive rejections knowing that the flavor of that particular story may have just not been the one those editors were searching for.

Rhian Bowley: My newfound love of Courier! I am possibly more paranoid about submitting now, having read such a high standard of the competition. But I also understand better the difference that active, vivid sentences make, and will spend more time trying to ensure my endings pay off.

Mike Bell: Reading slush has certainly changed my process. It has helped me to better identify common pitfalls, to understand what works and what doesn't. Not only has it improved my writing, it's improved my outlook. Submitting work can feel so defeating, especially when the response is a form rejection. But readers are real people and we find so many things to love in your work, even when it has to be rejected.

Marissa van Uden: Seeing how crazy good many of the rejected stories are has definitely made me less afraid of rejections. I also have a deeper understanding of how important it is to know the publication you're submitting to. It's made me a way more active and conscientious reader.

Kira Parker: I have a better idea of what makes a story "tic." Reading slush has given me a finer eye for detail and a better gut instinct for where a story exists on the sliding scale from good to great. I wouldn't say it has made it easier to write them, because I have a higher bar for myself than I used to, but I can recognize whether or not one of my stories is solid with all the right elements. I feel much more confident sending them out!

Gabby Shriner: If I'm being honest, I haven't submitted any of my fictional work to a magazine probably for at least a year or two. I'm trying to avoid being too hard on myself about that (especially this year), but reading so many subs for Apex has made me realize that, when it comes to my own writing, I am far more interested in the short story format than I used to be. I read anthologies and short stories in addition to longer novels and comics nowadays, and with that have come to realize I don't have to write "a book." I've been working on several interconnected stories/chapters of a larger work about virtual reality that take place in different points in time, in different

worlds and involving a cast of characters (some of which intersect, cross over into others, and others that don't), and I'm feeling way more confident about those stories, as standalone pieces that may not necessarily become a larger work. When I can dedicate more time to writing, these may indeed be things I try submitting! And once I take the time to sit down and write more, edit and submit, I like to think I'll be more confident and careful in doing so, having been steeped in the back end of goings-on at Apex.

Lesley Conner: What are your hopes for *Apex Magazine* in 2021?

Rebecca E. Treasure: I would love to see a story I recommended make it into the magazine, but mostly I am excited to see the amazing stories that Apex publishes go into the world.

R. Jean Bell: My unrealistic hope — I would love to see Apex up for awards again. The support of the Kickstarter, the flood of submissions from opening day — the speculative fiction world has missed the magazine.

More realistically, I hope the magazine succeeds enough in 2021 that it can financially continue in 2022, be it from advertising and subscriptions alone or other support if those aren't enough this first year.

And I'd love at least once to be the one who found that gem in the slush that makes it into the mag.

Vanessa Jae: More dinosaurs, always. Also, for emerging writers to submit their weird stories no one else seems to like.

Eva Roslin: My hopes for *Apex Magazine* are for the publication to receive many more subscribers, more eyeballs, more attention, and more support. I hope more people in the speculative fiction field will recognize Apex's excellence as well as all of the hard work that goes into each issue. I also hope readers can discover amazing fiction and be wowed by some of the things to come, and for Apex to thrive for many years to come.

Lillie Franks: That we'll keep seeing all of the wild, fascinating ideas people have and that we'll share as many of the best of them as we can! If the slush pile keeps looking like it does now, we'll have some excellent material for you!

Ruth de Haas: To see some of my personal favourite stories appear in the magazine and be able to say "I was the first person to read that!"

Mike Baldwin: My hopes for Apex 2021 — I hope that we will continue to push the limits with our storytelling. There are a lot of good venues out there for story-telling, but I think Apex really fills a void for some incredible stories that just don't fit anywhere else. I love this magazine and the range of strange beautiful stories it tells that make you feel and wonder. I really hope a lot of new readers will find and get excited about the Apex vibe.

Kai Delmas: I hope we get more and more great stories. You write them and we'll read them.

K.W. Colyard: I just want to read some really good stories and help them make it to print. I applied to *Apex* to be part of the SFF publishing community, and I'm looking forward to what the new year has in store for us.

Marie Croke: My hopes for *Apex Magazine* in 2021 are that the magazine delivers stories that make readers feel the flaws in all of us, the flaws in our societies and culture that sometimes feel as if they're holding us back, but also to celebrate all the hidden hopes and dreams that come through from those dark places and make us keep working our best for the change we want to see. That's how I see Apex stories, ones that welcome all the darkness in so we can acknowledge and grow from it.

Keturah Barchers: I'd like to see it surpass *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine's* audience :).

Rhian Bowley: More issues, so we can publish more of the fantastic stories we are receiving.

Mike Bell: My hopes are for new authors to join the Apex ranks! I'm so excited for readers to see the stories that have already been accepted, and I'm excited to discover even more!

Marissa van Uden: After the terrible confusing mess that was 2020, the world really needs good art, and I can't wait to see what stories we tell as we begin to draw together again, find our feet and get this planet on a better path.

I have no doubt that Apex will keep publishing original and diverse voices, and that the stories are gonna be dark and strange but filled with beauty and compassion.

Kira Parker: I want each issue of *Apex Magazine* to feel like the moment right before a leap of faith. I want readers to hesitate before they open their new issues: they *know* something lurks inside that will profoundly affect their hearts and their minds,

and I want us to prove that trust by upending tame reality into terrifying, curious, speculative wonder.

(And I hope the slush team continues to get plenty to read!)

Lesley Conner: Thank you all for answering my questions. Being the front line of the *Apex Magazine* submissions process is critical to our success! You have our turnaround time for hearing back about initial submissions down to just a few days and you've whittled the submission mountain down to a much more reason submission hill. Jason and I are incredibly grateful. You're all amazing!

MISCELLANEOUS

COMING IN ISSUE 121



We have a fantastic relaunch issue planned for January, 2021!

ORIGINAL FICTION

- “Root Rot” by Fargo Tbakhi
- “Mr. Death” by Alix E. Harrow
- “Your Own Undoing” by PH Lee
- “Love, That Hungry Thing” by Cassandra Khaw
- “The Niddah” by Elana Gomel
- “Gray Skies, Red Wings, Blue Lips, Black Hearts” by Merc Fenn Wolf-moor

REPRINTED FICTION

- “The Ace of Knives” by Tonya Liburd
- “Roots on Ya” by LH Moore

NONFICTION

- “Story-less” by Usma T. Malik
- TBD

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In addition to the six regular issues, you will receive two bonus themed issues (Indigenous Futurists guest-edited by Allison Mills and International Futurists guest-edited by Francesco Versa) planned for the second half of 2021 as part of your subscription.

That's 42 original stories a year, plus nonfiction, interviews, and more!

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Dedicated to the 776 Kickstarter backers who made our relaunch possible.

