

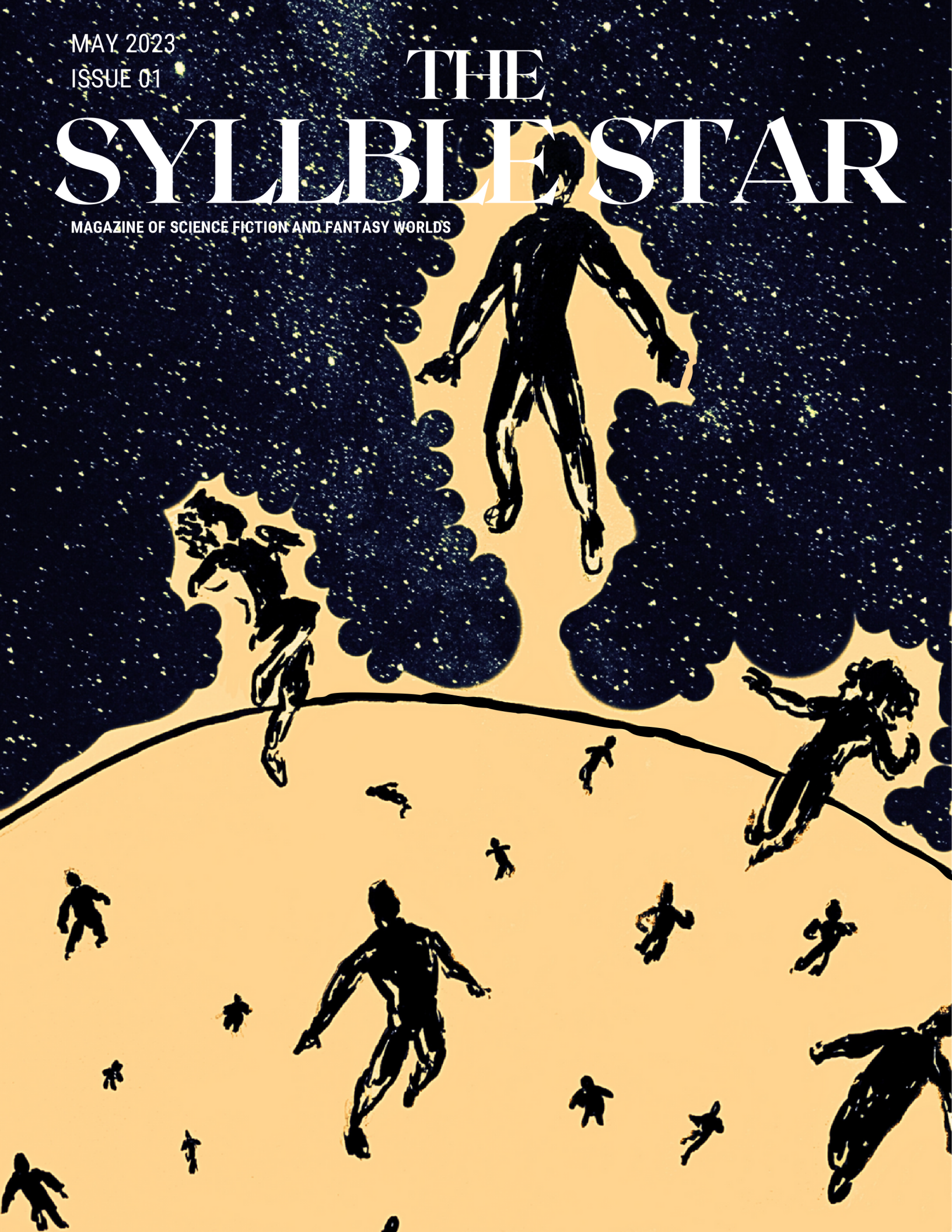
MAY 2023

ISSUE 01

THE

SYLLBLE STAR

MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY WORLDS



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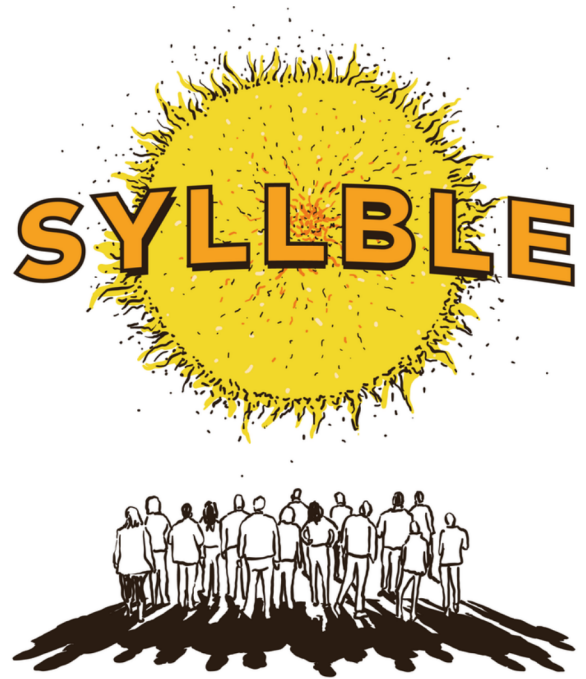
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Can Storytelling be Saved?

Fabrice Guerrier

As I write this editorial from my home in Larchmont Village, Los Angeles, just a few blocks from Paramount Studios, I observe a growing group of creative writers striking against the major studios. They hold brown wooden signs with red and black markings. I believe this is very relevant to the release of the first issue of The Syllble Star Magazine.

The world is changing on all fronts. The publishing world, the entertainment and television industries, and the advent of artificial intelligence are all moving in a direction that many science fiction writers predicted in pulp magazines from the past. They explored what would happen if new forms of unchecked AI were allowed to be introduced, or more specifically,

the rise of technology and its impact on our current society.

Even the world's most talented experts are uncertain about the future. "I don't know," they say. I traveled to Luxor, Egypt, early in May for an incredible experience as a fellow with the Shafik Gabr Fellowship. I met with two incredibly established speakers in the field: a well-established venture capitalist who was an early investor in Airbnb and OpenAI, and a brilliant senior diplomat and academic. They both challenged us to understand this uncertain future and the dynamics of how our collective societies will profoundly change in the next two years to the upcoming decade. They did not offer solutions that satisfied me, and their message seemed to be that the inevitable was chaotic. I was left with a profound sense of feeling lost, that even the brightest minds in the world seem to paint a future that will emerge in an unknown and chaotic pattern.

Amidst feeling lost, I kept pondering about the least disadvantaged, climate change, and our democracies. Will this chaos further break us?

I am an optimist in all aspects of life, especially about the future. Interestingly, right before going to Egypt, I flew back to Washington, D.C., since my flight was to depart from there. I spent the entire day visiting the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall to explore the Afrofuturism exhibit: A History of Black Futures. It was the first of its kind, and it explored history, music, science, philosophy, activism, art, science fiction, and fantasy to

envision how Black people see, perceive, and express their redemptive freedom in the future.

It was there that I realized Afrofuturism is the movement of our times. Marginalized people envision futures and histories that transcend the day-to-day, breaking through the numbness of society as we head towards the unknown.

Sun Ra, Octavia Butler, and recent films like Black Panther epitomize the soul of Afrofuturism, both as a movement and an aesthetic that people can use to reimagine the possible.

I felt did feel a profound loss after Egypt for at least a week after, but I knew that it also came from the psychic clash of traveling to the deep underground tombs of dead pharaohs who lived 4,000 years ago. This brought entirely new visions and frameworks about life. Our limited time on earth juxtaposed with the uncertainty of the future pushed me to realize that stories make this world go around. Our work at Syllble is important and crucial to our times.

Can storytellers in the science fiction and fantasy genre play a pivotal role in helping us dream more when we've forgotten the magic of stories? Do stories in movies and the entertainment world have become more formulaic?

Growing up in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and my early days living in the United States, cinema, comics, and science fiction stories helped me see more. Now, as I reflect across the uncertainties of the world, my trip to Egypt, the growing movement

in Afrofuturism, and the rise of technologies, can storytelling be saved?

I believe so. I believe Syllble in our small community yet global provides a different way for writers and creatives to organize themselves and envision a different future. Imagining new possibilities together through story worlds.

The stories in this first issue are an experiment, bringing together the traditions of the past but using a new recipe. We focus on fictional worlds, highlight a few of them, and stories expressed through the artist collective in our communities.

The Syllble Star Magazine also seeks to engage Afrofuturism by creating the Afrofuture corner, inviting guest writers and thought leaders the from science and creative fields.

I hope you enjoy this first issue of Syllble Star Magazine. ■



Parallelia world

Parallelia tells of a future world in the year 2087. After a series of unrelenting extreme natural disasters that ravage most of the world, most people across the United States are left homeless. Years pass while they form a new collective called the Earthbound as they move into the abandoned city of Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

As a community focused on maintaining a primal and spiritual connection to earth, they are able to restore some land and remnants of technology to establish live-able conditions and a culture based on energetic connectivity. Meanwhile, the Silicons, a group of hybridized human-android elites operate with alternative intentions. They found a way to digitize themselves as well as physical earth to escape the deteriorating conditions of the planet. They actively build a pixelized parallel reality by usurping land and resources that Earthbounds have christened as sacred modalities of connectivity.

The following stories were originally released in the micro novel 'Earth Raiders' 2022.

MICHA

By Marsha Clarke

To be honest, I didn't care that she was crying over minerals that came from the earth and were shined up pretty for her. If she didn't care that Henry's baby was crying for two nights because he was starving, then I didn't give a damn about her shitty family heirloom. If it wasn't for my father's words moving me to always do the more human thing, the dogs would have gotten more food, but people saw me as a leader, and like it or not, understand it or not, I led. Passing Tamara and Henry's tent, I could see their new baby, just two weeks old—hopefully, his little belly would be full after Tamara ate and I could finally get some sleep. I could hear my name being screamed by Arney, whose knees always looked like two gears that just couldn't figure out how to work together when he was running.

"Micha, raiders!"

My head tightened. I wasn't even sure what he said until he ran past me bellowing "Raiders! Get out now. We gotta get out of here. I saw at least twenty of them on bikes—that means there are more right behind them."

Arney was never wrong about the number of raiders and usually spotted them in enough time to get everyone packed up and moved out, or to gather enough weapons to fight them off. They never attacked at night. It was strange and desperate, but it also meant they were here for fun: it was a hunt. I tried to join in with Arney's instructions, but my voice seemed to cut in and out over the screams of everyone else who scrambled to pack up what they had and run.

"Leave it—they are too close and we have to get somewhere safe," I commanded, pulling and pushing people towards the side of the underpass that was clear. Then I heard the sounds of raider bikes like the high-pitched hum of a slot machine ringing up digital coins. I screamed as loud as I could—this time in anger—telling them to leave everything behind. I wasn't sure where I was running to.... Just to somewhere we could hide until the raiders got tired and left.

Some people heard me but others didn't. I wanted everyone to get out, but Tent City stretched for miles along the Guadalupe River.

Some raiders stayed on their bikes and rode people down, some got off and beat whoever they could get their hands on, using photovoltaics to start fires and to blast holes in people who wanted a fair fight.

The half-rusted metal pipe that lay strapped to my left thigh and had earned me the nickname magnet wouldn't stop any of the torture that was happening around us. I heard the rumbling of the raider convoy and I started to run. That tightening feeling in my head made me dizzy—the only thing I could make out were shadows of light. It was like I wasn't in my body: something else had taken over and I had been put in the backseat with a tight blindfold on. I could hear everything but couldn't respond at all. I heard when my right knee popped and when people chanted to follow the light. I could even hear the dirt shifting from underneath us as we ran. It must have taken us over an hour before we reached the gates to the park. The long steel doors that protected the dilapidated remnants of Silicon

Park from us who lived on the streets were never meant to be opened. I pushed on one anyway and it opened slightly—enough that when Arney and a few others joined in, it opened enough to let us all run inside. After we pushed the door closed, my sight returned and the tightening of my head declined into a fuzzy feeling. It was dark and everyone was scared; they all looked at me, waiting for another instruction. All I had left in me were tears that I fought back, but they burst through.

“Let’s find a room to hide. They could have followed us.”

Arney found a conference room that could hold everyone, then we barricaded the doors with whatever furniture we could find. My knee throbbed and I was so nauseous that if I let my tongue leave the roof of my mouth it would have all come out. I asked Arney for a head count; his number was two hundred. Of the thousands of people in Tent City who I’d lived with for years, those who gave me the sense of how humans should live on this earth, I could only account for two hundred of them. Arney and I took the first watch and when he drifted off to sleep with his head on my shoulder, I didn’t wake him. He deserved some rest—they all did. I was exhausted, but every time I closed my eyes, that communication without sound came over me. I went outside and placed my hands and feet on the cold ground. I couldn’t sleep—not because I wasn’t exhausted—but I couldn’t stop hearing the voices telling me to touch the earth deep below.

SABEBEL

By Brynn Yoder

The faint yellow glow of Sabebel’s flashlight illuminated the sleeping bags beside her. As the light dimmed, she found the crank at the side of the light, lifting it from where she had wedged it between her shoulder and head. She spun the crank and massaged the kinks in her neck.

As the light brightened, it revealed the crisp pages in front of her. She wedged the light back in its place. Before her was a copy of *The Infinite World of the Silicons*. If her parents discovered she had it, she could only imagine the lecture she would get. Her people had banned any literature related to the Silicons.

The form of her tent swayed with the wind. Outside, whoops of joy came as her people sang their anthem—the *Song for the Earthbound*. Her ears were perked as she read her book tonight. She listened for three sharp clicks. It was the sound that came before every Silicon attack.

She picked up the stale muffin beside her. It crumbled in her hand, parts of it falling onto her book as she munched on it. With a flick of her wrist, she swept the crumbs away. This book shed light on her situation. The Silicons could free her from the Earthbound camp. She wouldn’t have to live in the rubble of a city any longer. They could free her from the fractured world around her.



Her gaze flitted over the top of the page to the pink and yellow striped sleeping bag inside the tent. It was her little brother's; the same one she had slept in as a child. Her parents had told her that the Silicons were nothing but bad news. They told her the Earthbound way was the only way.

Three sharp clicks came from the direction opposite her people. It was subtle, indistinguishable if her ears weren't prepared for it. Even then, she wasn't certain if she had imagined it.

She shed her sleeping bag, carrying the book in one hand and the flashlight in the other. With a silent goodbye to her mother and father's tent, she unzipped the mosquito net. Before she exited, she took one last longing glance at her brother's sleeping bag.

A tear splashed onto her hand. She rubbed her eyes with her sleeve. If only I could have convinced my brother to come with me. But her brother was all her parents would have left. She had to do as her grandmother had always said: "Live in your own truth, child—you know what's best for you."

She ran down the street, determined to make her grandma proud. Her bare feet slapped the pavement as she left the light of the Earthbound celebration behind her. The rubble and glass bruised and sliced her feet, but she could ignore those temporary feelings. This was the blast zone, or the digitization zone where she would almost certainly be killed, or worse, left in some limbo state between life and death.

The street was dark, but as the light behind her faded, her hope grew like the cone of light from the flashlight in her hand. She tucked her book under her armpit and lifted her hand to crank. Ruined high rises with large chunks taken out of them spread across the horizon. It was as if God himself had come down to curse the human race, further pushing them toward a digitized world.

A flash from her light bounced off a white barrier on the street to her right. She turned and ran toward it. The Silicon raiders on the other side of the barrier had their guns leveled on her. She had seen an image of them in her book, but somehow their sleek white suits of armor were more frightening than she had imagined.

"Slow yourself," a guard said. He had a blue stripe going down his head, stopping at his visor.

No words left her mouth as she opened it to speak.

"Speak Sabebel," the same guard said.

"I want to be a part of the infinite world of the Silicons," she said.

"Very well," he said.

A guard lifted a different weapon, this one with a square glass shield on the barrel and what looked like a camera lens inside. The weapon fired, there was a flash of light, and Sabebel was gone, nothing left of her besides the book and her flashlight, which cracked in two as it tumbled onto the pavement. ■

Neptune World

The year is 2123. The Earth is a very different place than it was just a few hundred years ago. The ice caps have melted, the sea levels have risen, and the climate has become so extreme that it's no longer habitable for humans. In order to survive, humanity has been forced to abandon the surface of the Earth and live completely underwater.

The first human city under the ocean was built in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

It is called Neptune, and it is home to over 13 million people. Neptune is a self-contained city, with its own power plant, water purification system, and food production facilities. The city is covered by a large special glass polymer that protects it from the harsh environment outside.

Life in Neptune is very different from life on the surface of the Earth. People have to learn to live in a world where there is no gravity and the pressure is immense. They also have to learn to deal with the constant threat of sea creatures. However, despite the challenges, people in Neptune have found a way to create a thriving community. They have built schools, hospitals, and businesses, and they have created a culture that is rich in art, music, and literature.

The people of Neptune are divided into two groups: the Terras and the Gills. The Terras are the traditional humans who want to hold on to their human ways. They believe that humans should not genetically modify themselves, and they want to keep their culture and traditions alive. The Gills, on the other hand, are the humans and generations who have developed gills to swim underwater via biogenetic engineering with fish species DNA. They believe that genetic modification is the key to humanity's survival, and they want to create a new kind of human that is better adapted to life underwater.



LEAVING THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH

By Tim Malachy

“Don’t dad! You can’t! Please!”

Michelle, his daughter’s face was streaked with tears, her eyes bloodshot, hair damp in the suffocating humidity, as she stared up at him, her arms wrapped around the black furred neck of the dog, Xiao Di.

Nausea roiled his gut and he sagged against the dank, mildew stained wall to steady himself. He returned her stare. “I have to. You know I do. Would you just leave him? Do you want that? We can’t take him. I’m so sorry. We just can’t.”

“I’ll stay!” she screamed, burying her face in the dog’s fur, the dog’s limpid brown eyes worried.

His narrow shoulders raised in a sigh and he shook his head. “You know you can’t stay. Come on, be reasonable. Nobody wants this. I don’t want this! But it’s our only choice.”

Dishes clanked in the kitchen, then went quiet. A moment, and then Emma, his wife, peeked into the room.

“How’s it going?” Her voice was soft, but her eyes wide, anxious, with dark bags beneath them, her thick black hair greasy and lank.

He ran a hand through his own thinning hairline sticky with sweat and shrugged irritably. “How do you think it’s going?”

“Are you sure someone’s coming?” He shrugged again and shook his head. “I don’t know. I think so. It’s all I could do.”

The radio, set to one of the few remaining stations, squawked, the Chinese frantic and terrified and Chris couldn’t catch most of it, and in fact, barely any, but he caught some: dam... fail... flood... tens of thousands... dead.

“What about your connections with the US? How come they couldn’t do anything at the embassy – ?”

“You know why. These floods are happening everywhere. The ice caps freaking melted. Like, melted, the entire goddamn thing! America can’t do a thing for us. Mr Hsu promised... you know he owes me. If he said it’s taken care of, then it’s taken care of.”

She paused. “Can he even do it? They say only one in a million, like really, one in a million, get a slot. Lots of people won’t survive. Downtown’s already flooded. The 101 is on fire. We might not make it to the station on time.”

“We’ll make it!” he shouted, throwing his arms in the air. “Why are you listening to that news station anyway? You know my guy promised to give us a slot.”

“Ok... I’m just saying... we need to go.”

Michelle rocked back and forth on the sofa, her face buried in Xiao Hei’s furry neck, her body trembling. “I’m not going!”

He stared helplessly at Emma “Can you do something?”

Emma steps toward them, flipflops smacking the damp tile, and rested one hand on Michelle’s shoulders, the other scratching behind the dog’s ear.

“We have to let him go. You know what is happening. Nobody wants this, nobody wants any of this. We can’t leave him up here by himself. He’d starve to death. Can you imagine how cruel that would be? We just can’t. ”

“I’m not going!”

Chris shook his head, muttering “God damn...” as he stepped out of the living room to the enclosed rooftop quarters-turned-hoarders paradise. Nana, his wife’s mother, was long gone by now, taken in the first wave of the hydrophobia pandemic that took so many of the elderly, but her 20-year storehouse of random crap remained.

Stepping between the cement cistern topped with garlic hanging limp and rotted, he ducked under garden tools gone to rust and past giant plastic garbage bags stuffed with more plastic bags from the local markets. He walked to the rail beside the washing machine and dryer now corroded by the ever present humidity to useless pieces of shit, and looked over the wall.

Five floors below, the turgid brown waters that flooded the streets to the first floor were still, not a soul in sight, the neighborhood evacuated days ago. Chris saw something bobbing in the alleyway; it took him a moment to realize it was a body. Another body.

A wave of nausea once again roiled his gut. What if Mr Hsu didn’t come through?

Mr Hsu, born in Taiwan, raised in Arcadia, scion of a massive Taichung real estate and fried noodles dynasty that owned half of the island’s industrial capacity.

Scott – Mr Hsu – was an angel investor – in the Neptune Project, a vast underwater city built beneath a dome deep in the Ryukyu Trench. Bigger than the entire footprint of Taipei City and powered by the limitless geothermal energy and deepwater rare earths, it was a city under the sea, where the human race might have another chance to survive in a ruined, flooded world.

There were only slots for 100,000, though, out of a population of 23 million.

Chris had helped him out that one time... gave him an alibi, without which, Mr Hsu would have maybe not gone to prison, but certainly fallen from grace.

But with the world changing so radically, and no one much concerned about an old Ecstasy case anymore, would Scott follow through?

Yeah, he would. He’s Mr Hsu, Chris assured himself.

Scanning the jagged skyline towards the north and east, the clouds loomed heavy and dark. Bile filled his throat, and he raised his fist, middle finger upraised, then shook his head at his own futility.

He turned back, filled his lungs with the fetid air, and squared his shoulders. “It’s time.”

His bare feet in plastic flip flops squeaked on the linoleum. He walked into the house, into the hallway.

His wife and daughter were no longer on the sofa. He heard them whispering behind the closed bedroom door.

They looked up with startled terror in their eyes.

“It’s time.”

His wife nodded. “Come on, baby. He’s going to a better place.”

They hugged Xiao Di’s furry neck, kissed his snout, stared into his liquid eyes, and promised him eternal love and eternal happiness as he prepared the syringe.

Then they left. And he was alone with Xiao Di, his buddy, his companion, his best friend, maybe his only friend.

“It’s ok, buddy, it’s ok... Daddy will always love you. Always,” and his tears burned in his eyes as he wrapped the shoelace around Xiao Di’s paw, the dog pulling back, reluctant.

“It’s ok, buddy, it’s ok.”

The syringe found the vein, the plunger descended, and the light faded from those liquid eyes.

Down below, he heard the whine of an outboard motor wending its way through the flooded streets. Their ride was here.

He stood up, opened the door. They stared at him.

“It’s done. Let’s go.” ■

BLESSINGS OF THE SEA HAG

By Giselle Bodden

Amongst the yelling and whimpers, and cries of children, there was the soft, playful jingle of an anklet made of metal beads and seashells. The anklet adorned a wrinkled and barefoot old woman who called herself Agartha. This day was special. It was the opening day of Neptune. She approached the toughened glass Grand Doors of the world’s first underwater city.

She glanced upwards. The new day had a darker sky than on earth. Then again, earth’s sky had been contaminated with unbreathable pollution; and that sky was darker than the days of her youth. Darkness was a growing trend.

Neptune had been planted in an abysmal zone, not too far away from the Mariana trench but much closer to sunlight. She whispered to herself, “God Neptune will keep us all safe here.” A few foreign fish fluttered by. She could see a collection of mollusks that attached themselves to the glass dome of the waiting area. They seemed so few and so peaceful compared to the hundreds of unbathed, unfed, unrested humans waiting to be let in. It had been a long journey for most. The only way to reach Neptune was to be submerged from one of the qualifying international cities found along a Pacific Coastline.

Many people passed away en route including members of Agartha's coven. She was the only one left.

Agartha pushed her way forward through the masses. She had waves and swirls painted in light blue on her face and arms. She had a staff with a large conch shell atop of it, to help her walk. It was also a key tool in her blessing ritual that only she could now perform with her coven sisters having died on land. In her left hand, she carried a basket of dried fish, seaweed, herbs and oils to place at the entrance of the Grand Doors as an offering to God Neptune.

The first people submerged were those with young families who could continue to populate the earth – or sea – for generations to come. She paused to take a rest and ponder on how she, an old sea hag, could do nothing to contribute in building up this new society. The only gift she had was to share the wisdom of the oceans with the youth who would spend the rest of their lives here since the earth rejected them all. With her mission in mind, she kept nudging her way past everyone until she reached the Grand Doors.

“Ma’am you have to step away from the door!” A guard called out to her sternly while approaching her with his hand on his gun.

His colleague looked her up and down. He yelled out as well, “I don’t know why they let an old sea hag down here! She’s gotta be at least 70 years old.”

Agartha did not speak. Instead she placed her staff down gently and sat a few paces away from the door.

Meanwhile a young boy pulled his mom towards the front of the crowd and pointed at Agartha. “See mama, I told you she was here.”

“It’s NOT time for entry. Everyone needs to stand clear of the doors. We can all drown if this is not handled correctly!!” The guard yelled once more.

The young boy gripped his mom’s leg at the thought of drowning. She gently patted his head, “Yes, yes you were right dear... now let’s step back as the guard said.” She pulled him a few feet back but the young boy would not take his eyes off of Agartha.

Agartha removed items from her basket and laid them down in a swirl shape identical to the pattern on her right check. She said a short prayer in Koine Greek and took a bite of the dried fish – head first. Bones and all, she swallowed. She took out the herbs and oil, rubbing them onto her body in a meticulous order. Her prayers crescendoed into a chant. She picked up her staff once more and shook it around her items then thrice around herself. She briefly made eye contact with the boy who was completely intrigued.

Noticing the subtle exchange between this witch with her son, the boy’s mom, grabbed his small, cold hand. “Come now, Pluto lets go wait over here.” She walked him over to the glass wall where the mollusks had gathered. “What do you know about these little guys?”

Agartha untied her anklet. She held it out in front of her with both hands as though she was offering it to an unseen presence.

Most of the general public ignored her as they were too exhausted to care. Some hungry eyes peered over at the dried fish and seaweed in her basket. Others lay asleep, while others mumbled complaints under their breath. "They're really going to let some voodoo lady in here with our children."

Agartha's soft and shallow chant grew louder and more aggressive. The guard hadn't taken his eyes off her at all. Perturbed now, he jumped down from his post and hovered over the old woman. "Ma'am I don't know what you are doing over here but it needs to stop now!" He kicked the assortment of items she had laid out. The fish tumbled out of the basket and a hungry onlooker grabbed them for his family. "STOP, I said, dammit!" As he lowered his hands to grab her, a sudden loud humming noise caused the entire waiting dome to vibrate. Agartha's chants continued. Her whole body shook as violently as the dome. The guard stood straight up and moved away to check the surroundings. There were now flickers of light within the sea. Different fish and blinking organisms had them surrounded.

Pluto held his ear against the glass dome. "If you listen you can hear him coming mama!"

"Who's coming, Plu?" His mother grabbed him by the shoulders while looking around at the crowd and the guards for direction. Everyone was confused and disoriented. The bit of sunlight they had was gone. She looked up and a pod of whales humming loudly caused the entire space to vibrate even more. They passed by quickly enough but the light from above did not return.

The current of the water changed. All of the seas appeared to be sloshing around the walls and above on the surface.

The guard climbed back up to his post where the comms system was. He put in a phone call to Turf, the transition team on land. "We have an unstable situation here on Alpha Post. The unit is vibrating." He paused to listen for instructions. Agartha was now shrieking in Koine Greek with her eyes rolled to the back of her head. Her body no longer shook, but she now held the anklet above her head. "Dammit, I can barely hear ya! We have a damn sea hag down here who won't shut the hell up."

"He's almost here mama!" Pluto squirmed his way out of his mom's grip. He ran towards Agartha.

"Pluto, wait!" She took off after him. It was much harder for her to move through the restless crowd.

The guard argued with the commander over the telecomm, "I assumed YOU ALL in Turf gave her a pass! How the hell else would she get down here?!"

His partner had heard enough. "We have to remove her, Sarge." The guard slammed the phone down, pissed off. No more hesitating. He locked in on Agartha, whose back was facing him. The bullet landed swiftly and quietly in the back of her chest.

"Pluto!" his mom called out to him.

Pluto stopped short, right in front of Agartha. She coughed up blood, some of which got on his hoodie.

Her blood streamed down her chin and dripped onto the sandy floor. She lowered her arms slowly as Pluto stared into her dying eyes at her strong soul.

She held the anklet out to him, "This is a special day. Neptune's here."

The current above settled as did the rest of the waters around them. Pluto's mom caught up to him, kneeled down and spun him around. "Pluto, are you okay?! Talk to me!" He just nodded yes while clutching the anklet in a tightly balled fist. "Of course I am mama."

"We have to stick together! Don't ever run off like that again!"

The main guard pulled out a loudspeaker while the other guards came down to remove Agartha's body from the passageway. As they dragged Agartha's body aside, the single mom's eyes welled with tears as she held her son closer to her than before.

"Alright people, it's time to prepare for opening as the first residents of Neptune! We need you to get in three ORDERLY lines based on your port of entry. First up: Oahu. Osaka. Galapagos. We will continue in threes until all ports have been named."

Pluto fixed his vision on Agartha's lifeless body. With his mom still carrying him, he opened his fist behind her back to look more closely at the anklet Agartha handed off to him. He looked over at her body once more and noticed a crack in the wall. Was this the power of Neptune? ■



— *Star Profile*

Meet Nisi Shawl

The following is an excerpt from a conversation between award winning science fiction and fantasy author Nisi Shawl and Syllble Founder Fabrice Guerrier

Conversation has been edited for clarity.



Fabrice: What has been the most fulfilling part of your journey as a writer so far?

Nisi: Oh, gosh. Getting recognized. And I'm not talking about awards and stuff. I'm talking about people's lives being changed by what I do. That's been the most rewarding by far. So I guess that's not just recognition. It's influence. Yeah. Because that's what I'm in it for really.

Fabrice: When you say influence, do you mean how people engage with your work, how they engage with your ideas, how they engage with your stories, how are they changed and transformed by them?

Nisi: Yeah, yeah. You know, everything from the emotional impact, to well in some of my nonfiction, getting encouraged by things that I have to say in that and trying different attitudes towards life, and, you know, just really having a practical impact on people's work.

Fabrice: Yeah, I feel like that's the most fulfilling thing too. It's like you're sort of raising consciousness. You're allowing people to have your unique experiences that are different. What would you say fueled you wanting to become a writer or you beginning to write? I feel like there is definitely a continuum because I remember when I first started writing, I didn't necessarily write to change or transform people's lives, or to see how people engage in my work. It came at a later point, where I was like, wow, there's a responsibility here.

Nisi: So my idea of what it's like to be a writer is sort of rooted in when people would ask me when I was a child what I wanted to do. And my response was, I wanted to be a magician. And then they would say, "Oh, you mean, like, get up on a stage and pull rabbits out of hats?" No, no, no, no, I want to actually do real magic. And writing is pretty much like that for me. So that's what got me into it in the first place is you're constructing these worlds, creating these situations, these people are coming to life in your creativity. So yeah, that was the initial impetus.

And then, when I was in college, there was this wave of feminist science fiction, like Joanna Russ, and the one that really got me was Susie McKee Charnas. She wrote this novel called *Walk to the End of the World*. The premise of that novel is that civilization is restarted by the people who are saved under this mountain, they actually do have a mountain in Colorado where US bureaucrats and their secretaries are supposed to go in the event of disaster. So her premise was, what kind of society would come out of that? And it was rather grim. But at the same time, it was so audacious and I thought, wow, I could actually get paid to do stuff like this. Little did I know how much the pay was, it's diddly squat.

Fabrice: Now, I think you bring up a really good point. I love the idea of when you hear spelling or even look into the word spell, you're casting a spell when you're putting words into being.

Fabrice: Now, I think you bring up a really good point. I love the idea of when you hear spelling or even look into the word spell, you're casting a spell when you're putting words into being. And I feel like you can definitely influence people's minds unconsciously, I think I've come to terms like the most fundamental form of changes in our imagination, it is that our imagination kind of ties with our body, our hearts, our minds. And it's like, there's these boundaries, these limiters. And I think those radical thoughts fuels my visions for my art, like focusing on black and brown characters. What would you say are some of the things that fuels your artistic vision? Like, what do you hope to create? Or what do you create? When you set out to write?

Nisi: Well, I don't necessarily have, as far as I know, I don't have an integrated vision that goes across all my different works, I do tend to go back to certain elements again, and again, community and empathy. Just yeah, those two mainly. Those are the two main things that I write about. I write about black and brown people because I am black. I draw on my own experiences, and then I reflect on how other people's experiences relate to mine. So, again, that's the empathy in the community.

My novel, *Everfair*, is about a bunch of different communities coming together in the Congo region of Africa. Some of those people are representative of my demographics, and some of them are not. They're just completely different. But I'm trying to see how the relationships and ties work rather than the differences.

Fabrice: Did you have to research a lot for that?

Nisi: Gosh, yes. Some of the research was impossible. I mean, because a lot of the area that I was writing about was pretty much wiped out. The people who lived there were decimated. The term "decimated" has evolved to mean "wiped out completely," but it originally meant to kill one in ten.

So that area was decimated, and trying to find out what kind of things were going on in the historical period I was writing about was a challenge.

Fabrice: Absolutely. And that's like pre-colonization, right?

Nisi: It's right at the time of colonization. And so yeah, sure, you can find out from the colonizers what they thought was going on.

Fabrice: That's always reliable.

Nisi: I hear the sarcasm there.

Fabrice: What was that first book that you picked up with that first story that, like, inspired you to start in *Kalamazoo*? Do you remember?

Nisi: I was writing in junior high school. I was writing science fiction in junior high school. And not comic books. I mean, I was actually writing, like post-apocalyptic, you know, love stories. And I don't know that it was caused, actually, by a book. I mean, there were a ton of books that I read. And again, they were mostly fantasy and science fiction. When I was younger, I don't know that anyone just made me think you can do it, do it. I just did it. I had a friend, Karen Smith, and she and I, like, made plays together, you know, and we wrote our own lyrics to songs and that kind of stuff. It was just I mean, why not? Trying to think that's because I have never been able to pin it down

My father used to tell me stories about dragons. My father's name is Dennis. And he would do these stories. He would hold his hands like a book and pretend to read. And then he would read the stories that, you know, I've looked at his hands and there is nothing there. About a witch and her pet dragon named applesauce. Wow. And he was good at it. I've seen his writing since I was an adult. Um, nothing about the dragon applesauce.

Fabrice: Yeah. And I know, we spoke a little bit about Octavia Butler,

and you said that you knew her personally. I feel like her name is popping more and more and more in the cultural mainstream. As this sort of figure is around, like speculative fiction, science fiction, can you tell us a little bit more if you have a few stories. What was that experience kind of collaborating, writing, engaging? And how has she influenced your work? Or have you influenced her work? You wrote the introduction to the Library of Congress, a collection of stories on Octavia Butler that they gathered together, which was a really powerful introduction.

Nisi: Oh, thank you. Yeah, yes. I first met Octavia, because I had written the bio about her for the program of a science fiction convention where she was the guest of honor. So as part of the deal, they let me go for free and I met her and I remember looking up at her because you're almost always looking up at her, she's a very tall woman, and looked up at her and said, Wow, you're much more beautiful than I thought you would be. Which was not me trying to get on her good side. This was me being in awe of meeting her. So she eventually moved to Seattle, the Seattle area here where I live.

She liked the climate. She liked the rain and the cloudiness as compared to where she had grown up in the Los Angeles area. She moved here and we got to go to plays together, go to restaurants together. Just hang out. She was vegetarian, she was vegan. So, you know, we would go and try out different vegan restaurants. She would have me over to dinner, I would have her over to dinner. She came to an ancestor feast. I did one time. Now, Octavia was an atheist. I mean, she was polite enough so that she would come and you know, where it's like singing chants to all the ancestors. And she's like joining in. So that was wonderful. I don't know what else to tell you. I never collaborated with her on writing anything. I did talk with Octavia Butler on the phone several times. We would talk about problems that were coming up in our work.

MEET NISI SHAWL

I was in awe of her, and my career was just beginning. So it was mostly me listening to her talk.

One time, she asked me for help with the title of a series of books that was being repackaged. The original title was the Xenogenesis trilogy, but she didn't like it. She said, "I want it to sound a little ominous and kind of creepy." I suggested "Lilith's Brood," and she loved it. The publishers were happy with it too, and that's what they called the repackaging.

That was a direct influence that I had on her, but mostly it was the other way around.

Fabrice: I really, really appreciate you sharing that. It's so powerful. But I feel like one word that keeps popping in my brain out of everything that you said is the ancestor feast. I've never heard of an ancestor feast. Tell me more about that. If you wouldn't mind sharing a little bit.

Nisi: Oh, no, that's no problem at all. So I haven't done it this year, but most years I do a thing called an ancestor feast, which is I do divination, and I come up with as many dishes from as many countries and cultures as possible. And, you know, I'll say, "Should I bring you all some lamb chops?" And, you know, I will get a good answer for that. So the menu comes from divination, for you know, what the ancestors would want. Then I just cook up as much as I can, serve it to as many people as I can, and we tell stories about my ancestors, their ancestors, we sing songs for them. It's just a real joyous occasion.

Fabrice: I feel like when I moved to the US, I definitely was searching for a cosmology or form of thinking, way of being, or in what the French like to call it "L'imaginaire." I feel like my engagement with the ancestors have been a very profound experience, it's like what Maya Angelou loves to say "I come as one but I stand with 10,000." This idea of this sort of unbroken connection with the past, but also the future.

Yes, moving towards it's that process, would you say the ancestors and that energetic force has influenced your writing, your vision of the future and how things are changing right now?

Nisi: Well, a couple of things. When I write I generally invoke the ancestors to help me. I just do it because, yeah, they have messages and they can help me sharpen my message. The other thing is, I don't know if you're aware of a couple of writers, Adrian Marie Brown and Walidah Imarisha. They say that, while we are living in a time of immigration, we are also living in a time of science fiction. As far as our ancestors are concerned, you know, we are like, what they were dreaming of, we are living a life that they would have been like, "Oh, really?" Or riding around in a car. You get to eat fruit from California, when you're not in California. You know it's like, we are walking science fiction. And so there's a connection there. And then about going on into the future, I'm sure that they had dreams that went past us. ■

This excerpt of the Interview was recorded Dec 16, 2021 over Syllble's Podcast.

Nisi Shawl (they/them) is a founder of the diversity-in-speculative-fiction nonprofit the Carl Brandon Society and serves on the Board of Directors of the Clarion West Writers' Workshop. The story collection *Filter House* was a winner of the 2009 Tiptree/Otherwise Award, and their debut novel, *Everfair*, was a 2016 Nebula finalist. Shawl edited *Bloodchildren: Stories by the Octavia E. Butler Scholars* (2013). They coedited *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler* (2013).

— The AfroFuture Corner

How Science Fiction Inspired a Black Scientist

Teman Cooke

From the time I was a child I've had a fascination with science. Part of that came from my father, who worked as a materials scientist at a government research lab for forty years. Not only did he encourage my curiosity, his very presence served as an example to me that Black men could be scientists – at a time when there were few such examples in popular media. Another portion of my fascination was undoubtedly seeded by the dazzling array of summer camps and after-school activities upon which my mother insisted I partake.

Indeed, I owe my facility with computers and ability to program to her insistence that I not sit idle during the long summer months while school was out.

By far, however, the biggest influence was my parents' extensive library, which was rich in all kinds of science fiction and fantasy literature. They put few restrictions on what I could read, and so I grew up drinking from a veritable fountain of classics, written by great authors like Issac Asimov, Andre Norton, Octavia Butler



The AfroFuture Corner

Philip K. Dick, Larry Niven, David Brin, Arthur C. Clarke, Orson Scott Card, William Gibson... the list goes on. I would watch Star Trek (the original series, in syndication) with my mother, and over dinner all of us – my father, my mother, and I – would discuss ideas and concepts, seeded by these works, that I had found intriguing, or disturbing, or offensive, or incomprehensible. Overall, however, even as a kid, I could recognize the infinite possibilities – the full set of potential human outcomes (from good to bad to horrible) and all of the attendant promises and warnings – nestled and carried within these works, and I treasured them.

As I grew older and learned more of our nation's history, the infinite possibilities of the future increasingly contrasted with America's story: the singular certainty of the past, marked by a lack of opportunity for self-determination for those who looked like me. Science fiction stories provided me with hope of a brighter future: one in which societies could become more just, people could grow more compassionate, and individuals might have a broader set of choices for themselves and their children than their parents and their grandparents before them. With hard work and intelligent use of science, humans could not just flourish, but thrive.

Since then, I have grown older and wiser and perhaps more cynical. The world I live in now is not what I imagined as a child; being a scientist is more mundane – smaller, really – than those stories led me to believe.

Society is not more just, people are not more compassionate, and the array of acceptable individual choices is under threat in ways I would never have expected in my lifetime. And yet, I find that perhaps I need science fiction – good science fiction – now more than ever. The vision of a better, more vibrant future, provides a kernel of hope that these moments are temporary, and that there's still a road for us toward something better. And the infinite possibilities of these stories can provide that, especially when told by those whose view of the past is not colored by nostalgia for a nonexistent golden era of years bygone. Those who have the most to gain provide the brightest view of our potential; their work can help us imagine what that road forward might look like... and how we might start to build it. ■

Dr. Teman Cooke's firm belief that science can be both accessible and fun permeates his research and undergraduate teaching. He holds a PhD in theoretical physics from the Georgia Institute of Technology.



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