

# The Cascadia Subduction Zone

A LITERARY  
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Self Portrait



Silvia Malagrino

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Silvia Malagrino

“If your takeaway...is that *The Cascadia Subduction Zone* sounds really interesting, you’re not wrong—it’s a wonderful journal filled with thoughtful and insightful criticism.”

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## Into the woods with Carol Emshwiller

by Eileen Gunn

Carol Emshwiller was a kick and a half, and this is not so much an obituary as a celebration of who she was and what she did and how much fun it was to hang out with her.

This past February, Carol died, just two months short of her 98th birthday, after a life in which she'd been a classical violinist, an artist, and a celebrated writer—nearly a hundred years of life rich in culture and family and discipline and enjoyment, all jumbled together. No doubt there was sorrow and frustration mixed in—we all have that, and we couldn't write without it—but Carol in person projected bubbling amusement even when she was in fact complaining. (And complaining is part of being a writer as well. If you don't have anything to complain about, why write?)

Carol was a prolific short story writer, with six novels and more than 150 stories published over a sixty-plus-year career. She won more awards than most people can count: the Nebula Award (twice), the World Fantasy Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, and a number of others. She was shortlisted four times for the Tiptree, which seems like an undercount if you know how many times she deftly addressed issues of gender. (Have you read *Carmen Dog*? Really, you should read *Carmen Dog*.)

Carol started publishing stories in her early thirties, surprisingly late for someone so prolific, but by then she had already cast aside several creative lives. First, she trained and performed as a concert violinist, then she married an aspiring artist, Ed Emshwiller, and they both attended L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, studying art. Carol and Ed then returned to the United States, and they settled in Levittown, New York and had three children. While Ed built a substantial career as an illustrator and underground filmmaker, Carol stayed home with the kids in Levittown, far from the hip underground-movie scene in Greenwich Village.

At this point, I would like, per Carol's direction, to correct a dreadful rumor about her that has circulated through the science fiction community for some forty years, courtesy of the witty writer Tom Disch. Tom used to tell people that Carol wrote her brilliant early short stories while caring for her kids, which was true enough. Tom said he dropped by one day to visit—this has become a legend of sorts—and found Carol sitting in the playpen, at work at the typewriter, while the kids raged around its periphery creating chaos. "That wasn't true," said Carol. "He made that up. Although," she admitted, "I would take the playpen apart and use it as a fence around my desk, to keep the kids from messing up my papers." A wonderful image, Carol writing peaceably among the savage children, but now you know the truth.

Although I'd met Carol and read her work in the 1980s, I didn't get to know her well until 2002, when Pat Murphy and Avon Swofford and I started going to visit her in the summertime outside of Bishop, California, in the stunning high-desert Owens Valley that runs down the east side of the Sierras. Carol lived there in the summers in a single-wide trailer in a tiny desert community, with a view from the front stoop straight east across the valley to the spectacular White Mountains, and the dry foothills of the steep Sierras rose directly behind the trailer. We'd drive up for a long weekend in late June or July, stay with Carol, and go hiking with her wherever she wanted to go during the day. In the evening, we'd sit around in the yard workshopping stories and talking about writing. It was the least stressful writing workshop in the world. One year, we didn't even read the stories, just talked them to one another. You can learn a lot about the structure of your work-in-progress by putting the actual words aside....

It was hard not to laugh all the time when we were hanging with Carol, even at things that really weren't very funny,

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Into the woods  
(cont. from p. 1)

like the time, on a hike in the Sierras, when she was trying to step from rock to rock to cross a small stream. Age-related macular degeneration had made her eyesight so bad that she couldn't see either her feet or the rocks, but she didn't tell us until she was halfway across the stream. She laughed and apologized and grabbed our hands and made it across the stream while we were still wondering if a helicopter rescue would be possible this far into the mountains.

In 2008 or so, Pat and Carol and I hiked up a long but leisurely trail to a wildflower meadow. We were walking switchbacks up a hill. Pat and I had gained a good bit of altitude on Carol, and we stopped so she could catch up. We were looking down at her—rather fondly, I'm sure—when a troop of people on horseback, a guide and a half-dozen people who sat in the saddle like city folk, came up behind her. They said something to Carol and she responded, then they moved awkwardly on.

Pat and I looked at each other. What the hell? (We were kind of protective of Carol, as was everyone else who knew

her, and she shrugged it off, just as she did with everyone else.) We waited as Carol made her way quickly uphill. "What did they say to you? Were they asking directions?"

She laughed. "They said, 'How did you get here?'"

I love thinking about that. These weary tenderfoots have been lumbering about on their horses for an hour or two in the High Sierra, and they come upon a tiny, white-haired 87-year-old lady, apparently alone in the middle of nowhere.

I am almost at the end, here, of my deadline and my word count, and I haven't told you how much Carol liked cowboys, and how much she liked mules, and how fond she was of the ancient leather cowboy hat that she found in a thrift store, which, she said, still smelled of cowboy.

She said mules were very smart and peculiar and much more interesting than horses, and she was always torn, as Memorial Day Weekend approached, between attending WisCon, the feminist science-fiction convention, and the week-long Mule Days Celebration in Bishop, seven days of mules, mules, mules. Her love of cowboys she demonstrated in her novels *Ledoyt* and *Leaping Man Hill*, which are Westerns with an inimitable Emshwiller lilt, and her love of mules she used to write *The Mount*, a wonderfully peculiar novel about the complex relationship between the rider and the ridden, the predator and the prey, which you can interpret metaphorically any way you dare. Her love of that worn and wonderfully shabby cowboy hat? You can see it in this photo of her I took a decade ago in Bishop.



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Eileen Gunn writes short stories. Her work has received the Nebula Award in the United States and the Sense of Gender Award in Japan. Her story collections are available from Small Beer Press and Tachyon Publications. Her most recent story, "Terrible Trudy on the Lam" was published in the April 2019 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.





## Knife Witch

by Susan diRende

I have the worst luck. Becoming a witch among savages is not a prize you'd pay money for a chance at. But if I hadn't been scratching that impossible-to-reach spot right between my shoulder blades with a boning knife at just that moment, I'd be cold meat myself. Or worse. But see, there was the itch and the knife and then those barbarians burst in.

All my life I've been tormented by crawling, fizzy feelings, usually in places I can't reach without some help. This time, I needed a long knife with a pointy tip. I moved to grab it when Sharma turned away because of some ruckus in the outer hall. Then the ruckus invaded the kitchen and, well... Did you know that if a boning knife is pointing at the chest of a large, rampaging Wildman who is hurling himself at a girl, it, well, slips right in and pierces the heart like a pin through a bubble in a boiling pot?

If I'd been a man, that quick kill would've been immediately followed by a quicker, or possibly slower death: mine. That I am a girl changes the deal, though. Apparently when a girl takes down a warrior with her virtue intact, she is revered as a witch or priestess, namely someone not to be messed with. That would be me, standing over the now dead second-in-command of this large and smelly horde, brother to the leader, no less, a man no male could so much as scratch in battle.

Everything stops while they call the marauder-in-chief. He looks at the corpse and then at me. "Only magic could do this. Bring her for the temple. They will train her and reward us." And he turns away.

Some bearded behemoth grabs my arm, the one still holding the knife. I twist uselessly, demanding they leave me here and go away quietly. Not that I've been so happy here. "Itchy and bitchy" is what my sister calls me, and she loves me. Sort of. My whole family has been wondering how they could possibly marry me off, preferably far away. I'm

not the rebellious type that a strong man might imagine taming in some fantasy of power. Instead, something about me makes other people feel inadequate, and you can't find a husband for that.

The leader turns to look at me, grins, and shakes his head. "We each get a prize for finding a new witch."

I accept the inevitable. I decide okay, I can't save me, but I'll save the village, or what's left of it. "Fine. I'll go with you, but only if you tell these brutes that they have to stop all rape and pillage this instant."

The big guy laughs at me, pointing out that I know nothing of being a witch and so cannot control my power.

"Sure, now," I say, "but someday I will know enough to make a man's seed dry up in his berries and his urine burn with such fire he will want to cut it off. Any enemy of mine today will be my enemy on that day as well." And I smile right back at him.

He does that squinting thing that men do. Then with a growl, he turns and pulls some greasy-haired teenager off of Clava, escorts me out of the house, and tromps through the village toward the ship.

Pimply Rovel, who has tormented me all my life for no reason I can think of other than he's just cruel, calls me a name and spits as we leave town. I turn to fearless leader and say, "Him you can kill," to which he smiles and does.

At this point I figure it's a good thing I'll be leaving since a few of his relatives might somehow blame me for his demise. Rovel was an ambitious bully, and he was bound to hurt a lot of people on his way to becoming the most depraved headman in the town's history if he'd only lived that long. So I saved the whole town from that, not that they'd thank me or ever welcome me back.

See what I mean by luck?

The boat has rope ladders hanging down from the side that I'm expected to climb to get on board. In a dress. Can I say that I never liked dresses? They inter-



fere with running away from bullies like the aforementioned and now departed Rovel. They also let cold air blow up underneath in winter, making a private torture where the sun never. And the hems get all soggy and heavy when it's wet outside, because you can't roll a skirt up from the bottom like a pair of pants. And if you roll it up from the top so your legs poke out, you get called ugly names, even if you're only seven and don't know what those words mean.

So I turn to the leader and say, "You start up the ladder before I finish climbing so you can look up my skirt, and I will pee all over your head. Do I make myself clear?"

He gives me what I guess he supposed was a sexy leer and says, "Are you trying to make me want to mate with you?"

Men. "No, I'm trying to keep you from going permanently bald and beardless from witch piss."

He half-laughs like he doesn't believe me, but his hand goes to his beard, which shows he has doubts. I face the rope ladder and realize I still have the bloody boning knife in my hand. I have been gripping it so hard my hand feels frozen in that position, clearly some kind of traumatic attachment due to the minor fact that I killed a man not 30 minutes before. I take a deep breath, figuring in for a penny, in for a pound. I bite the knife between my teeth, grab the rungs, and climb. Hairy leader holds the bottom of the ladder steady and doesn't look up. Victory goes to the witch girl.

When I reach the top, I return the knife to its now permanent position in my right hand and wipe my mouth with my left. It comes away with a bloody smear. I consider being sick. Then I notice the way the men all back away from me, and I figure I cannot afford the luxury.

I'm shown a tiny room the size of a sideboard table, with some furs on the floor. My cabin. I'm locked in while the men holler and the ship clanks and creaks. A few minutes later I feel the sway of open water. For some reason, this makes me happy.

I was miserable in my village. The future with these barbarians looks like a whole other kind of miserable, but it's a change. And change, once it starts happening, can mean anything. I was never brave enough to have picked up and taken my chances. Chance has picked me up instead, and now that I'm out and afloat on this journey, I feel free, really free for the first time in my life. Of course, I am locked in a tiny room on a smelly ship full of men who barely speak my language and whose own language I can't begin to understand. These are details. I am floating away from the past and the future written by that past. Even if this future is terrible, too, it will at least be different.

A couple of hours or so later, I am awakened by somebody opening the cabin door. "You can't just walk in here. This is my room," I say as I open my eyes.

The leader, who the crew calls Volzh, stands there and smiles condescendingly. Lying down makes it hard to put smug in its place, so I stand up. The ship is really rolling, and I have to bend my knees to keep from falling over. I notice that just because the floor tilts, up and down doesn't change, so I get the hang of it pretty fast.

Volzh has a bowl in his hand. "Is that for me? I appreciate your bringing me food, but you have to knock first, or I might get the wrong idea." I gesture with the knife that has blessedly never left my hand. He looks disappointed and just stands there like he's waiting for something. "Food?" I remind him, pointing. "Give it to me. I'm ravenous."

It turns out I am the first kidnapped witch who does not get seasick. Volzh thinks this is an omen. All it means to me is that henceforth I don't get clear broth brought to my cupboard-sized cabin, but have to sit in the reeking mess with the rest of the crew if I want to eat. Which is bad enough, but then I get the grandmother of all itches right where a girl should never scratch if she's in a room full of marauding pirates.

I reach for the bread knife, but Volzh grabs my hand saying one knife is plenty



for me and that I shouldn't go around collecting them. I explain that my knife is too pointy for where I have to scratch. His eyes get narrow again.

"You have need to scratch?"

"When I have an itch, I have need to scratch just like anybody else. You got a problem with that?"

"You had an itch right before our attack, yes?"

"Yes, that's why the knife was handy."

"Is this itch in the same place?"

"No"

"Where is it?"

"It is in none-of-your-business land."

He roars. "The witch has an itch! From below it comes. Prepare for a kraken!"

The men leap, I mean literally leap, from their seats. Some land on the table. One guy puts his foot on the roast and takes a fall that would crack a man's head open if it wasn't made of solid rock. Fortunately for this guy, rock is all he's got upstairs. He shakes it off and heads topside.

Volzh grabs my arm and drags me after them. "You will tell me if the itch gets worse or better."

"It's going to get better because I'm going to scratch it" I say, grabbing the bread knife. Come to think of it, why do these barbarians have something as civilized as a bread knife? You'd think they'd just be tearing off hunks instead of being all fancy with the slicing. A puzzle to work out later, because in the present, Volzh grabs the knife. "No scratching. You must keep us alive."

"If I don't get to scratch at least a little, I will prefer death to the agony. Give me that knife, or I'm going to take my chances with the kraken."

He hands it over. "Just a little scratching. The only way to survive is if we can light the sea with fire at the right moment."

I give myself a few good pokes down and behind my butt and feel almost human again. We hurry up on deck where the men are also hanging funny shaped barrels with long spouts over the railings.

"The only thing that will stop the kraken is fire, but fire will also destroy

the ship if it spills. We must light the surface but not the sides of the ship."

My itch has not come back, and I'm thinking everybody overreacted. I start to say so. "You know that itching. It's pretty much...aagh!" Forget ladylike. I bend over and reach under my skirts without caring who sees how much. Actually, nobody is looking at my legs and whatever, because the minute I holler and hike up my skirts, Volzh gives the signal.

"Dump the barrels now! Fire ready!"

I am perfectly happy for about two seconds, poking the itch with the bread knife. My other hand is still in possession of the boning knife, but scratching underneath with a thing that pointy on the rolling seas is not a wise choice. And then this giant tentacle almost knocks me over, slapping its slimy self right in front of me.

The tentacle flexes, suckers grabbing the deck. Instinctively, I do what any cook knows to do with squid tentacle; you skin it. I stab the boning knife to hold it and slip the bread knife in sideways. Now normally I would not use a serrated knife for this because the teeth ruin the flesh, but I work with what I have. I can't expect to skin the whole twenty-foot appendage, of course, so I'm pleased when the tentacle pulls away and does my work for me.

Not that I'm taking credit for getting the monster to retreat. That prize goes to the boys who poured and lit the oil on the water so that it flamed up with a big whoosh. Suddenly, all the tentacles vanish. Mine is the only one dripping ooze and flapping loose skin, though, a fact not lost on our illustrious and odorous leader. He comes over, puts a meaty paw on my shoulder, and says, "Never again will I question you when you ask for a knife. I will say 'take it, take them all,' for you are a blade in your mind and all knives will serve you."

So now I have a fan. If you're starting a cult, it helps to have at least one follower. Volzh is my first.

Nobody takes the bread knife away from me. It gets to join my growing collection.



The weather turns really bad, and I go below feeling exhausted for no good reason. I fall asleep the minute I'm horizontal. I have weird dreams about monsters with tentacles whirling in the deep water around us and monsters with wings spinning in the skies above us. I tell them to swoop and dive all they want but to leave me alone as I bobble on a thin layer between stormy seas and roiling clouds.

Knocking at the door pulls me out of dreamland. My whole body feels as heavy and inert as a lump of mud, but I manage to hack up some phlegm and call out, "Come in!" Volzh enters, proving that even pirates can learn manners. He's holding a large tankard, and I'm thinking he's going to invite me to a party to celebrate surviving a kraken.

"You need to drink this, Knife Witch." He bends over and places the tankard in my hands.

It is filled with dark green sludge and smells awful. I pull my head back, trying to get my nose away from it, banging my head on the wall behind me. "This is disgusting. Are you trying to make me throw up so you can retrieve some of your manly superiority? I'm not drinking this." I put it down on the deck and move to stand, but I feel kind of woozy, so I just sit up straighter. I notice I am stiff and achy.

Volzh picks the cup up and holds it out again. "You sleep for two days. This is witch power sickness. I don't think you use so much before. But the kraken did not come back for us, and no raptors who follow the kraken came from the sky. It means you sent them away, which is great power. I fail to protect my ship witch, my crew will throw me into sea and pick new leader."

"Then why are you trying to poison me with that?" No way I'm taking the tankard from him again. My hands are tucked under my arms, knives ready.

"This drink for witches. It will fix you. You are weak and you hurt all over, yes?"

I do, but I don't say so. He can tell anyway, apparently. "Smell is bad, but taste is good to witches."

"Have you tried it?"

"Only witches drink. Try."

He is still holding it out to me. I figure it can't be any worse than the oil Sharma made all of us swallow the first day of winter frost and once a week after until the second thaw. I take the cup and, trying not to breathe, I scrunch my eyes and take a sip. Surprise of surprises, it does not taste like the underside of a corpse's armpit. It is nutty and sweet and salty all at once. I drink deeply and feel my whole body sigh with pleasure. Volzh is nodding. I figure I'll give him this one. "Thank you. I guess I needed that."

I stretch and practically feel the kinks unclenching. "I slept for two days?" It dawns on me that the seas are much calmer and the air doesn't crackle with storm energy. "I feel the need to move around a bit. But first, I need to pee."

We head to the closets at the back of the ship with holes leading down to the water. I do my business thinking how dainty of pirates to have private rooms for such things.

Up on deck, the air's got a taste almost as good as food. The sight of land on the horizon surprises me. "I thought we were way out in the middle of the sea."

"We have crossed the inner sea. We stop in villages as we go north to the open water and home."

"Stop? You mean attack, rape, and pillage?"

"Not unless necessary. These towns know if they give to us food and women, we will not burn their homes and kill all their men."

I catch that "all" business. "Only some of the men?"

"There are always some who think they can fight." He shrugs as if that is inconsequential.

My head drops to my chest, and I cover my eyes. I don't want any part of this.

He misinterprets. "I know. They are stupid. We help the town by getting rid of the unfit. Like that one in your own village. You understand."

Well, what could I say? I did get Rovel killed. I mean, he spit on me, and tormented me most of my life. Is that enough to kill him over? Okay, yes. But



I knew him and what a pustule he was. I sigh. Either I'm in the pillage business, or I jump over the side of the boat and drown. Not the best set of choices. I decide not to drown, for now. I'll wait to see how the "stop" goes.

Still, the thought of drowning makes me think of water, which makes me think of washing, something my bloody, salt-crusted clothes and skin would really appreciate. "Do your people ever wash?"

He looks offended. "It is your people who do not wash. At home we bathe every day."

"But, you all stink!"

He smiles. "On ship, need water for cooking. We do not wash from the time ship sets out until we return. Then there is a day of cleansing and quiet to shake the dirt and the bloodfever of the killing."

Every day? Not buying that one. A weekly bath in summer and a monthly bath in winter is about right. However, the blood and guts all over me from, you know, has me itchy in an entirely different way. "I am not waiting for your big homecoming to wash!"

"Knife Witch, we will share our last drop of sweet water with you if you wish it. The rain barrels are full. I will have the cook bring some to your cabin for you. Do you want it warm?"

I have never washed in warm water, though I do like the way it is not so cold during summer baths. "Thank you." I turn and go below thinking about the crazy idea that these barbarians wash more than we do. Unreal.

The cook shows up with a steaming bucket of water, a large bowl, and a sponge. He is a sleepytime story pirate, with one eye sewed shut, only a thumb and two fingers on his left hand, and a wooden left foot. He is also approachable in a way the others are not. Or maybe it's just that the cooking makes me feel kinship. Either way, I like him.

"Thanks, Cook. And bless you for bringing the sponge." I gesture because I'm not sure he understands my language. He understands the meaning, though. He nods, and says what I guess is "you're welcome" but sounds like "I'm so good."

A half-hour later I have scrubbed myself raw. I decide to go all in and wash my clothes as well, putting them back on wet and letting the sun up on deck take care of the rest. Pretty soon I am dripping but clean, skin to skirt. I grab the bucket, bowl, and sponge, and go drop them in the mess before heading up the steps to the deck. When the cook says what I assume is thanks, I wave and call, "I'm so good" to him, which causes him and his helper in the kitchen to roar with laughter. And I do mean roar. These Wildmen do a thing where they throw back their heads and pour sound out of their guts like bears. Honestly.

The brightness makes my eyes water as I look out over the open sea. Tears for the Goddess, we call them at home, offering water to the earth when the sun is cruel. The Goddess is not out here on the water, at least not the Goddess of my past. I guess this is a different Goddess, with a gleaming silver back, whose life teems inside her belly instead of poking out of her skin. Bright sun on the waves leaves dark cuts of shadow under each, as if a sharp knife sliced the silver surface a hundred thousand times. So perhaps the Goddess of the sea is like the earth, powerful but everywhere torn open so that plants can grow or waves can dance.

I remember the dark kitchen and muddy yard where I spent my days at home and feel the blind eye of Luck on me. I did nothing to deserve this. Nor will the people in the towns who get attacked by these hairy, scary men with no pity.

I suppose neither do the ones among the Wildmen who will die fighting or who will get rich with plunder on this journey. The difference is these men are aware they could die, while the people in towns like mine aren't. We hid from knowing how close death stands. As for me, since I wrote in death's ledger with the blood of my attacker, I have lived aware of its closeness. And so I will do my best to keep living without forgetting that every choice I make from now on is written with death looking over my shoulder. I will never hide from it again.



## Knife Witch (cont. from p. 7)

We near the shore, and I can hear a gong banging and voices loud with panic. I do not go below to pretend it is not happening. I don't want to be without pity, but I won't hide from seeing what it means to be a witch of the Wildmen.

The world is too big for me to change all by myself, and even if I could, what change would be right? I could save a man not aware that he is this town's Rovel. I need to learn how the world works, how this itchy magic of mine works, and then maybe I can do something worthwhile.

Unless I get angry. Then I have zero self-control and will probably do something stupid from which I could die. Okay, but at least I sailed the ocean and fought a kraken and learned I was an honest-to-goddess witch before I died. Be as must be.

When Volzh comes to get me to accompany him to the town, he glowers. "You are the first new witch we have taken who does not try to hide when we go ashore. This is not normal. Witches, even after coming to full power among the People, do not like to help us."

"I do not like to help you, but I cannot pretend that this is not happening, that I do not have a role to play, even if I have no idea what it is. Deal with it. And, get this through your thick, barbarian head," I say, poking him with the tip of my boning knife to make the point, "I am not nor will I ever be 'normal.'"

I notice that his squint now includes a tic in his jaw. "What are you thinking? Out with it."

"I am trying to decide if you will become too powerful once you have learned the secret ways of witches, and I should just kill you now."

"Fine. Kill me. At least I won't have to go ashore and watch helplessly while you act like beasts among good people." I turn away from him and pretend to look at the approaching shore. It's one thing to decide you will live without fear of dying, it's another to actually act like it's true. My pounding heart says I'm a fake, but my face gives nothing away.

Volzh sighs. "The men will not like losing the protection of a witch now that they have it."

"How am I supposed to protect you when I don't know how to use this power you claim I have?"

"Your power will tell you if there is danger. If you itch, you speak and we will act."

"Are witches always itchy?"

"No. One sneezes. Another gets hiccups. Another kisses the nearest man or woman madly."

He is trying to look innocent and failing. "Really? Funny, my knife hand is itching."

He straightens, suddenly serious. "Really?"

"I think my knife wants to kiss you."

He grunts an almost-laugh. "Maybe I am just hoping that one day we will find such a witch."

I pat his arm kindly, "And maybe one day my knife will stab you in the neck. We all have our dreams."

The village sits on a bluff above the beach. A few small fishing boats bob in shallow water. The Wildmen have been working the oars to slow our ride onto the beach, and we softly smooch into the outer sandbar. Men leap into the shallow water, roaring. Fifty voices doing that raises the hair on my arms. Volzh tugs at me, and I jump out beside him and start wading through the water toward the shore, which is hard going in a skirt.

The sand sucks and swirls, grabbing my feet with each step, and I wonder about the ship. "How will you get the ship free?"

"Tide is rising. In an hour, we will be free."

I guess they know their business. There is some fighting on the steps cut into the bluff up ahead. One of his men is thrown down on the rocks, and it looks like he lands on his head. Volzh grabs me. "Did you itch and not tell me, witch?"

I notice over his shoulder that the man has gotten up and is wobbly but walking. "Warn what? He landed on his head." And I point.

Volzh's answering growl is almost conciliatory. We slog up the steps and find



the townspeople standing around grumbling but no longer fighting. Volzh pushes forward and screams at them with all the menace of a kraken. "You, you, and you." He points at random then turns to his men. "Throw them off the cliff."

A wail goes up, but he doesn't hear it. An old woman steps out and grabs Volzh's arm. "Take me instead of my daughter. She is with child. I will die for what was done." He nods, and the girl, who is probably only a couple of years older than me, runs to cling to her mother. The mother pats her arm and then shrugs her off, walking proudly to the edge of the bluff. As one of the men moves to toss her off, she leaps instead. The girl wails and falls to the ground. Others help her up.

"The debt is paid for attacking my men. Will you pay the bounty for the peace?"

"What choice do we have?" another woman asks bitterly.

"You fight, maybe kill some of us. You die with honor. Or you submit, and you live."

A small boy steps forward. "I will die."

Oh no. I don't wait to see what Volzh will do. "Of course you will die, little man. We all die. What would you save with your death?"

"My goat. I don't want you to take my goat. She is my only friend. I would rather die."

"Does your goat have milk?"

He rolls his eyes. "Of course. And it's good milk."

"Promise a glass of milk today and a wheel of cheese every time we return. In exchange, you may keep your goat and live. How does that sound?"

"You won't take her?"

"Not if you share her milk and cheese."

"Wait there. I'll be back." And he races off to, I guess, milk the goat. The crew all look at me. I scratch my butt, which is not actually a lie about itching, but does send a message. Volzh turns back to the woman.

"What will it be, woman of Disgas?"

She bows her head. "We will bring you what is promised."

"While we wait, you will bring us food and drink."

I am confused by how rebellious these people act. My own town wept and cowered. Nobody fought back. Nobody tried to negotiate. In a strange way, the agreement, even to submit to the Wildmen's demands, lets them act more confident. I suppose they are like me. I agreed to go and so have some power, even if it is only the power to choose to die.

We "stop" at three more villages as we make our way north toward the open ocean. Each gives us dried fish. Some have grain, some tubers, some even fruit. All have craft work they add to the pile. Twice Volzh examines the booty and finds it lacking. He burns a few buildings, takes some livestock, and generally makes it worse for them to refuse. I don't see why the people in these towns should work hard and then hand over what they earned, but keeping it for themselves was never the choice. To resist, they would have to train fighters and support them with food and goods while they trained, so maybe in the end the cost would be the same.

At the last village, I get all itchy in my nose. Usually my itches are in hard-to-scratch places. This one I almost miss because my hand could just lift and scratch it. Volzh sees and bats my arm away.

"No scratching. Follow itch."

"Itches don't point," I scoff with a shake of my head, and surprise! When I face left, the itch goes away, and when I face to the right, it gets itchier. I move in that direction, and the irritating tingle spreads to my teeth and tongue. Witchery is weird.

Soon I'm standing outside a paddock with some goats and a dog house. I'm thinking we're supposed to take the goats...but no. The itching fades after I pass the dog house. I turn back and the itch returns. I guess we're supposed to take the dog?

I go over to get the dog, but there is no door. The chain goes inside, but it is completely boarded up on all four sides. Okay, that is creepy. I point and Volzh pulls the boards off. The smell is so bad it makes the Wildmen seem sweet as roses. I tug on the chain but nothing moves.



Then I hear a whimper and a weak scabbling. I know better than to reach for a strange dog, even a weak one, so I slowly pull the chain and gently drag it out.

The dog's body is coated with offal. One eye is swollen shut. The chain is cutting into the neck, and the paws are raw and caked with blood. The boards have scratch and teeth marks on the inside, so I can only guess how desperate the dog was.

A girl, maybe ten years old, comes running and crying, "Raider!" I think she's attacking Volzh, but she runs past him and throws herself on the dog. Raider, the dog, tries to stand, and barely manages. He puts himself between her and the rest of us as if he has the strength to protect her. As if he needs to.

"What is going on here," I ask. "Why was he locked in?"

"They do it to punish me. I don't care what they do to me, so they punish Raider."

"What do they punish you for?"

"I keep fighting my new brother. He wants to make babies on me, and I won't let him. They say I lie and punish Raider until I apologize. They decided to marry me away to an old man in another town. I said 'yes' because I would do anything to get away. But I heard he was already married. My parents want me to make babies with the man anyway, without marriage, because he is rich. They locked Raider up and said he will die if I don't make babies with him."

"What are you called?" I ask.

"My name is Wisma but they call me Wakma."

"Which do you prefer?"

"Wisma means obedient. Wakma means devil woman. I don't like either one, so I don't care."

"Where I come from, we have a word for a person who is good with animals. That person is a marhai. Would you like to be called that, maybe?"

"Marhai. Yes, you can call me Marhai."

Well, Marhai, do you want to come with us on the boat? To leave here forever?"

"I can't leave Raider!"

"Raider can come too."

"Do I have to make babies with anyone?"

"Not unless you want to. But you will have to obey me in all other things."

Volzh clears his throat. "Knife Witch. We cannot..."

"Itch." I say, pointing to my nose. He nods.

"Well, Marhai? What do you choose?"

"I will go with you."

"And..."

"I will obey you in all other things. But not making babies."

"Good. Now, we need a blanket to carry Raider with. Can you get one from the house?"

"I'm not allowed..."

"You can take anything from the house you want. You are one of the Wildmen now. Go and bring a blanket and anything else you need."

She races off. Raider tries to follow, but I speak quietly to him until she returns. She holds out a beautiful quilt that will probably be ruined, but I don't care, if she doesn't. We wrap Raider in it and Volzh carries him back toward the center of the village.

The only other thing Marhai carried out of the house was a ceramic bowl. "Why the bowl?" I ask.

"It was made by my first mother. She made many beautiful things, but she died when she was having another baby. I was only four. My new parents took me in, but they never let me touch any of her things. When I did, they beat Raider."

So now I'm thinking Volzh should torch the town. Or at least the parents' house. See how quickly I become cruel.

When we get back to the center of the village, the goods are piled up and Volzh, still carrying the dog, walks over to inspect them. A woman cries out, "My marriage bedding! You wrapped that filthy dog in my bedding. Get it off him and give it back!"

She leaps toward Volzh, reaching for the quilt, and he backhands her without a glance. The town is galvanized by her scream, and I get an itchy-all-over feeling that mob madness is coming.

I pull my knife out, point it at Marhai, and say, "Who is this girl's brother?" Not



what they expected. Confusion breaks the ugly moment. “Where is the brother? The one who wants to make babies on girls too young to have them.”

“What do you want with him?” asks a man holding Marhai’s no-longer-screaming “new” mother.

“I am the Wildmen’s Knife Witch. Where I come from, we have a way of dealing with such things.”

“The girl’s a liar. My boy is good. We are all good people, but that one is a monster. Take her. Take my marriage quilt. But leave my boy alone, you witch.”

“I’d have an easier time believing you if I hadn’t found the dog boarded up without food or water or room to piss and shit.” I see a teenage boy cowering behind the man and woman. I signal to one of the crew. “Take the boy and board him up in the dog house back there. It is better than he deserves, but perhaps it will teach him what bad treatment feels and smells like. His people can release him after we leave. Maybe he will learn something.”

Volzh, who has been calmly inspecting the tribute pile, mutters, “Not a chance.”

I privately agree, but I am not prepared to kill the boy. I see that the tribute is acceptable, so I speak up before Volzh can say so. “There is something else you must pay, for indignities to my apprentice.”

The town gives a collective gasp as they realize I mean Marhai. “Each household will contribute one piece of pottery made by her first mother.”

“But those pieces are rare, and we cannot replace them.”

“And you denied the child any of it. Now your greed is repaid.” I turn to Marhai. “Let’s go. We will collect the ware while the men load the ship.” I take her hand, and we walk past the crowd.

“Witch!” someone spits out.

I smile and look at them. “Knife Witch, because all blades answer to me.”

By the time we finish, the ship is loaded. I have added two excellent knives to my collection and am wearing them tucked in my hair, blades out. Marhai is struggling under a load of dishes, bowls, and cups, with a ewer looped around each arm. We proceed with dignity to the shore where the crew helps us out to the ship. There, Raider is waiting for Marhai, and a new home is waiting for me.

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Susan diRende is a writer and artist with roots in live performance. In 2005, Susan founded Broad Humor, a film festival for women’s comedies, which has been named one of the top 5 film festivals for women. Her novella *Unpronounceable* (Aqueduct) received a 2017 Special Citation Philip K. Dick Award.





## Short Fiction Reviews

by Karen Burnham

“The Blighted Godling of Company Town H,” Beth Cato, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (#268), edited by Scott H. Andrews

“Sequestration; Vitriification,” Allison Jamieson-Lucy, *Strange Horizons* (Dec. 17, 2018), edited by Jane Crowley and Kate Dollarhyde

“The Fortunate Death of Jonathan Sandelson,” Margaret Killjoy, *Strange Horizons* (Fund Drive Special 2018), edited by Jane Crowley and Kate Dollarhyde

“New Action,” Nisi Shawl, *eFlux* (#93), edited by Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle

Today I'd like to write about something that I almost never see in short fiction, a critical absence. And, frankly, not just in short fiction, but almost all of the fiction I read. It's fiction that deals with the hard work of operating in a democracy. We read about so many aristocratic and hierarchical societies: monarchies abound, as well as feudalisms and occasional libertarian strongholds. But alongside all the court intrigue, where is the legislative intrigue? Where are the stories about creating social movements, or even changing society by convincing a meaningful faction of people of the usefulness of your idea such that they enact legislative or social change? Coming after a century that has seen the Civil Rights movement, the Arab Spring, the failed fight for the Equal Rights Amendment in America, and the ever more successful movement for gay rights and marriage equality worldwide, why are stories about collective action so rare? They're not nonexistent, and I'll talk about some examples shortly, but after a year of reading several hundred short stories I can count the number of examples without exhausting my fingers.

I'll acknowledge up front that some recent activist anthologies that I have not gotten to, such as *Do Not Go Quietly: An Anthology of Victory in Defiance* (eds. Jason Sizemore and Lesley Conner) and *Who Will Speak for America?* (eds. Stephanie Feldman and Nathaniel Popkin) may have a concentrated amount of what I'm discussing here, so I may have missed some rich veins. But I think the point stands: in a literary tradition, both of short fiction and novels, that has conventionally focused on feudal heroes even in huge ensemble casts (I'm looking at you, George R. R. Martin), narratives that re-

flect how real democracy works—with all the banality of meetings, agendas, Robert's Rules of Order, and published minutes—are a tough sell. Even the examples I'm about to mention deal with moments of high drama, which is natural enough in short fiction, and there's not a parliamentary agenda in sight.

I'll begin with an example that made me start thinking about collective action and how unusual it is to see a story centered around it. “The Blighted Godling of Company Town H” by Beth Cato opens with Dreya, the titular godling. She sits in an abandoned factory, folding icons out of company paperwork in order to provide protection and health for the handful of people who remain in town, only 100 left out of the 3000 who used to live and work there. Town H had a munitions factory that ran for centuries, now derelict after the armistice. One young girl comes around to tell Dreya that some of her icons are falling apart—they're being Unmade, which is unheard of. Dreya is well aware that her powers have ebbed along with the fortunes of her town, but she takes seriously her duty to the remaining town folk and wants to be worthy of their respect (literally, their worship). She sends messages to other godlings, although communications have been almost nonexistent since the railroad shut down (Town H is especially isolated due to the explosive nature of what its inhabitants used to make). When she realizes that the Mother god from HQ has gone rogue and is Unmaking whole towns, she and Town H have to decide what to do. While Dreya is clearly the leader and the focal point of the story, the town collectively decides to stay and resist. They work together to make a paper army that Dreya can



animate (“Dreya and her people had formed a force of carrion-feeders. Scavengers. Vultures, hawks, eagles, coyotes. Creatures that would do whatever they could to survive through dire days.”) They stand together and push Mother out of their town. The story has a number of gorgeous details: the way Dreya revels in the minutiae of the paperwork legacy of the Factory, the lurking threat to the town of the environmental degradation from the Factory (many of the icons are needed simply to prevent the soil and people from succumbing to the toxins surrounding them), and the legalistic language in which Dreya and Mother challenge each other. It clearly evokes the American Rust Belt with industries and factories that abandoned whole populations when business went elsewhere or changed; and it presents a vision of collective survival.

A different kind of community comes together in the near-future cyberpunk story “The Fortunate Death of Jonathan Sandelson.” Jae Diana Diaz is a hacktivist who harasses corporate officers with nonviolent AI drones, among other techniques—it’s called boxtrolling. One of her drones is following the CEO of a private prison company when a boxkiller—a boxtroller who doesn’t mind offing their target—wrecks the guy’s car, causing his death. She’s rightly terrified that she’ll be implicated in the murder, but she manages to get enough information out of the boxkiller’s drone to track him down. It turns out he’s been assassinating corrupt officials and corporate types who were involved in deporting his son on flimsy pretenses; the son was then killed in the desert trying to get back. Jae doesn’t want to be arrested but also doesn’t want to rat out the murderer—she’s vehemently opposed to assault but also convinced of the justness of his cause. She and her white hat hacker housemate concoct a scheme to enable the murderer to escape his FBI pursuers. In the end her anti-ICE activities are going to continue. It’s a fun story with a perfectly reasonable extrapolation of today’s trolling, activism, AI, and autonomous aircraft technology.

Two other stories that feature people engaged in collective action contain much more ambiguity, less of the defined heroic narrative arc seen in the above stories. In “New Action” by our own Nisi Shawl, the story unfolds through segments set in 2025 and Wikipedia excerpts from 2028. In this future Net Neutrality is a thing of the past, and collective organizing on the internet has been banned under the guise of antitrust actions. Massive corporations on the Amazon level have attacked all kinds of local freecycling groups as infringing on their (the corporation’s) rights, and they’ve used that legal wedge to crack down on any kind of organizing. There are official limits on how many groups any single group can connect with. An independent network exists based on drones docked to high altitude balloons, which can deliver physical messages from one place to another (ingeniously encoded in knotwork based on an ancient Incan communication method). This future is a continual struggle between lateral networks and strict government hierarchies, with a central motif of the “Five Petals of Thought,” a philosophical system for considering action, and the “New Bedford Rose,” which is seeking to put it into practice, encouraging the lateral networks that the government is trying to ban. At the end of the story there have been some local victories, but there’s still a long road ahead and no clear end in sight.

“Sequestration; Vitrification” by Al-lison Jamieson-Lucy is something of a slice-of-life narrative. Lynn is a biology researcher who is working to genetically engineer diatoms to suck up nuclear waste from contaminated liquids and store it away in glassy coral structures. The problem is that radioactivity is as dangerous for diatoms as any other life-form, and they usually die out before making much impact. She’s working on improving that lifespan. One of her friends is an artist whose boyfriend has cancer; several of her housemates are involved in antinuclear protests. It may seem like a throwback to talk so much about nuclear issues today when climate





## To Be Human in the City

*The Municipalists*, by Seth Fried, Penguin, March 2019, 272 pp., \$16.

reviewed by Patrick Hurley

Henry is an orphan, having tragically lost his parents at age eight to a terrible train accident. Yet because he felt very cared for by the foster system, Henry believes in government, order, and efficiency.

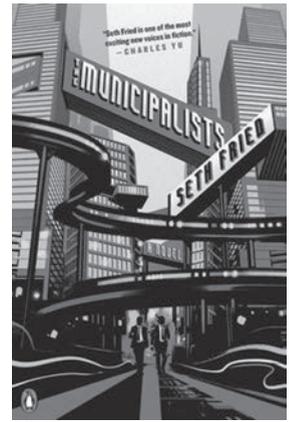
If Leslie Knope of the TV show *Parks & Recreation* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Data were to conceive a son, he would be very similar to United States Municipal Survey Agent Henry Thompson, the protagonist of Seth Fried's *The Municipalists*.

As in many protagonist origin stories, Henry is an orphan, having tragically lost his parents at age eight to a terrible train accident. Yet because he felt very cared for by the foster system, Henry believes in government, order, and efficiency. So much so that he collects model locomotives, specifically looking for another copy of the model his father gave him right before the accident, a model of the very same train that killed his parents. As an adult, Henry works for the United States Municipal Survey and believes in their mission with the fervor of a religious convert.

Set in an alternate universe where the federal government is surprisingly effective, the bulk of *The Municipalists* takes place in Metropolis, the fabled city of tomorrow. Metropolis is an amalgamation of all that's best about cities: a cultured foodie's fever dream, with museums and restaurants on every corner of every multiuse development, built in every kind of architectural style.

But not everything is as it seems in this gleaming urban utopia. Shaken by a terrorist attack at the United States Municipal Survey's national headquarters just outside Washington D.C., the survey director orders Henry to Metropolis to investigate possible rogue agents in the organization. Henry is also given with what can charitably be described as the most unlikely of partners, an artificial intelligence named OWEN, who's not all there, both figuratively and literally.

OWEN (Object-Oriented Database and Working Ekistics Network) is the Municipal Survey's supercomputer intelligence, a sort of Siri, but with much



more attitude. He has also been upgraded, and from the lens on Henry's tie clip can project an illusion of himself as a tall blond gentleman—or anything else that comes to his creative mind. OWEN's powers of illusion and connection to numerous databases are creatively used to get the pair in and out of all sorts of trouble.

One of my favorite parts of *The Municipalists* is Fried's inversion of the buddy cop trope. OWEN is not your typical AI. He gets drunk by giving himself ultra-complex mathematical equations to solve while his illusion takes a drink. If Henry is reminiscent of Dan Ackroyd's Joe Friday, then OWEN is his Pep Streebek, played by Tom Hanks. He is the emotional wildcard, the loose cannon, while Henry, the human, is the robotic, stiff, by-the-book pencil-pusher. In Henry's words, "Just my luck. The first colleague I'd befriended at the agency, and it was an alcoholic supercomputer."

Though the novel's characterization isn't completely flawless (there were a few moments when Henry seemed to become conveniently more worldly), for the most part the partnership works quite well. The story moves at a brisk pace and is a fun, funny read. Henry's and OWEN's investigation reveals cracks within the United States Municipal Survey, where both sides have justifiable viewpoints, if questionable methods.

An interesting counterpoint to Henry comes in the form of Sarah Laury. Another orphan, adopted at infancy by the mayor of Metropolis through the city's foster system, she has been in the media spotlight her whole life. An Olympic



athlete, former model, and now college freshman, Sarah's character and her role in the conspiracy are a thought-provoking examination of what can happen when idealism becomes radicalized. (Though one wonders if her name is somehow an attempt to call out Sarah Lawrence College?)

Throughout the book, we're given different perspectives of what government and cities should be, from pro-growth urbanization to the evils of gentrification. As someone born in Detroit in the '80s (Detroit, Detroit, not the suburbs), the mention of Coleman Young toward *The Municipalists'* conclusion helped the story feel quite relevant.

Since the contrasting arguments on urban development and the role of government are idealized and satirized throughout, it's difficult to parse what lesson, if any, Fried is trying to impart. Though Henry starts out as quite naïve, by the end of the book, he has grown and

realized his beloved institution is absolutely fallible.

And so he—and we—are left with questions: Are growing cities a good thing? Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few? What should we do to not forget those swept up in gentrification? Are '40s gangster movies and Kurosawa films healthy for a burgeoning AI to watch? Will fedoras ever actually come back in style?

Perhaps the most cogent theme is stated within a note OWEN leaves Henry:

*What I'm saying is that only when you give up on the fantasy of moral authority can you approach any problem without doing more harm than good.*

OWEN is encouraging Henry to think critically. To actually live in the world around him and try to improve it from a place of humility. And with the current state of world affairs, it's a lesson we readers would do well to take to heart.

*...we—are left with questions: Are growing cities a good thing? Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few? What should we do to not forget those swept up in gentrification?*

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Patrick Hurley lives in Seattle and loves it. His fiction has appeared in *Galaxy's Edge*, *NewMyths*, and *The Overcast*. He attended the Taos Toolbox Writers Workshop in 2017 and was a finalist for the Baen Fantasy Award in 2018.

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## Dust Lanes (cont. from p. 13)

change dominates our discourse, but in this story a nuclear weapon was stolen and used to level N'djamena in Chad, and there's intense concern about nuclear fallout in the United States. The story centers on Lynn, but generally it's about how all the characters keep doing what they're doing even if they're not sure it makes any difference. Aashray makes art and highlights the human rights abuses of the gem trade; Kimya helps organize marches in Washington, including dumping backpackfuls of dirt on the White House lawn to memorialize those killed in nuclear attacks; Lynn engineers her diatoms. There are no breakthroughs, only people clinging to hope that they can help each other through these times. As Lynn thinks to herself: "When the bombs fell, Lynn wouldn't be one of the survivalists. She wasn't cut out for a gritty, every-man-for-himself dystopia. She would die with her friends, wherever she was."

It's good to see these examples of groups of people coming together to work for collective goals, whether it's preserving a community after its industrial heart is torn

out, encouraging social and governmental change, or fighting to exercise the right of free association. I wish we saw more of it. In a genre and a mode of literature that has a bias towards relatively independent heroic figures, any depiction of collective action feels radical. However, I worry that in a year when these are some of the only examples of communality I saw, I saw none that treat democratic institutions as settings and backdrops the way countless feudal and monarchical systems are used. I wonder if the difficulty in portraying democratic participation narratively has in some way contributed to or resulted from widespread disengagement from the process (as seen in lamentable voter participation rates, but also in the concentration of political power in the hands of the wealthy). I also wonder if, as more and more "normal people" (those without million- and billion-dollar bankrolls) run for and win political offices, from the library board to the halls of Congress, we'll see more stories that depict those actions and show us how to navigate these communitarian waters.

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Karen Burnham is vocationally an electromagnetics engineer and avocationally a book reviewer and critic. She writes for *Locus Magazine* online and other venues. Her single-author study *Greg Egan* is available from the University of Illinois Press. She works in the automotive industry in Michigan, where she lives with her family.



## A Strangely Resonant Tale of War

*Miss Violet and the Great War*, by Leanna Renee Hieber, Tor, 2019, 318 pp., \$18.99.

reviewed by Kristin King

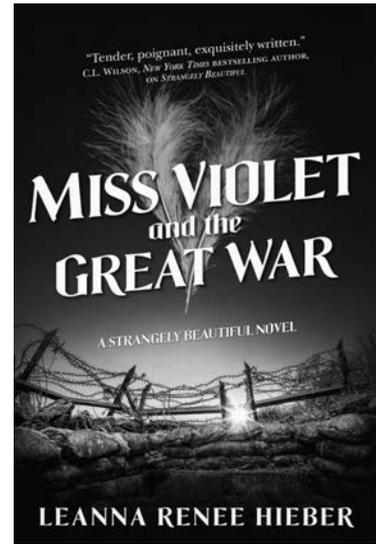
*Violet has forebodings of horrors to come that echo my own dread about the near future, with the encroaching of fascism and climate change.*

This gaslamp fantasy (Victorian-era imaginative fiction), a part of the *Strangely Beautiful* series, is also a standalone adventure. It takes on the enormously horrific topic of World War I, framing it as a magical battle, an unspeakable evil to be faced alone by one small girl, Violet, while also promising—and delivering—a “strangely beautiful” journey. Violet is raised in a magical and utopian community called Athens, protected by her parents and loved. But she has been dreaming of trench warfare since childhood and knows she will be called upon for a bigger fight.

Hieber roots Violet’s tale solidly in its historical moment, not only through factual details but also through its psychological complexity. The members of Athens share a sentimentality rooted in pre-war optimism, in a time many people thought signaled the beginnings of a new age of liberation, peace, and economic justice. But Violet has forebodings of horrors to come that echo my own dread about the near future, with the encroaching of fascism and climate change.

Violet’s own reactions to those horrors, however, feel odd and out of place. She seeks out her parents for reassurance, an entirely appropriate reaction for an eight-year-old, then studies their reactions, seeing unease and deception. When her mother asks, “You’re not afraid, are you?” she shakes her head no. Of course, she must be feeling some mix of emotions—fear, suspicion, curiosity, trust, hope, love—but it’s kept entirely off the page until she’s much older, and rarely shown on a bodily level. And as she grows older, knowing the path the Fates have set out for her, she follows it unwaveringly, without an inner struggle.

In contrast, the other characters have strong and believable emotional responses. Her parents fret over their precocious and willful child, afraid for her



future and wishing they could keep her from going off to the Great War. They know firsthand what she will experience, because they were once members of the magical Guard, hand-in-hand with the Muses, defending a barrier between this world and the spiritual one, the Whisper-world. They struggle to keep her safe as long as they possibly can.

Even the Muses have strong inner lives. In an inversion of the *deus ex machina* trope, these godlike beings are entirely out of their depth and rely on Violet and her community to save them and restore their waning strength. The conflict’s death toll overwhelms them, the scope of this war too vast to comprehend. In that muddy, desolate landscape, the souls of the dead linger, turning Earth into its own purgatory because there are too many to fit through the door to the afterlife.

This mythic level of struggle fully engaged my attention and more than made up for my dissatisfaction with the character of Violet. It also brings new meaning to the story of a world war. The stakes are life and death, true, but also something more. Who are we as a people? Do we stumble along in our own miserable Whisper-worlds? Can

*It also brings new meaning to the story of a world war. The stakes are life and death, true, but also something more. Who are we as a people? Do we stumble along in our own miserable Whisper-worlds?*



we draw strength from our Muses: Intuition, Art, Healing, Memory, and the Heart? Or do we give up?

The journey through this novel is also a quest for an answer to the question: In the midst of all this trouble, why go on?

The answer comes in a small moment. Violet finds the Muse of Art curled into a ball at the foot of her bed, sobbing. But a divine projector, the Liminal, shows the Muses, and Violet, a soldier rescuing a litter of puppies. This small act reawakens in the soldiers their desperate need to feel and give love. (It's historically accurate as well: one of the puppies goes on to show business, becoming Rin Tin Tin.) Art revives, saying: "[T]here will

always be a human instinct to protect the most vulnerable beings among you. It doesn't always win, but the *trying*... That's why I've never given up on you."

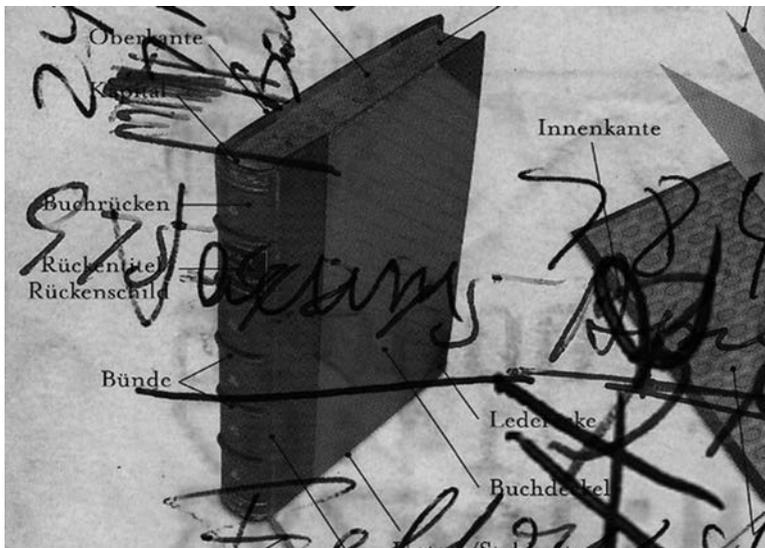
With Art back on their side, and Memory also promising never to give up on humanity, Violet is prepared to perform the task for which she's waited her whole life and strike a new balance between the mortal and immortal realms. A happy ending? Yes—until you remember that World War II is coming up next.

Perhaps that calls for a sequel. How would the rise of fascism affect the spiritual dimension of Hieber's world? How would Violet and the other members of Athens respond? I would love to find out.

*Violet is prepared to perform the task for which she's waited her whole life and strike a new balance between the mortal and immortal realms. A happy ending? Yes—until you remember that World War II is coming up next.*

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Kristin King lives in Seattle and is working on a time travel novel. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, the Aqueduct Press anthology *Missing Links and Secret Histories*, and her short story collection *Misfits from the Beehive State*.



*In the Margins*





## The Futuroptimist

*How Long 'til Black Future Month?*, by N.K. Jemisin, Orbit Books, November 2018, 397 pp., \$26.00  
reviewed by Kathleen Alcalá

*The title says it all, How Long 'til Black Future Month?, because there are so many people, including Jemisin, who have been looking forward, rather than backward, all along.*

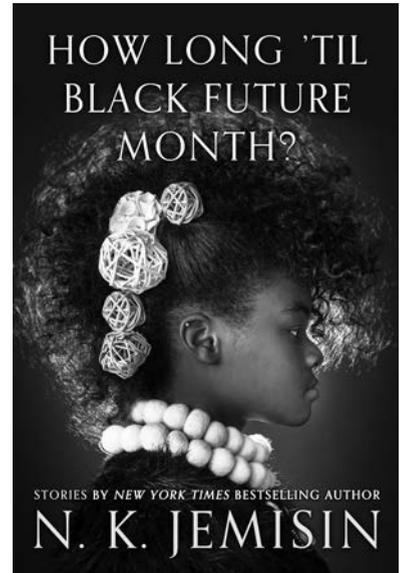
Most fiction writers start with short stories. The pond of a story seems easier, somehow, than those oceans of empty pages waiting to be filled by novels. A writer's early stories tend to be studies of solitary characters, often engaged in lengthy internal monologues. It is only later that the possibilities of short fiction make themselves known as the writer takes control of her craft.

A few students of the art, however, start right in with the sensibilities of a novelist. I've had maybe three such students in my classes over the years, and it is evident from the start: they exhibit a confident voice, well-developed characters, and a strong sense of place.

Jemisin is clearly one of these writers. Already a novelist when she attended a Viable Paradise workshop, she initially balked at the advice to try short stories, but was persuaded that it was a way to start getting paid for her work. As a result, we get to enjoy these varied approaches to alternate realities.

The stories range from a direct challenge (which takes a lot of nerve!) to one of Ursula K. Le Guin's stories, in "The Ones Who Stay and Fight," to retakes on the tale tradition. They vary from steampunk romance to digital dystopia. The stories are longish, because each drops us into a fully formed world. The only things missing are the people to inherit, cherish, or exploit these worlds, and Jemisin provides those, too.

What the stories have in common with each other is an innately optimistic world view. I attended a conference in 2018 that focused on Afrofuturism and how the movement had developed in parallel to mainstream science fiction and fantasy. The wild success of *Black Panther* early in 2018 dismantled the falsehood that African American protagonists could never capture a mainstream (read: white) audience. Scholar after scholar at the symposium carefully



documented the many ways this movement has manifested itself over the years, often in close partnership with music, when all we really needed to do was look inside Jemisin's head. The title says it all, *How Long 'til Black Future Month*, because there are so many people, including Jemisin, who have been looking forward, rather than backward, all along.

Jemisin also cuts a much broader swath through the cultures from which she borrows, stepping away from spaceship dystopias. It is common for science fiction and fantasy writers to borrow from existing cultures as a way to more fully immerse the reader in the experience, in the way that Frank Herbert borrowed from Middle Eastern desert cultures in writing the *Dune* series. But how many writers have pioneered a new planet with an all-female crew of Muslims, in a story where the point is not "How diverse are we?" but "what is the line between faith and madness?" Egyptian-tinged "The Narcomancer" introduces us to a sisterhood that can accommodate males, as well as showing a character that he must be willing to risk the loss of his gift if he is to fulfill his purpose. A couple of

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stories are set in New Orleans, rapidly becoming one of my favorite cities in the United States, so I could not help but like them. She manages to pull off the dialect in “Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters” without driving us crazy.

Two of the stories are all about the magic of food. Is there a term for this? Cibumancy? Gastromancy? One is set again in New Orleans, and the other in Italy. In both cases, the reader is ready to bargain with the devil to get in on that meal. I expected especially tragic endings, but each time Jemisin manages a little twist instead.

In Jemisin’s generous view of the world, even cities are granted personhood, first in “The City, Born Great,” in which a gay, homeless teen has been chosen as a champion, and later in “Sinners, Saints, Dragons...” She reminds us that we must respect all signs of life, not just those of beings who resemble us, or from whom we might gain favors. Greatness, she seems to say, resides in even the least of us.

Jemisin successfully replaces the stereotype of the white, male protagonist—who, despite being an orphan, must save the world and win the princess—with bright young women of color. The lively steampunk romance between Jessaline and Eugenie in “The Effluent Engine” is steamy enough, and funny enough, to give anyone the vapors:

Eugenie stared at her in such dawning amazement that Jessaline could no longer help herself. She caught Eugenie about the waist, pulled her near, and kissed her most soundly and improperly, right there in front of her brother. It was the sweetest, wildest kiss she had ever known in her life.

Mostly, we are spared the starving children dystopias, except for “The Stone Eater,” which I won’t spoil for you. The scariest story, to me, is “Too Many Yesterdays, Not Enough Tomorrows,” in which human scientists have managed to “break” the universe, leaving each of us in a separate universe. The survivors can communicate only through unreliable email, successfully reminding the reader that we are wasting time and meat-space by confining our activities to online interactions. Go outside! Prepare and eat a good meal. Love your friends.

I (blush) have not yet read any of Jemisin’s novels, but I suspect that these stories were a way for her to exercise her pipes and try on voices, the way actors try on costumes and accents. The results are rich and varied, and show her deep empathy for other people. Only by identifying with our characters, even the unlikeable ones, are we able to give them the depth and texture that seduces the reader into our worlds.

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## Music, Mischief, and Doppelgangers: The Worlds of Sarah Pinsker

*Sooner or Later Everything Falls into the Sea*, by Sarah Pinsker,  
Small Beer Press, March 2019, 286 pp., \$17.

reviewed by Misha Stone

*Sarah Pinsker's debut collection of stories conveys the kind of clarity of thought and emotion found in narrative songs, rendering expansive, feeling characters and worlds in the miniature.*

Short stories have a condensed space in which to connect with a reader. The strongest stories convey their characters, setting, and theme with deft assurance and play the reader like a finely tuned instrument, steering them to the story's emotional truth or central idea in the space of a song. It should be no surprise, then, that this author is also a professional singer and songwriter. Sarah Pinsker's debut collection of stories conveys the kind of clarity of thought and emotion found in narrative songs, rendering expansive, feeling characters and worlds in the miniature. To give a sense of the narrative breadth of this collection, this review will highlight aspects of most of the stories herein.

In the first story, "A Stretch of Highway Two Lanes Wide," a man wakes up after a farm accident to find that his parents decided to replace his mangled arm with a robotic one. The problem is that the arm he kept still has a tattoo of a short-lived high school relationship emblazoned on it and his new arm thinks it is a stretch of highway in Colorado. That can't be a good thing, can it?

In "Remember Day," Clara readies her mother for the annual ceremony. Once a soldier in the War, Clara's mother is now in a wheelchair and no longer remembers her past. Clara wants to know about her father's death and how the Veil clouds her mother's ability to reconnect with the events of the past. But where did those memories go, and how did the state take them? Forgetting may be just as dangerous as remembering.

The title story, "Sooner or Later Everything Falls into the Sea," has a wonderful first sentence: "The rock star washed ashore at high tide." A good first sentence is worth its weight in gold, and that one draws a reader in with a bang. A woman named Bay combs the shore for treasures in a world destroyed by climate



change. Bay has been waiting for her wife to find her, but the world is fractured and years have passed. Then a rock star, Gabby Robbins, washes up from the luxury cruise she fled, scavenged like flotsam onto Bay's shore, and tells her story of discovering that touring with rock stars at the end of the known world was not what she had expected. Gabby shares with Bay that even there she was considered second-string—where is the fun if the hierarchies of fame remain? Rockumentary takes from the now defunct "Inside the Music" pepper the narrative as it becomes clear just how little stardom means in a world that is quite literally adrift.

In "The Low Hum of Her," a girl's father makes a mechanical grandmother, or fake Bubbe, when her grandmother dies. This Bubbe is very lifelike, except she has a birdcage chest where they must store their valuables when they suddenly need to flee. The girl comes to love her new robot Bubbe as home and family shift: "I whispered one of Bubbe's songs under my breath, to show the memories they could come with us." What if the ones we love and lost can come with us in another form? There are still lessons to learn from this Bubbe, stories and songs to pass down, and comfort to be gained.

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Nutshell crime scenes are the subject of “Talking with Dead People.” Gwen fed her friend Eliza’s insatiable need to solve crimes by creating miniature crime dioramas and that curiosity spawned a keen business venture, “House of Whacks.” Gwen could have gotten in on the business at the ground level, sure, but when Eliza’s true nature is revealed she thinks better of the cost.

“In Joy, Knowing the Abyss Behind” won a Theodore Sturgeon Award in 2014. In it, Pinsker provides a glimpse of the strange secrets at the edges of our vision through subtle details. An architect who loves his wife and children is asked to assist the government with a project; when he returns home he is not the same. A woman reflects on her loving husband, the life they shared, and the central secret that stood between them that was right in front of her all along. What does the artifice of the good life obscure? How do we live with the choices we have made?

“No Lonely Seafarer” is a fantastical story about a seaside town where men and their vessels are stranded, waiting impatiently while sirens appear on the rocks singing a song that kills men trying to pass them. Alex, an intersex farm-and-bar-hand who dresses as a young boy is asked to help a boat navigate past the sirens. Alex’s employer offers pragmatic acceptance: “I guess there are people in the world born like you, with boy parts and girl parts that don’t really add up to either.... You’ve seen that tabby cat running around with the extra toes? That doesn’t bother her none, so I guess you have to make up your mind that this won’t bother you neither.” Can Alex, who is not exactly a man, resist the call of the sirens and navigate the waters to safety? In some worlds our heroes are those who are beautifully different from everyone else.

A generation ship loses all of its programmed data from the past—history, plays, literature, television shows—and the generations that follow try to recreate human civilization’s history third-hand in “Wind Will Rove.” In a story reminiscent of Richard Flanagan’s

*Gould’s Book of Fish*, a novel that explores the recreation of a lost text and the faulty nature of memory, a historian fixates on a song important to her family while versions slip from her grasp and students of the new generation rebel against the very notion of history’s importance in a future far from Earth. What is worth preserving, what is truth, and who decides?

The novelette “Our Lady of the Open Road” won a Nebula Award in 2016, and delves into Pinsker’s knowledge of itinerant musician life, albeit in a future American wasteland where most get their entertainment via StageHolo. Luce holds on to the old ways, eschews the self-driving nature of the Chauffeur cars, and travels with her band in a van that runs on vegetable oil. They still play at the few remaining live music venues, for money and the thrill of connection. But most bands have sold out their likeness to StageHolo where people pay to watch video replicas of their favorite bands play in their local bars and homes. In rock and roll, it’s always a balance of learning when to hold on and when to let go.

The final story, “And Then There Were (N-One),” is the most eerily peculiar and funny one in the collection, even as it becomes a murder mystery. A woman named Sarah Pinsker discovers the multiverse and convenes a conference of all of the other Sarah Pinskers on a remote island in Nova Scotia. As one Sarah wonders, “Who discovers how to access infinite realities and then uses that discovery to invite her alternate selves to a convention?” There are Sarah-Con sessions entitled “This Is So Damn Weird: Strategies for Navigating Sarah-Con Without Losing Your Mind” and “Yes, Another Horse Panel.” Most of the Sarahs are married to Mabel in each world, and a preponderance of Sarahs come from Seattle and Baltimore; however Seattle has been lost to earthquakes and tsunamis in many of the multiverse worlds. Narrated by a principal Sarah, an insurance investigator, who navigates this funhouse mirror Con with a baffled interest until she is pulled into the investigation of the death of murdered Sarah,

*What does the artifice of the good life obscure? How do we live with the choices we have made?*

*In some worlds our heroes are those who are beautifully different from everyone else.*



Sooner or Later...  
(cont. from p. 21)

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the story's delightfully weird logic makes for a masterful coda to the collection.

Pinsker's stories present the future in small details, from robot arms to self-driving cars to mysterious alien encounters to extrapolated tech, which creates a seamless science-fictional sense of these worlds. Additionally, Pinsker's stories present queerness in a normalized, matter-of-fact fashion, in female-dominated stories where women have wives, girlfriends, and lovers who are women, with no whiff of judgment or stigma. It is refreshing to encounter worlds that are troubled by concerns apart from homophobia. Pinsker does offer characters who defy society's expectations, where outsider status appears in other ways. Pushing back on what society compels one to do is a common thread throughout each story.

Small Beer Press has a reputation for selecting some of the finest writers in science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction, and this collection is in keeping with the company of short story collections by Kij Johnson, Andy Duncan, Karen Joy Fowler, and Kelly Link. If you enjoy language-rich and character-driven speculative stories that tug you gently into strange corners of the future, then get a taste of Pinsker's unique voice now in anticipation of her debut novel, *Song for a New Day*, to be released later in 2019.

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Misha Stone is a librarian specializing in readers' advisory in Seattle. Stone has served on the Clarion West Writer's Workshop board and periodically teaches readers' advisory classes for the University of Washington's iSchool.



## Poems by Anne Sheldon

### Afterwards

A quiet time after the culling, still is.  
Crime happens  
but discreetly, by traditional means.  
We are fewer, and more of us, old,  
but we enjoy quiet evenings.  
Fellow humans in our immediate space  
look at us as they speak to us.  
Even in anger, this is welcome.

Not that the nightmare is forgotten.  
Of course, the visitors  
who came in copper-colored ships  
left in shame that, by their lights,  
they got it wrong.  
It seemed so clear: natives  
with small plastic oblongs  
affixed to palm and ear,  
apparently  
talking to no one,  
listening to no one,  
tapping nervously on blinking pictures.  
*These must be more of Earth's disabled  
and the planet can hardly afford  
the upkeep of the healthy!*  
They needed no IT support.  
All users were fried humanely,  
at 1:17 PM exactly.

In Japan, ashes were set afloat  
in doll-size boats with elaborate ceremony.  
In Texas, they were collected for mulch.

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Anne Sheldon's writing has appeared in such venues as *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *The Lyric*, *Weird Tales*, and *Anglican Theological Review*. Her first book, *Hero-surfing*, came out in 2002 and Aqueduct has published *The Adventures of the Faithful Counselor* (2005) and *The Bone Spindle* (2011). Anne's a librarian and storyteller living in Maryland.

### New Bronze Plaque\*

ordered in 2017 for the Statue of Liberty  
"the Mother of Exiles."

Give me your techies, your rich,  
Your blonde Norwegians yearning for a king  
And glamorous models from your teeming stores.  
Send these, the privileged and bored to me!  
We'll drink champagne behind the golden door.

\*no offense intended to any Norwegians, blonde or otherwise.

### Guns, Words, and Fear

I remember  
with fondness  
black and white films  
about *democracy* in the  
school cafeteria.  
When Ike was in charge  
I didn't know about Hitler,  
or the genocidal passions  
of cowboys and pilgrims  
or that my father's co-worker  
at the Census Bureau  
had slit his wrists  
rather than appear before HUAC.  
And we, the offspring  
of educated bureaucrats,  
didn't know we'd come  
to be despised  
as lazy bloodsuckers  
by distant cousins  
in the Midwest.  
Not for us, to buy  
automatic weapons  
and mow down  
fascist celebrities.  
Not yet.



## Silvia Malagrino—Palimpsest

Silvia Malagrino is an internationally known award-winning photographer and filmmaker.

She began to take pictures in her native country, Argentina, a year after the military Coup d'Etat of 1976. That was a time of institutionalized repression, persecution, torture, and murder. A time in which a whole society came face to face with horror and with the intricate monstrous manifestations of the human potential for destruction.

These exceptional historical events—being a witness and survivor of a “Dirty War” and working as a woman, lesbian/immigrant/exile in the United States—have challenged her emotionally and intellectually over the years and marked her as an artist.

Since she began to make art, she has been concerned with issues of memory and history, freedom and survival, and dedicated to the creation of art that establishes bridges between the personal and the collective, between intimate experience and larger cultural and historical frameworks. She says: “I do not see one’s inner world as separated from the social experience, the two nourish and collide with each other.”

Her practice as an artist is fluid and essentially interdisciplinary. She works with different media—photography, digital video, language, light, and sound, not only to represent issues of historical and cultural interest but also to explore in depth the fancies, the intricacies, and the idiosyncrasies of the personal imagination.

Prior to her development as a visual artist in Argentina, she studied Literature and Modern Languages at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. She moved to the United States in 1978, and received an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1987. Currently, she is Professor of Photography at the School of Art and Art History of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In her early work, she dealt with the realm of memories and dreams. She has used them as the subsoil of her art to

establish connections between fact and fiction, and to reclaim subjectivity as an integral part of the historical.

During the '90s she created site-specific installations in which she inter-related digitally processed media. She juxtaposed groupings of photographs, large murals, and written texts that were independent of each other but that were designed to call forth a series of correspondences between history and memory, human action and accountability. Later on, her work became more interactive with the gallery space. She used photographs, video, and light design to explore spatial, temporal, and conceptual relationships between media and viewers. She experimented with media, narrative, and photographic representation, while addressing issues of particular global histories.

In 1998 she took a leap of faith and became totally involved in the research, direction, and production of her first feature length documentary, *Burnt Oranges* (2005)—about the long-term effects and repercussions, personal and social, of Argentina’s 1970s state terrorism, and the global necessity to defend human rights and democratic values.

The film garnered wide recognition and received awards such as the CINE Golden Eagle (2005) and two awards in an international competition: Aurora Platinum Best of The Show Award in the category of Cultural Documentary and the Aurora Gold Award for best Directing (2007), among others. In 2005 she received the Lorenzo Il Magnifico International Award in New Media at the 5th Edition of The Florence Biennale and in 2010 a Guggenheim Fellowship.

The works presented in this issue are digital manipulations of photographs from her new series of work titled Palimpsest. As the title suggests, original photographs and writings have been effaced and reused to give room to others in which traces of the originals remain.

Website: <http://silviamalagrino.com>

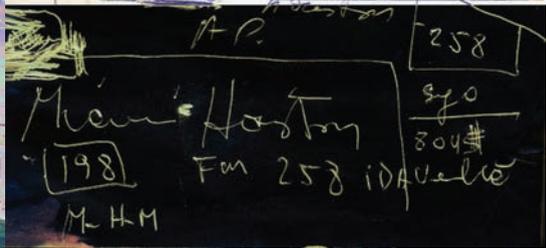




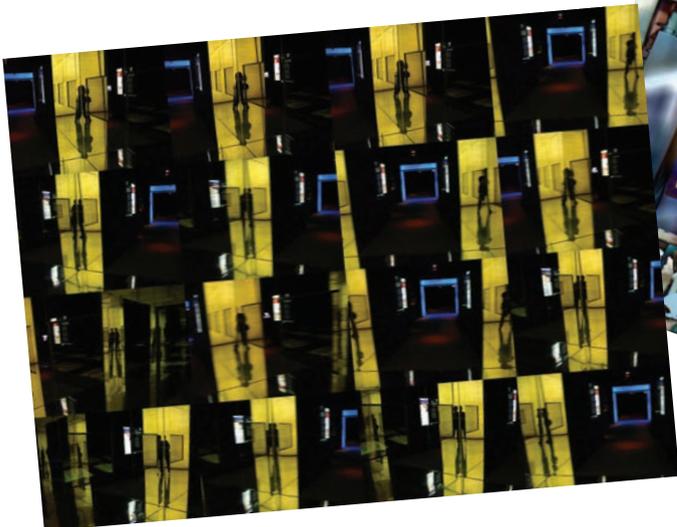
Politics



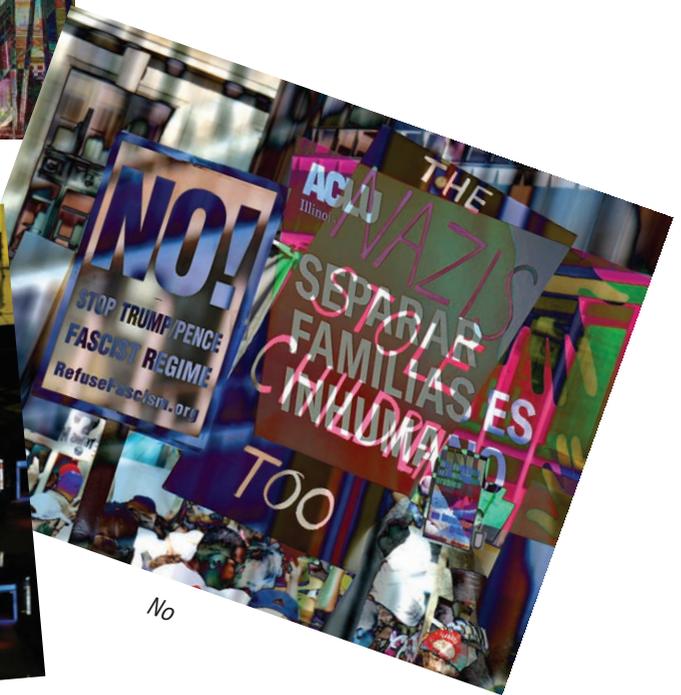
Hommage to Hans Haacke



Notes on Forgotten Papers

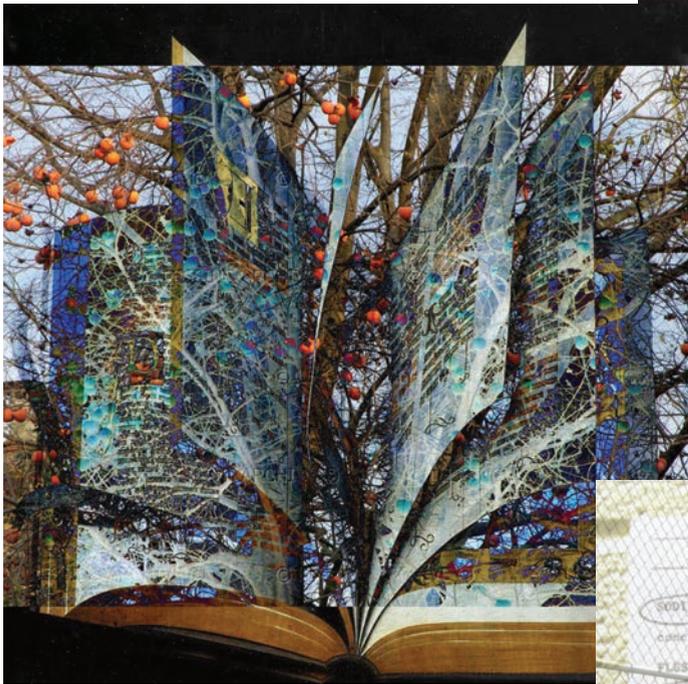


Passage in Yellow

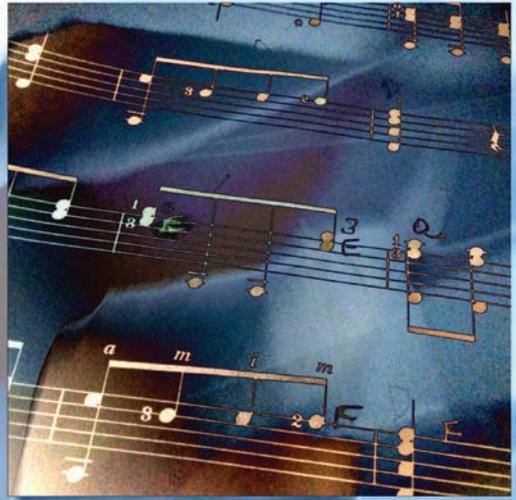


No





Book of Marvels



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