



A Larger Reality

Speculative Fiction
from the Bicultural Margins

Edited by Libia Brenda

Stories from Gabriela Damián, José Luis Zárate, Verónica Murguía,
David Bowles, Raquel Castro, Alberto Chimal, Julia Ríos,
and many more! Featuring a comic in the center!



A LARGER REALITY

SPECULATIVE FICTION FROM THE BICULTURAL MARGINS

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EDITED BY LIBIA BRENDA



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2018 by [Cúmulo de Tesla](#)

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Translation: Libia Brenda and David Bowles

Edited in México, August, 2018

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FOREWORD

I wracked my brains all week, trying to craft a text that would function as a prologue without being too personal or too subjective, because I've always had this idea that a respectable prologue "must be" literary, serious and formal. Well, forget that. I'm going to do exactly what I was avoiding the entire week, because that's what comes most naturally to me. I do have four pages full of literary, serious and formal drudgery, but not even I want to read them. (At least the text that follows interests me, because it is the purest truth.)

It all started with private messages and emails that said: "What if we put together a book with our stories?" The answers ranged from "Yes, what a great idea! What can I do to help you?" to absolute silence, with an occasional "Ah, I can't right now, but good luck." Then things escalated when someone said, "What if we made it bilingual?" Then another suggested, "Could it be a flipbook?" So I started asking for stories, which could have been previously published and written in either Spanish or English (and preferably already translated into the other language). The result? Twelve stories and a comic in English and Spanish. Some unpublished, some written or translated for the very first time.

Whenever someone asks me what I do (by which they mean, "what's your job?"), I like to respond "I make books." Making books is not, like writing, a work of concentration, solitude, drafting, care of words and silence. For this anthology in particular a team of twenty-seven people collaborated, including authors and translators, and pulling it off was a collaborative effort of will, dialogue, patience, lots of caffeine, generosity, madness, hundreds of emails (yes, hundreds), solidarity, brute force, creativity, long hours of work, and authentic talent. In the process, it was essential that all the people involved be willing participants, working without expecting anything in return (the Kickstarter campaign came much later). Above all, we always had to keep our spirits up.*

These thirteen stories are by Mexican and Mexican American people, and we were inspired by the Mexicanx Initiative of John Picacio, who decided that WorldCon would do well to invite fifty of us to establish a bicultural, international and, above all, friendly dialogue: That same spirit inspired the creation of this book. Another of its objectives is to bring about greater recognition of the creative work of those who appear in its pages. These tales are of such high quality that I would bet good money that we're going to have to do another print run: in these stories there is horror, superheroes, ghosts, weird fiction, humor, fantasy, queer characters, time travel, magic tricks, zombies, a comic, cholos and science fiction. In other words, they run the entire gamut of speculative fiction and are a work of imagination.

While we're on the subject of imagination, in her acceptance speech for the 2014 National Book Award, Ursula K. Le Guin spoke of resistance and change.** She said that difficult times were coming and people who remembered freedom would be needed: "poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality." Well, if this book has value beyond its literary merits, which are significant, it lies in its being a book crafted outside the capitalist scheme. It will not be sold: an ebook version will be released in September to be read for free throughout the world; it was not created with profit in mind or for anyone to be considered important or more valuable than someone else. All I have written above can be summed up thus: this project is the result of collective effort, and it brings me great happiness to have worked with so many people to put it together. I hope this book will allow us to learn about each other, authors from at least two countries, and help us discover new readers. This is a bridge allowing us to travel in two directions, a door so we can enter and exit without knocking; it is also a sample of our work, the result of a profound act of love. This book is a piece (small, modest, one of many such pieces in the world) that can be fit together to build greater freedom.

LIBIA BRENDA

* Note to the digital edition: this ebook does not include the short story by Verónica Murguía, but if you are able to read in Spanish, you can buy the digital version of the book that includes the very same tale, the title is: *Atrapadas en la escuela*, edited by Selector (it is sold in the most huge company that sells ebooks and paper books, and in the most big store that sells computers, phones and music, and has a fruit in the logo).

** If you have not seen it, I strongly recommended that before you start reading, you go watch this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et9Nf-rsALko. That's how, among other inspirations, the title of this anthology came to be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book, so compact and organized and lovely, arose from a crazy idea. Many like-minded people, together with the writers, decided to pitch in, and the result is this anthology. The diligence of so many crazy and enthusiastic folks deserves a loud “thank you” (or two, or three, or more) for the invaluable work they did in record time:

To Andrea Chapela, Ana Paula Dávila, Ariadne Ortega and David Bowles: you were the first ones to join the team and offer support. Frankly, you did more than could have been hoped or expected: without you, without the time you dedicated and your impeccable work, this book would not exist. Also, thanks to David Bowles who translated from Spanish to English the foreword, this acknowledgements and part of the comic, he did it fast and with a smile.

To Andrea and Kelsi, Adrian (via George Henson), and Patricia (via Julia) for volunteering to translate several of these stories. To Joey Whitfield, Ruth Clarke, Jesse Ward and Megan Berkobien for allowing us to use their translations. To Felecia Caton for proofreading in English.

To Iliana Vargas and Gabriela Damián for helping me find the right printer and then transport the books from one place (and one country) to another. To Raquel Castro and Alberto Chimal for carrying books in their suitcases, also from one country to another. And a special warming thanks to José Luis Zárata, who literally lost the shirt to help transport books under the californian sun, with Gaby and the editor.

To John Picacio for donating the incredible cover image and to Pablo Defendini for designing the exterior with the retro style we were looking for.

To Julia Rios, Meg Frank and Pablo Defendini (*Fireside* Magazine team): because they were in charge of the great Kickstarter campaign that made possible that this book existed in its physical form, without the worries of a limited and personal budget.

And, of course, thanks to all the people involved in The Mexicanx Initiative: John Picacio launched the call and selected the 50 Mexican and Mexican American creatives, but many people gave their support and money to make it possible, and for that we will always be thankful:

John Scalzi, Ctein, Ty Franck, Christopher Brown, Chris Rose, Joanna Volpe, John & Christina, O’Halloran, Mary Robinette Kowal, Kate Elliott, Richard Flores IV, Fast

Forward: Contemporary Science Fiction, Kat Angeli, Superfan Canadiense Anónima, Rina Weisman & SF in SF Events, Randall Shepherd, Elizabeth B. McCarty, Amazing Stories Magazine, Mur Lafferty and Jim Van Verth, BWAWA (Baltimore-Washington Area Worldcon Association), ALAMO (Alamo Literary Arts Maintenance Organization), Worldcon 76, Kevin Roche, Ric Bretschneider, Jeremy Brett, Misty Hawkins, Adam Rakunas, Cheryl Souza, Daniel Dern, Renny Christopher, Kate Nepveu, John Yarrow, Jean Stuntz, Ian Monroe, Scarlet Moderne, Pablo Defendini, Gay and Joe Haldeman, J. Van Ekeren, Joseph Monti, Martha Wilson, Pamela Burr, Tasha Lennhoff, Peter Krulevitch, Caroline Spector, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Timothy Martin, Clifford Winnig, Reid Brennan Kermit Woodall, Benjamin Sparrow, Ellen Datlow, Reilly-Rose Hayes, Chris Duval, Leanne Verlhust, Laura Majerus, The Mighty Constellation (of Nebraska), Legion of Rassilon, Lester Gibo, Fred Moulton, Book Basement, Laurel Hill, Kevin Mukhar and The Mighty She Who Will Not Be Named.

Finally, thanks to the people who supported us on Kickstarter: Michi Trota, Dan García, Maria Lima, Benjamin C. Kinney, Mike Zipser, Marissa van Uden, Kirtana Rex, Adolfo de la Garza III, Izzy Wasserstein, Andrija Popovic, Kate Baker, Jed Hartman, Amanda Makepeace, Ian Stockdale, Glen Mehn, Rachel Coleman, Marguerite Kenner and Alasdair Stuart, David Huerta, Runes, Claudia Silva Solís, Joe and Gay Haldeman, Melissa Gay, Erica Stephan, Marcela Vargas Reynoso, DJ Orta, Dianna Dearborn, Moss Collum, and Andrea Phillips.

FENCES

BY JOSÉ LUIS ZÁRATE

TRANSL. BY JOEY WHITFIELD

The rabbit was rabid. The magician, his hand inside the top hat, realized suddenly. There was no other explanation for its feverish heat, the spasming muscles under its pelt, and the unexpected force with which it bit his hand.

Still smiling at the audience, he put his other hand into the hat to break its neck. Then he removed the animal, cradling it in his arms as if the little white rabbit needed protection and care. The rodent's urine ran slowly down his sleeve. There was no applause. It didn't matter. He was used to it. In any case he thanked them for their (wavering) attention and made way for Melvira and her skimpy sequined costume. They applauded her entrance. Between John's fingers: blood and rabbit saliva. He sucked the wound. After all, he was already infected. He went with the Gypsy who was still trying to fix the jeep that carried the Hinterland Circus along the length of the Fence. It seemed impossible that such a tiny vehicle could carry that heavy contraption of wood and plexiglass. But it did. The Gypsy was the closest thing they had to a boss. He knew everything. Almost everything; he knew nothing about making money. Apart from that he was a genius. Almost a genius.

"The rabbit was rabid," said John in his laboured Spanish.

"That's stupid. Rabbits don't get rabies."

"It bit me."

"Bullshit. Rabbits are rodents, like rats, and when rats get rabies they freeze, they don't attack people."

John put the rabbit on the carburetor that the Gypsy was repairing.

"No one explained that to him."

The Gypsy looked at the animal, touched its fevered skin, sighed slowly and

muttered what the magician feared most.

“Shit.”

Behind them the Fence glimmered.

There was no ceremony of any kind, no speeches, no official final day. Suddenly, without warning, the complex mechanism began to work. An incandescent light crackled across the desert. An electrical storm that divided Mexico and the rest of the world from the United States. Who could deny them the right to mark their territory with an impenetrable wall? The complicated ecosystem that had been the “Border” collapsed in an instant: the coyotes, the routes of the immigrants, the secret paths, the bribes, the multi-million dollar business of transporting people like livestock, the predators who lay in wait for the immigrants. All of it was erased, destroyed.

The Fence was part of the strategic defence system of the USA. The world had become a dangerous place for the Empire. Faced with the choice between being obliterated by the nuclear flames of one of the dozens of nuclear powers of the new century, or losing a cheap and useful workforce, the government opted for security. The submersion of Houston into a nuclear tide allowed the Fence to be approved without objection.

Foreigners had to stay on the other side of the barricade.

Racial purity had never been so important for North Americans, but this was a purity not measured by genetic code but by the issuing of documents: the citizenship card, the passport which identified you as a citizen of that country was enough to prove your lineage.

“John, we’ve got ten days before the first symptoms of the rabies show,” said the Gypsy as he hurriedly put the jeep back together.

“Ten days ... Are we close to anywhere?”

“No. To speed things up, the two of us are going to leave the others behind. Maybe we’ll find something. Maybe not. But at least we’ll try. What else can we do?”

They could abandon him. He could sort himself out. But the Gypsy never considered such options. For him the circus members were his tribe, his family. He had never lost anyone, except his wife and a couple of dancers. And they had left him of their own volition.

The jeep was loaded up with its precious supplies of petrol, alcohol, and gas. Including the solar batteries that were never fully charged (“There’s not even enough sun in the desert to make them work,” the Gypsy would always grumble).

The off-road vehicle was neither fast nor comfortable. John would have preferred the horses, but they had long since been eaten. It was dangerous to travel with them, an almost irresistible temptation. In the Empty Lands it was not advisable to attract much attention to personal property. It was never advisable per se, but they didn’t

know that. The Hinterland Circus had to learn as it went along. During the years it had been on the road, things had changed; never suddenly, never in such a traumatic way as the birth of the Fence. Slowly, things were different, so that it was possible to adapt, and things didn't seem too bad, part of a larger cycle, like the seasons or the gradual mutation of insects. Sometimes even the Gypsy forgot that the frontier had been different. How many years had it been? A lot, too many on the road. The gypsy told himself that in spite of all the years that had passed, he could still attempt the impossible in order to save one of his own. If the time ever came when it seemed easier to let someone die, all he would do was run towards the Fence and touch that solid light, melt into the momentary flare of its fire.

The jeep entered one of the many ghost cities that haunted the length of the frontier. They were used to those dusty remains where nobody stayed for long. They were places with bad luck. After all, it was luck that had killed them.

Those manufactured plains had always depended on the uninterrupted passage of people and products, vampire-cities that drank a little blood from every traveller, or sucked them dry.

The dusty buildings, the broken roads, and the thirsty cracks in the cement still dreamt of incessant lorries, of the wandering travellers and their scant savings.

But the Fence had put a stop to that. The new paranoia of so-called security. Now there are only the automatic transporters that carried nothing that is not authorized, nonstop containers that swallow distances between countries, steered by a silicon chip that cared nothing for the roadside cafés, the waiting motels, the expectant gas stations, the people thirsty for passing trade.

The containers are a mobile part of the US; territory in transit, according to the new laws. An attack on them was an attack on the northern nation. Not that it stopped the desperate looters along the route. But the containers were too tough to rob. They fired at the slightest provocation.

And they passed through the empty cities. Grey specters with sudden fury.

John and the Gypsy saw one of them leave, oblivious to its surroundings and the few nomads who inhabited the emptiness.

It didn't occur to them to ask the nomads for help. The Gypsy left them behind without a thought. There was always someone hungry. Especially in the Empty Lands.

There was no particular reason to abandon all that territory to the outcasts (like them). True, it was not a viable route to the US and the incessant radiation of the Fence had caused mutations in the insects that devoured entire harvests, but really it was the political movements that put an end to the place. It was a place that nobody wanted. More than ever, activity was concentrated there in the cities. The cultivation of algae depended on a centralised infrastructure. It was the cheapest way to obtain

nutrients, and so the land became increasingly unnecessary.

The land and its inhabitants ...

John's parents were members of a species that was almost extinct: North Americans in exile. Their sin had been terrible. They visited the Island and were admitted into countless enemy countries. Every territory they visited was further evidence against them. They were not unaware. Because of their love for other countries and foreign people, different places, they refused to return. It didn't bother them. The Fence had not yet left its mark on their generation. Once the circuit was closed the country was isolated from the rest of the world. The only possible transmissions were generated within the Fence, there was no way to find out about other countries except to travel to them, but the Networks said that this was suicide and the best way was to watch "Lands of the Earth" on prime-time on their favourite channel.

John's parents never described themselves as rebellious, they liked to discover unusual things, nothing more. There were no significant stains on their records, so their citizenship was not revoked. They kept the passports of a country that waited for them, maybe with prisons open for their sins, with well-intentioned psychiatrists to cleanse them of foreign ideas. They never found out if this was the case. They didn't bother to check if the rumours were true. They didn't care about dying in other lands, they had lived there for so long that they belonged.

The great movement of tourists from the U.S. dried up, as if the Fence also prevented exit. Nobody was surprised. They were safe behind their borders. The Fence was a palpable demonstration of their invulnerability; to go outside meant more than simply moving away. It was possible to reach the rest of the world through fibre optics. Communication systems enabled the monitoring of business from home. The Fence that Japan erected soon afterwards was, in some ways, a justification. Once again Japan shut out the rest of the world. It was the most powerful nation, economically speaking, and could easily afford to do so. Fences began to grow around the planet. Isolation became normal: for the nationalism of confinement the only things of worth were internal, the only justice was a nation's own, the Norm was what happened within the Fence.

Communication became more calculated. There was less talk of people and more of numbers, figures, business.

New food technology made most nations self-sufficient. And one day, behind their layers of protection, nations stated to fall silent.

John dreamed that he approached the Gypsy in the middle of the night and told him something in his slow English before biting him on the neck. He woke up with the taste of blood in his mouth. The Gypsy was sleeping heavily. John looked at his hand, white and pale like his skin. There were no symptoms of the infection, or signs

that the rabies virus was incubating inside him. It might have been a false alarm. But it might not have been.

After three days on the road they found nothing except people, with fewer resources than them. It never occurred to the magician to ask what they were doing there in the Empty Lands. He was there too after all, he had grown up on that seemingly dead land. As long as he could remember there was just the jeep, the Gypsy, the nomadic peoples, the few permanent plots, the Hinterland Circus. They wanted the same as him: to live another day. Live their lives. It was a lot simpler that way, the risks and familiar dangers. Living on the edges of a civilisation had its benefits. A medical service was not one of them.

The proximity of the Fence disrupted all transmissions and closed off any form of wireless communication. There was no way to ask for help. The Hinterlanders never asked. The cities were severely stratified. The Gypsy said it was impossible to be admitted without money and influence. Not even into Maintenance. John's parents had told him. When they arrived at the frontier with their bags on their shoulders and their eyes wide open, they came across the Hinterland Circus. They joined the tour out of curiosity. The Gypsy agreed when they showed him how they could make coins disappear, produce flowers, pull rabbits out of hats. They made ends meet and never did any harm to the other circus members. That was enough. They even had their son inside the trailer. They named him John because they thought that the Gypsy's name was Juan. When John's father died they gave his body to the desert, like all the Hinterlanders. At the frontier there was no time for graves or plans for the dead. And what more was the magician in that moment but a corpse in waiting? He had been careful not to approach the Gypsy, eat from his plates, infect him. As soon as he felt one of the symptoms of the disease, he would bury himself in the desert, or embrace the Fence. In some ways he had spent the whole journey preparing for the end. He felt sorry for the Gypsy. John had been one of the biggest draws in the circus, not so much for his meagre abilities as a magician, but for the fact that he was a Gringo. It was such a rarity to see one in real life. Only 60 years had passed since the U.S. had closed its borders, but so much had happened in that time. Gringos had become curiosities like the lizard with two heads that at one time had stolen the show. On the frontier the image of the Gringos changed over time. They were the people who had expelled the whole world from their interior. Special people. The few pictures that came from the U.S. spoke of an incredible reality of golden beaches, contemporary wonders, cities of light. The Hinterlanders continued to shape their mythology. And John didn't fit into it.

The Gypsy would insist that he said his magic number in English and that he presented the rabbit with a triumphant expression as he said nice rabbit. "A real North

American,” he confirmed as he recited in two languages. ¡Por mi madre... bohemios!¹

The act almost always finished with the exhibition of the ultimate magical object: John’s passport. The key that would open the gates in the fence, only for those who possessed the correct genetic code, lodged in its magnetic memory.

The passport was real, but nobody believed it after reflecting on it. If it was real, what was the Gringo doing there?

John couldn’t tell them.

When the seventh day came around it was clear to both of them that they weren’t going to find anything. The Gypsy gestured towards the Fence. It wasn’t far, they could see its radiance in the night.

“It is time to return to your own kind.”

It took a moment for John to realise that he was referring to the North Americans. He didn’t know why. They had always called him a Gringo and the Gypsy made him practice his English every day. “You don’t belong here.” In one form or another he had always been forced to face up to this fact. When he was a child the Border people would tell him about the wonders of the US. How many times had he heard of the wonders of the science on the other side of the Fence? They could do anything for you, if they wanted. For free, if you were a Gringo citizen. John never knew whether he believed those stories. His parents always told him that one day he would see his country. They told him that until the US government imposed martial law, no citizen was allowed out of the country unless it was important for the nation. How could you convince some bureaucrat that the Hinterland Circus was vital, at least for them?

Somehow the fact that John was a foreigner made the Circus curiously proud. “We are all outsiders everywhere,” the Gypsy would say, “but you’re a Gringo. A real Gringo, sí señor.”

Now he was a sick Gringo. All the years he had felt out of place had to be good for something, the sadness he felt at the fact that the Empty Lands didn’t belong to him in any way. John wanted to say something, to protest perhaps. But he didn’t because the Hinterlanders only lived by one rule: to survive. To say that he preferred rabies to abandoning those lands, in some ways would show that he was not a frontier man.

“Don’t worry, John ... remember that there must be a hinterland on the other side too ...”

But would it be like his? Would there be opportunities and tolerance for a traveling circus? Everybody said that he was a Gringo, but what was a Gringo like, he wondered? The same as him? And what the hell was he like?

“I’ll miss you, Gypsy.”

“I’ll miss you ... if we get another magician he will have to be called Magic John, too.”

John smiled. His smile was forced, like the Gypsy's.

"Do you know what you will find?"

"Yes ... I hope ... I don't know. What does it matter, Gypsy? They are my people, they'll take care of me."

On the ninth day they reached the automatic access gates in the Fence. A booth that opened and allowed one person inside, with a North American passport. No other was accepted. In some ways it was an emergency exit. The heavy traffic of people and objects took place in the cities. The Gypsy didn't say goodbye to John. He simply wished him luck as he entered the booth. John didn't bid farewell either. He told the Gypsy to make use of his things and asked him his name. The Gypsy didn't reply. Gypsies never give their true names.

The passport opened the gates in the Fence. The machine did not return it to him. He stayed in the cabin, waiting. The United States didn't seem that different to the frontier, at least not from inside the booth.

But when two men arrived and began to ask his name, his age, the names of his parents, and why he was there, John knew he didn't belong there either.

John didn't understand their English.



Note: this short story was published in *Palabras Errantes. Latin American Literature in Translation*: www.palabraserrantes.com.



JOSÉ LUIS ZÁRATE (México, 1966) is one of the most famous and respected Mexican writers working in Speculative Fiction. His work includes novels, short stories, essays and poetry. He is considered part of a reformist movement in Mexican literature, began at the end of the twentieth century, which moves away from nationalism towards more universal themes. He is one of the founding members of Mexican Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy and is one of the pioneers in Mexico of electronic

publication: his twitter account, @joseluiszarate, daily publishes nano-stories. A winner of numerous national and international literary prizes, some of his works include: *El tamaño del Crimen* (published electronically at sigueleyendo.es, 2012); *Three Messages and a Warning* (2012); *Le Pettis Chaperons* (2010); *La máscara del héroe* (2009); *La ruta del hielo y la sal* (1998); *Xanto, Novelucha Libre* (Planeta, 1994. Ediciones Castillo, 2015). You can read over 20,000 of his short short tales on his twitter account @joseluiszarate

JOEY WHITFIELD (transl.) lectures on 20th and 21st century Latin American literature and film at Cardiff University. Most of his work is about the relationship between culture, crime and punishment. His first book *Prison Writing of Latin America* (Bloomsbury 2018) compares texts written by ‘political’ and ‘criminal’ prisoners from Cuba, Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, Bolivia and Brazil. He is also interested in translation, particularly of non-traditional literatures such as prisoner writing, testimonial texts and creative writing by anarchists. He is currently working on another book about the cultural politics of the ‘War on Drugs’.

1 A reference to ‘El Brindis Bohemio’, a popular poem by the Mexican poet Guillermo Aguirre Fierro, written in El Paso, Texas, in 1915. The lyrics speak of a group of friends on New Year’s Eve, toasting the things they are grateful for; with the most emotive toast, by the last bohemio, for his mother.

AZTLÁN LIBERATED

DAVID BOWLES

From the rubble of war-gutted Juárez they emerge: el Chamuco and his rumblefish clique. La Güera is at point, machete and Glock in hand, wheaten hair bound in a bandana. Next comes Einstein, hairnet askew, Stacies badly in need of a shine, knapsack full of battered books and gadgets. Payaso brings up the rear, droning a constant comedic monologue despite the devastation.

El Chamuco mourns his fallen carnales, victims of the Pocho-Zeta War, but grins victorious. The four pachucos have avenged their barrio, following the only code that yields survival in this apocalyptic desert: kill or be killed.

The vultures wheel overhead. Life slithers on.

La Güera raises her blade to signal a sudden stop. Her Glock dips its glittering barrel. There on the shattered blacktop a vehicle looms unexpectedly, an Army green jeep bearing the US flag, its 42 white stars mocking. Against a knobby tire a soldier sits, legs splayed, guts gleaming red in his cupped hands. His comrades appear to be missing.

Choo attack, el Chamuco surmises, and he steps forward, eyes scanning, AK-47 raised.

The yank is Latino. He lifts a pained gaze at the gang, sighs. “Bueno.” He coughs raggedly. “Kill me.”

“You’re already dead.” El Chamuco kneels close. “The hell you’re doing in Aztlán, yank?”

A rivulet of blood dribbles down the soldier’s chin. “Scientists. They figured it out. How to end the goddamn chupacabras. Found the queen. Meteor that hit near Las Cruces? Choo ship. The other goatsuckers were advance troops. Now they’re plugged

in. Hive mind.”

The yank—Chávez, his uniform declares him—bumps the jeep with his head. “A nuke. In back. Their defenses scramble guidance. Got to take it in person. There’s a detonator in the cabin.”

“Fucking yanks,” Payaso mutters. “Them and their nukes. Cabrones.”

Wheezing hoarsely, Chávez extends a bloody hand and seizes el Chamuco’s tattered flannel. “You all are just cholos. Probably don’t got it in you. But there it is.”

His eyes glaze, and Holy Mother Death takes him.

“Chale,” Payaso spits. “Like we’re gonna forget fifteen years. Putos put up a wall, trapped us inside with the Choopi-choops, grunts ready to shoot your ass if you try to climb to Mother Mex or Gringoland.”

Einstein shakes his close-cropped head. “Yeah, but we wouldn’t just be saving them, ese. We’d be liberating Aztlán, from Brownsville to Tijuana. Free to build a permanent home for la raza.”

La Güera scoffs. “Whatever. I just want to gank me some goatsuckers. Using this bomb means a shitload of them die, I’m all for it.”

El Chamuco regards them all, bravest souls he’s known.

“Then we do it. We go together as far as Las Cruces, then one of us drives the bomb to the crater’s edge and hurries back fast as shit. Got to be far away when we detonate.” The silence burgeons with implications no one will voice. “But right now you’re in charge of the bomb, Einstein. Payaso drives. Güerita, gather any weapons the yanks left, get them working. Nos vamos en diez.”

As Einstein retrieves the detonator and a military satphone, el Chamuco drags the soldier to the dunes, douses him, and sets him alight, leaving nothing for the alien horde. The sun settles redly into a jade-swathed horizon. The cholo lowers his tattooed face, mumbles a prayer.

Darkness encroaches as they head north. Rusty remains of cars loom as if to snatch them from the road. Amid the windy silence comes a chattering whine. The four heft weapons, ready for the attack. Thudding impacts send the vehicle swaying back and forth. Large, glowing eyes and stiletto teeth loom at windows. Claws tear at sheet metal. El Chamuco sprays the roof, his tactic met by shrieking cries. Then the enemy redoubles its efforts. The chupacabras, their purpose as ineffable as ever, berserk against the gang.

A haze of smoke rises as barrels blaze. Payaso steers blind, plunging across obscure

sand. Through a sharp-edged hole, Einstein is taken. Bursting from the jeep, la Güera screams as she fires. Like a fury she drives the monsters before her. Spiny backs sprawl in the dim starlit dunes. Einstein howls in pain, his arm shattered, and with it the detonator. They dress his wound, crouch near an outcropping of rocks, awaiting the sun, thinking somber thoughts.

As dawn drags itself into the sky, Einstein uses his good hand to scrounge through his knapsack. In short order he has kludged together a strange system, battered keyboard and cracked tablet jury-rigged to the soldier's satphone.

El Chamuco watches for a while as the barrio genius pecks at the keys and tweaks. "What you up to, little homie?"

"A sat-hack, ese. Gaining access to the Net by bouncing a signal off a military satellite. Got to figure out how to manually detonate the pinche bomb."

Someone draws in a sharp breath, but no one argues. The choice is clear.

El Chamuco addresses his sibs. "We always knew. To get this nuke near the crater at Las Cruces is suicide for one of us. Now someone else gotta die."

Einstein nods. "I know how to activate it. Just need someone to drive. I've lived a life. Read a lot. I'll go."

"Shit, I ain't letting this pendejo get all the credit." Payaso grins, his eyes bright. "I got the wheel."

"Pobres mentos," mutters la Güera. "The minute the choops attack, y'all are gonna wish I was there."

Their leader looks at each, looks down into their hearts. They nod at him. His chest aches with pride.

"Órale, pues. Time to show the haters what's what."

Einstein nods, points at his gear. "Simón. That's exactly what we're gonna do, jefe. I just set up a streaming feed. Bounces video of everything we do from here on out off that yank satellite. No way Gringoland or Mother Mex gets credit for this shit."

El Chamuco puts out a hand, helps him stand. "Bad-ass. I can talk to that thing?" "Simón. Go for it."

The cholo leans his tattooed face toward the small iris. "Hey, fuckers. Name's Chamuco. Yank soldiers brought a nuke into Aztlán, tried to destroy the choops, but they pussied out, got their asses killed. So now me and my clique are gonna do yall's dirty work for you. You hear me, pendejos? Just us four pachucos."

He turns, gestures at the jeep. "Okay, climb on, homies. Let's go save the world."

An hour later the jeep rumbles off the pitted highway and Payaso smacks it into four-wheel drive. Chupacabras burrow and sleep their blood-speckled sleep when the sun is up, but the thrumming of the motor and turning tires calls to them. Black specks soon dot the dunes, moving closer, fast. Soon a sea of chittering night is flowing at the jeep from all directions. Canid faces snarl in the vanguard.

“Keep the fuckers off Einstein. I got Payaso,” El Chamuco yells at la Güera above the rising din. “At all costs, ¿entiendes?”

“My pleasure, jefe.”

They are still ten minutes from the lip of the crater. The first wave hits. El Chamuco sprays bullets at the choops in front, clearing a path. Payaso rams and crushes the wounded. La Güera grunts and fires, kicks and stabs.

Their defense lasts three minutes before the horde swells like tsunami, choops clambering up the spiny backs of other choops, crashing upon the jeep, slashing tires, puncturing the gas tank, smashing through the engine block.

“Better hope we’re close enough!” Shouts el Chamuco as he slips though the shattered windshield and takes on a dozen of the beasts. “Detonate that fucker now, Einstein!”

The chupacabras have entered the back of the jeep. La Güera grapples with them, punching, kicking, biting, howling like Cihuacoatl, fierce Aztec goddess. The alien drones rip off her arm, but she keeps thrusting them away from Einstein, giving him every second she can.

“Órale, pendejo,” she gurgles at last. “Now or never! Mándalos a la verga, and I’ll see your ass in hell!”

They dismember her. The jeep drifts to a stop. Payaso is decapitated with a single, vicious blow of talons. El Chamuco is shoved back into the jeep by the squirming mass. His eyes meet Einstein’s as the man makes the final connection in the firing mechanism.

“Ahí los wacho, fuckers,” the genius mutters, smiling for the camera.

“That’s my boy,” el Chamuco manages to whisper.

The world goes white.

It doesn’t take long. When the mushroom cloud expands above the Organ Mountains and every chupacabras drops dead, both the US and Mexico initially assume the military mission has been a success. But the video from Quarantined Zone goes viral, and the names of the four cholos are reported across social media and news

outlets. Pirate ISPs throughout the wastelands spread the news: liberated at last.

Neither Mexico nor the US wants the responsibility of cleaning up the Quarantined Zone, so when the tens of thousands trapped within those walls insist on their right of self-determination, arguments are perfunctory, purely for show.

The flag of freedom is lifted over Aztlán.

Her saviors, whatever paradise or hell they find themselves in, flash their gang sign one final time.



Note: this short story was published in the book *Chupacabra Vengeance*, Broken River Books, 2017.



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A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED

JULIA RIOS

TRADUCCIÓN DE PATRICIA CORAL

It's raining when Osmundo stops me by the crosswalk. It wasn't raining a moment ago. In another reality a half step to the left of this one, the sun is shining and Osmundo is a skater punk who goes by Oz. In that reality I never told you anything I shouldn't have. But only because I never met you to begin with.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a person who has been cut off from her dearest friend must be in want of a reality shift.

This Osmundo is wearing a tight black t-shirt that says Glitter Queer in sparkly pink writing. He is built in this reality. Really ripped. He must work out a lot. I think about my Osmundo watching *The World's Strongest Man* on TV and idly saying he thinks it would be cool to try that, and I wonder if this Osmundo actually plans to.

"Carrie," he says. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I ask. It's the kind of question that might sound like friendly banter, but it should also buy me time, and maybe if I'm lucky, give me an actual answer. Because of course I have no idea what I'm doing. I just got here.

Osmundo shakes his head, disparaging. "Don't do it, girl. This is a mess, and it's only gonna get messier."

"How do you know?" I ask.

Osmundo snorts, which is not really helpful, but is totally Osmundo. My home Osmundo makes exactly that noise when he's exasperated with me, which is...not infrequent.

Osmundo is never too far away when a shift happens. The me who designed the shifts made that a condition. Her Osmundo has a sort of homing device. A key.

"Okay," I say. "Look, I obviously need help. Can we get out of the rain while we

discuss this?"

Osmundo jams his hands in his pockets in that way that says he needs them there so he won't use them to shake some sense into me, but he follows me to stand under the awning outside the coffee shop across the street.

"I can't believe you want to go in there," Osmundo says.

"Why?" I ask, desperately hoping this question will turn up some useful answers about who I am.

Somewhere in another reality, another me is doing the same thing to skater punk Osmundo, and to tax accountant Osmundo, and to my original reality Osmundo, who hasn't decided what he wants to do yet, even though he's 27.

I don't know what made all the other mes want to shift, but the desire has to have been unanimous if I understand science genius me's notes. I wonder if any of us has found answers, or satisfaction. I guess not, since we're still shifting.

I'm starting to think I would rather be home again, though. Even without you in my life. ... Maybe.

The part of me that felt so ripped raw apart that I yearned my way into a different timeline is still there, a little voice, but a persistent one. *What if you can have her back here? It asks. What if you don't have to have ruined that friendship forever?*

So, no, I'm not ready quite yet.

When we walk into the coffee shop, I understand immediately why Osmundo was freaking out. It's familiar, wooden floors that creak underfoot, skylights, mismatched tables, and heavy ceramic cups. Everything in the place feels comforting and warm, like my favorite cafe back home. But in this one, you're a barista.

Osmundo notes the panic that must be apparent on my face and smoothly guides me to a table.

"Sudden change of heart?" he asks. "Don't worry. You don't have to talk to her."

"More like she doesn't have to talk to me," I mutter.

"Oh, she'll talk," he says. "I just don't know why you would want to invite that." He has no goatee in this reality, but he still strokes his chin the same way he does in the ones where he isn't clean-shaven. I can't help smiling at that. All the little tells are a comfort, wherever I land. My people are still themselves. I am still me. Something of us is intrinsic, fixed.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a Carrie in possession of the chance to talk to Alicia will absolutely take that chance," I say.

Osmundo's brow furrows. "Why are you talking so weird right now?"

I pull out the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* I keep in my bag in every reality and point to the famous first sentence. But it's different here.

"Everyone in the world knows that a single man in possession of a large fortune will

one day or another need to find a wife.”

Okay, things in this reality are definitely odd.

“I don’t get it,” Osmundo says. “Just stay here and I’ll bring us drinks.”

He comes back with two cappuccinos and some almond biscotti. I usually get a black coffee and a croissant, myself.

“Thanks,” I say, trying not to seem disappointed, but my poker face is no good at all.

“Sorry,” he says. “You get my usual instead of yours. I couldn’t let Alicia know you were here. She knows your order by heart.”

“Right,” I say. Because of course you do. We know each other too well in every reality. Except the ones where I never met you at all. I don’t know if those are better or worse. All I know is that in all of them, the chances of being close are ruined now. Every single time. I don’t know exactly how things fell apart in this one, but it’s clear they did. And I’m not over it.

I wonder if any of the other mes are.

“Okay, Osmundo. I know you want to help me. And I know I’m a giant mess. So... let’s try a little thought experiment.”

Osmundo waves his hand in a circle, beckoning. *Go on*, he’s saying. This gesture is another one of his tells, consistent in every reality. There’s a lot I don’t know about this Osmundo, his hopes and dreams, his everyday routine, but I know his soul.

“Tell me about my life,” I say. “Give me all the details. Pretend I have amnesia. The basics and the good things and all the things I obviously need to fix.”

Osmundo frowns, skeptical that this will do anything good for me. “Why?”

“Just humor me,” I say.

Osmundo is a good sport in every reality, so he does.

In short order I learn that I am 25 (like always), I am Carrie Anna Cynthia Gonzalez (sometimes true, one letter off from my home reality, where I’m Carrie Ann instead of Carrie Anna), Osmundo is my cousin who isn’t a cousin—our dads are besties from childhood (always true), I was mostly doing okay with my lifeplan until this last year when I started messing everything up (mostly true), I’ve got a lot of friends (always true), I’ve never dated anyone (50/50), I met you three years ago (true except in the realities where I never meet you), we were always in each other’s pockets for two years (same), you’re an evangelical Christian (usually not true—usually you’ve rejected that by the time I meet you), you’re super bad news for me (can’t possibly be true... can it? I refuse), you’re coming over to our table right now (0% true in every other reality...).

“Carrie, I didn’t think you would come in today,” you say. You look only at me, not even nodding at Osmundo, which is a little weird, but I don’t care. Your voice washes

over me like a warm shower after a long cold walk in the dark. I am a tangle of love and misery. In my home reality, you haven't wanted to talk to me in months. I don't know if you ever will.

"Hi," I say, shy, smiling.

"Does this mean you've thought it through?" you ask.

I nod, as if I know what you're talking about.

Your face lights up. "Oh, that's wonderful!"

I think, in this moment, that whatever it is I have agreed to, it's worth it.

"Do you want to sit with us?" I ask.

Osmundo gives me a look that says *wtf are you thinking, woman!?*, but he's saved because you say, "I have to get back behind the coun-ter. But I'll see you tonight?"

"Absolutely," I say. I'll have to figure out where, but if you want to see me, I *will* be there.

"What was *that*?" Osmundo asks as you walk away.

"Me fixing things," I say.

"How on earth can that possibly fix anything?"

"She wants to be friends again," I say. "I'm miserable without that connection."

"She thinks you agree that your "connection" as you call it, is a spiritual bond centered on Jesus," Osmundo counters.

I frown. He did say you're an evangelical in this reality, but... "But I'm not religious and she knows that."

"You just volunteered to go to Wednesday night church with her."

"Oh," I say. "Right. But how bad can it be?"

Osmundo sips his cappuccino like he's in one of those reaction gifs where people sip tea and throw shade. "Do you seriously think she isn't going to press you to go to conversion therapy again? We've been over this. You can tell yourself you don't have a crush on her, and you can date only guys, or no one at all if that's what you want, but studies show that it's actively harmful to try to pray the gay away."

For a moment I consider, seriously, allowing myself to convert, to try to embrace the Jesus stuff. I imagine the future where you and I are soul friends who plan church events together and talk every day. I imagine the warmth of knowing you love me. It's brilliant, that feeling. Surely any trade would be worth it.

But then I look at Osmundo, my not cousin, my champion. I think about how the future comes together without him in my life. Because that's why you didn't look at him when you came over. If I choose you here, I lose him. And how many other people?

I sigh, long and deep. "You're right," I say.

I feel it, then, the crackling at the edge of the room that signifies a shift is imminent.

This time I don't wonder where I'm going. I know. It's time to go back home.

What will the me from this reality do? What will her visits to the other realities have taught her?

It doesn't matter. I have a feeling she'll be all right.

The next moment I am in a coffee shop, but it's a subtly different coffee shop, and I'm here alone. I have my black coffee and an empty plate with the flaky traces of a croissant on it. The barista catches my eye from behind the counter and waves. It's not you. You're definitely not a barista in this reality. You're at home with your baby, enjoying maternity leave from your high-powered job. I pull *Pride and Prejudice* out of my bag. Its opening line is the one I expect.

Going to church won't bring me to you here, but you also don't care if I'm gay or straight or bi or whatever. And you definitely don't mind if Osmundo is. Just so long as I don't expect you to be more than a friend. Because you've never felt that way about me, and you have a husband, and you're happy.

I wish I could go back to a year ago and stop myself from confessing anything to you. Or, failing that, I wish I could make past me respect your boundaries once the horrible rush of words was out. Your friendship was worth so much more than that.

I can't, though. If I've learned one thing through all the shifting, it's that there's no going back, only forward, or sideways, I guess. The hurt is familiar, but not so acute as before, I think. At last I'm ready to face it.

I clear my dishes and head out into the chilly spring day. There are flowers opening—daffodils and crocuses—the early sprays of purple and yellow that herald new growth and lush greenery to come. A year ago, I would have texted you a photo. A month ago, thinking of this would have made me cry. Today I don't do either.

Maybe we'll get to be friends again, or maybe we won't. Flowers will continue to open and bloom. And me? I'll still like them. Life will go on.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a Carrie Ann Cynthia Gonzalez in possession of a phone must be in want of a flower photo to text someone.

I snap the photo and send it to Osmundo.



JULIA RIOS is a Hugo Award winning editor, writer, podcaster, and narrator. Her fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in several places, including *Daily Science Fiction*,

Lightspeed, and *Goblin Fruit*. She was a fiction editor for *Strange Horizons* from 2012 to 2015, poetry and reprints editor for *Uncanny Magazine* from 2016-2017, and is currently the fiction editor at *Fireside Magazine*. She is also a co-host of the Hugo-nominated podcast, *The Skiffy and Fanty Show*, a science fiction discussion and movie review podcast, and she has narrated stories for *Podcastle*, *Pseudopod*, and *Cast of Wonders*, and poems for the *Strange Horizons* podcast. She's half Mexican, but her (fairly dreadful) French is better than her Spanish. Find her on Twitter as [@omgjulia](#)

MATACHÍN

BY FELECIA CATON GARCIA

I

Lina would have you believe that each moment is a faceted jewel of narrative. That perspective is more important than truth. That there is no difference between translation and interpretation. But there's just one story here. Perspective is overrated. Not all versions of history are equally valid and sooner or later someone opens the goddamned box to check on the cat. Don't be fooled. Lina isn't. Her propensity for lying and lying well is proof enough. You don't have to take my word for it. I'll give you evidence. Listen:

We're driving to a department dinner and she sits beside me, turned toward me, one hand on my thigh, the other resting on the back of my neck. On our right, the Air Force Base stretches for miles along the edge of the city. She's telling me about an article she's read about abusive men, how they sometimes move photos one inch over on the wall or change all of the clocks in the house to keep their women uncertain and reliant. To make them doubt their own sanity. Lina is outraged.

"Can you imagine?" she asks me, shaking her head, intricate silver earrings chiming like a belled cat. "Imagine making someone's notion of reality so fragile." I glance at her. We pass the main gate to the base where the young guards salute incoming cars with preening formality.

"How's Khaled?" I ask her. Her fingernails graze my skin as she starts to pull her hand away, but then she grips me tighter, grasping the back of my neck and shaking me softly.

"Fine, I think." She shrugs and looks out of the window. "I haven't seen him."

It's monsoon season, and the ground is still wet from an afternoon thunderstorm. Lina has her hair clipped up in an elaborate knot as a hedge against the unusual

humidity. It leaves her neck bare. Just beneath her ear is the faint line of a bruise where a sharp tooth may have caught too hard or too long. Where a thumb might have pressed, convulsed at the moment of orgasm. *Liar*. I say nothing. She may have slept with her neck against the edge of a book. She may have scratched herself cutting the dead growth of the plum tree. And next week, when the bruise is lower, darker, she will tell me I am imagining things. She will tell me it is the same bruise as before. Imagine. A reality so fragile you doubt your own sanity.

That day, Lina reached up and unclipped her barrette. Her hair curled where it fell against her shoulders. The mark was hidden. But I'm telling this story, and I'm telling you that bruise was there. I saw it, and at another point in time, something made it. Khaled, the plum tree, her own fingernails. Fuck point of view. One of these things is true, and the others are not. It doesn't matter who's telling the story.

II

I don't believe in the grandfather paradox. I don't believe that time allows the kind of chaos that everyone warns about. It doesn't fit the universe profile. I find it useful to think of the universe more as a personality than a system. Or, rather, as a system of personality. It only makes sense. Hand in hand with our effort to build artificial intelligence is the understanding that personality is part of the process. To think autonomously means to develop the pattern of preference and choice that we call personality. In much the same way your law enforcement experts work, I examine the forensic evidence of the universe acting. Criminally acting, some might say. Over the years, I've drawn up parameters. Developed a profile.

My conclusions thus far? The universe is a gentle sociopath. A monster of habit who likes the idea of itself as spontaneous and unpredictable, but who enjoys logical games: crosswords, Sudoku, chess. And quickly becomes bored. Invents new rules, becomes bored with the new rules, sets the game aside and begins a new one. Guiltlessly leaves things half-finished.

The universe is interested in things. No. The universe is interested in everything. But it has no particular interest in anything, and it is entirely uninterested in outcome. What does this have to do with the grandfather paradox? The universe will not tolerate someone traveling back in time and changing the flow of history so much that it would result in the demise of the time traveler. It is more likely that it would hand off the problem to one of its infinite brethren. A new universe would come into existence to house the new reality. The original reality would continue with minor details changed. Enough for a good universe-sized game of Find the Difference. I think sometimes we

do find the difference. We call it Déjà Vu or Ghosts or A Feeling. We call it I Know I Put My Glasses Next to the Glass of Water But Now They Are in My Pocket. Ultimately, though, the changes are small. Inconsequential. We blame it on our age, our distraction, or our overactive imagination. We collude.

So when Lina says she feels as if she's known Khaled in another life, I don't have to believe in reincarnation to think she might be right. I've stopped asking how. Now I just want to know *What was she to him?* I want to know *What about me?* I want to know *Where is he now?*

III

Of course I knew about Khaled. At first, I thought he was nothing more than a distraction in a world of distractions. I wanted it to stop. I asked for it. But when she started coming home, distracted, smiling and singing in the kitchen, I realized I had become reliant on the fingertip bruises on her thighs, the bite marks on her breasts. Suddenly, there was no evidence. No proofs. My assertions reverted to theories. I should have been reassured. I'd given her a requirement and she'd followed it.

I was not reassured. So, I worked. We'd recently received a bevy of visiting scientists—a phalanx of Chinese researchers and two or three Iranian imports. One of the Iranians looked enough like Khaled that I held his hand a little too long making the mental comparisons. But I was glad for the distraction, and for the next few weeks I immersed myself in the work. It was good to get fresh blood in the place. It's too easy to begin participating in the hive mind that happens when people work too closely for too long. We begin to reinforce our own opinions. Established criteria for reality doesn't get questioned closely enough. We become congregants instead of scientists. After all, who's to say we aren't being manipulated by an alien species? Played with by pinheaded angels in lab coats? Orchestrated by sly dolphins?

IV

My fellow South American, Andrés, was our experimentalist and material physicist. He was the one who would build the matachín to hold our theorem. You don't know the matachines? They are everywhere in Latin America, and they are very popular here in New Mexico. They are masked and costumed dancers who play the role of famous historical figures. In La Danza de Los Moros y Los Cristianos, the matachines tell

stories of the Moors being exiled from Spain. The Indios here took to it with fervor, of course. A story of one people driving out the invaders. But you don't care about history. The point is that someone must construct the physical shapes that can bear the weight of the theory. Those dancers become history when they dance. It isn't just a costume. But sometimes it's easy to forget that. A quantum computer, for instance, has to be a real thing. Something you can see and touch and drop on the floor. And building things is what Andrés does.

V

There is a fine line between cynicism and idealism. Cynics are cynics because they want so badly to believe. And however cynical I may seem to you about people and politics, I believe in science. I believe that it transcends everything else. In this way, I am devout. So we were all of the same faith inside those small, humming rooms: prayerful, drunk, enraged. We all believed that the work we did was divine.

Lina would have understood if I'd told her. She would have understood not because she could do the math, but because she works almost entirely in metaphor. In translation. She has spent her life in the spaces between words, which might as well be gaps in reality. But I had stopped talking to Lina about my work. For a long time, there was no one to tell, even if I had been allowed to tell it. Even if I had decided to break the rules. Risk everything.

But now you know. We did it. We solved it. And in solving one problem, we solved a thousand. A million. But for months that knowledge paralyzed us. You think Eve went skipping back to Adam with juice still running down her chin? No chance. Desperate with worry, he found her days after. Found her still naked, curled against the base of the tree, absorbing, shivering, learning. And who wouldn't want to kiss those sticky lips? Who wouldn't want to taste it right then and there: his tongue in her mouth. Then, and only then, would she have been able to speak.

So for all the stories about the scientists who scamper to the journals to publish first, that wasn't us. And not only because we couldn't. We sat and looked at one another for a long while. The devout prayed. The alcoholics drank. And me? I spent hours in the dark listening to scales rasping against the bark.

VI

In central Mexico, there is a telescope made of 300 tanks of purified water. Every second of every minute of every hour, the water watches the distant reaches of space. It observes the voracious eating habits of black holes—energy detectable only through the secondary shower of particles created as our atmosphere deflects and diffuses the dangerous energy. The water watches. The water has eyes.

VII

Earlier I told you that not all perspectives are equally valid. That sooner or later someone opens the box and things are what they are. But I think I lied to you. Not intentionally. Not willfully. I still believe in will. Now more than ever. Because it is becoming increasingly clear that time is symmetrical. It runs forward and backward. What I do today changes what I did yesterday.

How can I explain this to you? Several years ago, Lina translated a mystery novel by a well-known Bolivian writer. Not her usual thing, but this one interested her. The novel begins with the unveiling of the murderer. I imagine some people quit reading after the first chapter. After all, what labyrinthine forests: down to the tip of Tierra del Fuego, in and out of volcanoes and ice floes and stones worn smooth by millennia of water before revealing in the final chapter: the identity of the victim.

Think of it now. That moment when the name of the murdered is printed on the page—think of the backward process through the story that happens in the mind of the reader. Step by step to the first and final chapter. But everything is different now that you know. The past changes when you find that the killer has stabbed to death his own father.

I see your skepticism. Already you are running through all of the significances and scenarios that nearly everyone does. The practical applications. And because you are who you are, there is one idea that emerges again and again: the ancient science of weaponizing knowledge. Secrets and their spies. Even the Promised Land was the work of spies—twelve to be precise. You don't know the story? What do they teach you? Not physics, not math, not history, not poetry. All things you should know deeply and well if you're going to carry a gun, by the way. You should see the background check I'd put into place if I were in charge. So history.

There is some version of this in every corner of the world. The Aztecs seeking Tenochtitlan, the Umayyads traveling to Iberia, and Moses sending twelve spies into Canaan for forty days (numbers have always mattered) to see whether the people could be conquered and the land possessed by the Israelites. Ten spies returned with doubtful reports. Joshua and Caleb returned and predicted a successful outcome.

Mysteriously, the ten doubters became sick with plague and died—I doubt they'd studied history either or they could have seen that coming. That meant God ordained it. Joshua and Caleb became heroes, though not exempt from the forty years of desert wandering meant to punish the Israelites for their ten doubters. And there is your history lesson for today: a good spy knows that he doesn't report the truth, he writes it.

Khaled would have known this story. Too bad you never thought to ask, eh? I'd call you Philistines, but then I'd have to tell you another story. So, long story short. We didn't know what questions to ask, what calculations to access (the term "run" no longer applied—all calculations had already been run somewhere and sometime). Not that we'd have been allowed. There were already changes being made. Scientists reassigned to other projects. Three checkpoints in and out of every lab. Unsmiling men and women behind every desk. And you lot. Setting up in every unused office, in the corner of every lab, and at the edge of my vision everywhere I went. The last mission of every spy on the table: the knowledge of every possible world. Like trying to hide an elephant under an eyelash. But I guess you had to try.

Ask me the right question now, and you'll understand everything that came next.



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KAN/TRAHC

ILIANA VARGAS

TRANSL. BY ADRIAN DEMOPOLUS

The headache began minutes after S. heard the last thunderclap, just the one that had sounded as if the remains of volcanic rock upon which the city had been built were adjusting themselves, preparing to awaken once more transfigured into caramel material of incandescent glass.

The silence of the end of the world did not allow them to open their eyes, even though their solar connector had activated almost six hours ago. There was a noise interference that diminished the elasticity of the golden body, rooting it to a black coral reef, on whose points ceaselessly vibrated the luminosity of an abyssal voice whose nature, as much as they tried to associate it with some earthly element, was unrecognizable.

It was not the first time that this type of interference slipped into the suprasensory liquid that the dispatcher provided every 8 hours. S. had detected it since they tried to decrease the dosage, provoking a short circuit upon inserting the point of their inked nib pen in the metal entrance of the apparatus, but the only thing they achieved was concentrating the liquid in the first three milliliters of the conductive hose, in such a way that, upon going through the venous branches of their thigh, the density of their blood caused an electric shock so sharp and intense that it made them perceive a luminous aura on every object of a phosphoric nature around them.

The-wor-st-fe-ar-ed-is-re-born with the bubbling of the dream The worst feared? Wouldn't it be, better said [they enjoyed saying], the most feared?

[questioning themselves taking advantage of the vulnerability of consciousness was another one of their fascinations]

No. No, no, no, let's see: the worst feared, it means [they said] that which is feared improperly ... So, if that which one should not fear stands out among all of the shadows—even those that are hidden beneath the obscene tongues of those shoes—if I begin to shut my eyes abandoning myself to the elastic languor with which The Supreme Sleep reveals itself in my body ... I would neglect my surveillance site at the defensive wall that this operating room // waiting room // crystallized cryogenic capsule // and I // have constructed over 12 days to defend ourselves from the walking pieces ... and ... so ... if my eyes begin to succumb to the heaviness with which the cold leaps over the eyelashes to close them ... my body would lose the uncontainable state of

«Alert °tachycardia°burning pulsation in the head°tachycardia°»

which we have designed to recognize the beings cloaked in purple amber when they arrive carrying—with the help of two metal tentacles at the extreme left and extreme right of its indecipherable body—enormous containers of steel beetles which, upon varying the intensity of the light that the lamps direct toward them, change, subtly, almost imperceptibly, in porosity, in texture, in outline and look like—or they want us to think that they look like—pieces of flesh in the shape of a leg adhered to a foot from which IN REALITY hang small groups of viscous cocoons riddled with ocular thorns ... and they come, they approach hidden toward our exposed flesh, that flesh which we allow to be cut in exchange for silence and kan/trahc ... ah ... if the heaviness weren't so sweet ... if the muscles tried harder not to give in ... that is what, well understood, is the worst feared...

///: DAY 13

The isolation increases intolerance. 90 milligrams of contraximoxin and I can feel the gaseous particle that slips in with the moss that grows at a caterpillar's pace in the crack in the wall, which, like a crumbling piece of stale bread, supports the window and its rusty electrified iron bars.

In the grassy island that floats over the opposite bench, various quadrupeds frolic. From their skin hangs fur of diverse colors, thicknesses and lengths. Some drool with impertinence. Others absorb—in a never-ending act that demonstrates their mechanical nature—the drool, with a cloth that they squeeze over the dry pasture that surrounds them. From among them stands out one whose animality reflected in the obsession with polishing every part of its body with its tongue, exasperates my nausea:

the exasperation consists in the transfigurations to which this phosphoric hybrid must subject itself in order to execute its task successfully, as its tongue is so short and its body long and voluminous, that at moments it practices forward rolls and postures with which it seems to want to break its own neck, a leg or its coccyx. If at least its movement were less desperate and the expression in its eyes less human ... I could forget the automatic link that my brain makes upon connecting with the image, and control the nausea upon ceasing to recognize in that face my own, or that of all of those who frolic prostrated at my side. Upon seeing them / seeing myself, returns, like the flight of a boomerang, the daily question: What was it that incited the desire to submit myself to the deranged foolishness of manufacturing a phosphoric meat?

Ah! How could I forget the brief seduction that message produced in my bones!

If you, kind taxpayer, consider some part of your body a nuisance, a useless waste of space, an attack on the aesthetic logistics of our overpopulated community, and you don't know how to remedy this terrible moral burden, worry no more: let us know which arm, which leg, which vertebrae, which bone or any old organ you're not using anymore, and here we will exchange it for phosphoric meat:

The Energy of the Future!

I read the message exactly eight times in search of a secret code or deceptive offer before providing my information to the machine that attended pleasantly to my telephone call:

1. I would sign a contract.
2. Someone would explain the surgical process to me.
3. I would stay in observation for 18 days to ensure that the surplus body part would adapt to the process of manufacturing phosphoric meat.

3a. My presence during the *Post Process*, would be a precautionary measure in case they needed fresh portions of tissue, blood, DNA, various types of biopsies and even samples of gastric juice and bile waste, because of which I would not be able to leave the *hospital* until the exchange *finished successfully* ...

But, would it be worth such docility to experience assisted automutilation? Ah, most definitely! In exchange I would receive kan/trahc, endless supplies of that

substance which activated the subtle perception of the ear to return to it the sweet and complicated function of discovering, defining, distinguishing sounds ...

In spite of the catatonic mechanization provoked by the depressing crisis that each and every human being lived due to the annulment of the acquisitive value of everything that surrounded them; in spite of the fact that nothing could be bought because money had lost all of its value and people acquired what they needed through exchange—thereby losing the compulsion to buy in the middle of an economic boom to a point so utopian that it had been disastrous; despite the fact that the governments of every society took great pains to keep the population distracted with vast quantities of images and audios superimposed one on top of another, S. still remembered what had been valued most before, long before: they were anxious to recover the placidity it brought them to hear sounds in distinct frequencies or outputs, and not in an agglomerated mass of advertisements/welfare that was indecipherable, incomprehensible and that brought little more than bewilderment and the need to do everything in the fastest way possible to return and shut yourself in at home, to wait, in a silence clouded by endless echoes, for the next day to arrive.

////: DAY 15

If I had for sure what they advertised in that message, I could predict that within three days I'll be ready to leave this place. However nothing that I expected to occur has happened, save the filtration of that white noise that is becoming defined little by little in a voice that seems to not tire of playing with the tonalities, the subtleties, the thicknesses that it can achieve, in the human, in the buccopharyngealthoracic apparatus when the air pierces through it ... And I can only hear that voice when I am provided a new dose of a certain luminescent liquid that robs my strength, consciousness and the willpower to impede the taking of a new piece of meat, either from some extremity or one of the organs which, although until now they haven't turned out to be so "vital" ... I don't know exactly which ones they are ... Maybe this is kan/trahc? ... What to do? ... The weakness has me adhered to the metal of this which seems more like a dissection table than a stretcher ... I can't ... even sit up to see ... which body parts I still have ... not to mention feeling anything: the cold: the liquid: the immobility: the numbness ... white noise ... sensitive dyslexia ... the

sound of blood in my brain ... black noise ... forest of black arteries ... of neurons ... of black leaves ... oh ... gravity shifting in my tongue ... oh ... shif...ting...at least... at most? ... at...most...I can still ... put together ... co he et...current...co he rent frak... frag...ments of...men...tal...ta...id...ideo...g...r...a...m...s...

But the third day never came.

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Note: this short story was published in the book *Habitantes del aire caníbal*, Editorial Resistencia, México, 2017.



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Adrian Demopolus (transl.) (Texas, 1997) will begin her senior year at the University of Oklahoma this fall, studying Spanish and communication. Her translations include short stories by Yoss, Gabriela Damián Miravete, and Raúl Flores Iriarte. After graduating, she plans to go to graduate school, travel, and translate (or any

combination of the above).

THE BINDER

ANGELA LUJAN

It was nighttime, and it was dark, on account of how it was nighttime. It was a dark nighttime, and I was in desperate need of a binder. My mother drove me to the store to get a binder for class the next day. I'd procrastinated, so what followed was my fault.

We were heading back from the store when the car stalled. A man approached from the shadows. Lightning in the distance painted an ominous silhouette of the gangly man.

My mother tried to get the car going as the man closed in on us. He meant trouble, I could smell it. Or perhaps it was whatever was accumulating in the storm drain. Either way, something smelled, and I smelled it. He was close now, and the darkness of his silhouette slipped away to reveal a man crazed. Crazed by binders.

"Gimme your binder!" he shouted, with menace in his eyes.

"What? No," I replied. I clutched the binder close to my chest. This was a vital binder, necessitated by school things.

The man lurched forward, pulled open my door—which in hindsight I should have locked, given the proximity of the miscreant. He ripped the binder from my hands, the force of which sent him stumbling backward a few feet. Then he laughed in celebration of his victory.

A bolt of energy I'd never felt before shot down my spine. I stepped out of the car. I closed in on the man, preoccupied with his spoils. And I did what had to be done. I kicked him, right in the shin. Quite hard.

He yelped out, then hobbled away as quickly as his leg would let him, and lying on the ground was the binder.

The next day passed behind foggy glass. The words of others couldn't pull my mind from thoughts of the night before. Had that really happened? What had come over

me? My schedule was merely a railway. I followed it effortlessly, absentmindedly. Right up until my English class, wherein I was to present a presentation. A pedagogic presentation on past participles and the present perfect. Also grammar.

My teacher called on me. I rose and reached to retrieve my notes. They rested in the binder. My body buzzed with the same energy from the night before. I pulled the binder from my backpack and strode toward the front of the class, turned rather abruptly and walked right out. I couldn't remain in that class. Not when the streets were riddled with criminals. Not when I knew how to stop them with a swift kick. Who knew how many binders were being stolen while my class's clock ticked?

I marched out of my school and down the street with a great confidence that slowly turned to puzzlement. My general sense of duty wore off, revealing an utter lack of planning. Then I heard someone shriek, "Help!" I ran toward the voice as a bolt of energy shot down my spine. I rounded the corner and found nothing but an abandoned Blockbuster. In its front stood a man in a blue rubber suit, and across his chest in bright yellow, the letters "BBB."

"You there." He jogged toward me, "Did you see where he went? 'Bout yay high, brown hair, had a woman's purse?"

I shook my head.

"Damn. Well, he's outta the parking lot by now." He shrugged. "Outta my jurisdiction."

Many thoughts rushed through my mind as I stood face to face with a strange blue man whose jurisdiction extended to the entirety of a parking lot. The one I said aloud was, "Better Business Bureau?"

"Huh? Oh, the... no." He corrected his posture, positioned his hands on his hips and said, "I'm the Blockbuster Bandit," and winked.

"You rob Blockbusters."

"No, I protect Blockbusters. From criminals." Perhaps my silence urged him on. "Surely, you've heard of me. I mean, there's been a slight decline in Blockbuster criminal activity in recent years. I'd like to think I played a part in that."

"Are there even still Blockbusters?"

He gestured behind him. "Hello? There's several, okay?"

"Okay." I didn't have time to argue with the Blockbuster Bandit. I didn't have time to point out to him that the word "bandit" did not mean what he thought it meant. I didn't have time to tell him that protecting Blockbusters was an absurdly narrow scope. Not when he'd instilled an idea in my mind that would allow me to help all those who were in danger of losing their binders. An idea that would propel me toward superheroism: a costume.

He offered me an autograph. I declined, excused myself and went to a craft store

and then home with a purpose.

I spent hours working on the designs. I considered leggings, capes, vests, armor, belts. One such sketch was almost identical to Blockbuster Bandit's costume. While imitation is the highest form of flattery, it is also the most illegal, so I tossed it aside. A garbage pile grew where I threw the crumpled pages covered in unappealing apparel and uninspired attire. The doodles I'd dismissed.

The perfect costume felt just beyond my reach. I needed only to remember why I'd started down this path in the first place for the solution to reveal itself. I began scribbling furiously. The hours or days that passed were a blank. I came back to myself to find my costume completed. That night, I stepped out of my home and into my role as protector. Dressed as a binder.

As I walked down the street, the wind quickly became an issue. I returned home, tailored my suit to be less sail-like, and once again, stepped out of my home and into my role as protector. Dressed as a more narrow binder.

I began patrolling the streets, looking down alleyways for binder thieves, or even some other type of criminal. Instead, I passed block after silent block. The city was asleep and I was about to be.

I decided a fifteen minute break was in order and sat on the curb. That's when I heard a distinct, repetitive clinking sound. It was quite annoying. It sounded nearby, so I got up to see what it was. As I closed in on it, I began to hear hushed voices as well.

Clink. Clink. Clink. "Hoist your end."

"I am-est."

I spotted two shadowy figures down an alleyway, carrying something. I closed in to get a closer look.

"Thou art not."

Two full suits of armor were clumsily lifting a crate off of a truck. They turned toward me and froze. "Uhh." One turned to the other. They dropped the crate and hopped down from the truck. *Clink. Clink.*

The men were shifty, I could tell that much even with their armor. "I don't think this is your truck, guys," I said. I suddenly grew nervous. I received no surge of energy from my attempted heroics.

"Thou thinkest that we're stealing?" They moved in toward me. "You mightest be onto something."

"That's right. Do you know who you're dealing with. Est? We're The Knights of the Round Table—"

"—Of evil," said the other.

"Come on, man. I had it."

"I know. I just like to say that part." He paused. "I'm sorry."

“It’s okay.” He returned his attention to me. “Point is, we challenge you to a duel.” They continued their clamorous march toward me.

“Not so fast,” a familiar voice echoed through the alley. “Two on one? That doesn’t sound fair to me.”

“Alright, come on then. Two on two it is-est,” said one of the suits of armor.

“A dual duel,” said the other.

Then Blockbuster dropped from the sky, taking down one of the metal men. He jumped to his feet easily, while the armor flailed in vain on the ground. Then he turned to me and winked. “Hey, kid.”

Blockbuster was quick: the remaining medieval man wasn’t. However, he was wearing armor, so quick did little good.

Blockbuster, very quickly, punched metal and hurt himself. “Agh! Your turn, kid.”

I moved in and did what I had to. I kicked a metal man, right in the shin. Quite hard. Alas, he was metal, so I injured myself. Meanwhile, Blockbuster had used the distraction to get behind him. He knelt down and I pushed the chestplate of the toe-stubber. He toppled right over Blockbuster and fell flat on his back. He clawed desperately at the air and rolled side-to-side, to no avail.

“I can’t believe you *fell* for that,” said Blockbuster Bandit. He got up and elbowed me, “Right? Hey kid, what’d these guys do anyway?”

“They were stealing from that truck.”

“Cool. Cool. Hey, strike a hero pose with me real quick.” He stood tall with his hands on his hips and I followed suit. We stood like that for no reason I could discern for about a minute, before Blockbuster decided to call the cops and let them know where to find The Knights of the Round Table of Evil.

“Hey, Blockbuster Bandit?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’re you here? This isn’t Blockbuster.”

“Well kid, there aren’t a lot of Blockbusters left. Sometimes a hero’s gotta adapt. Sometimes,” he looked out into the distance, “You’ve gotta fight for something new.” He struck his pose.

“Oh.”

“Nah, I’m just kidding. There used to be a Blockbuster near here. I count abandoned Blockbusters, demolished Blockbusters, all that stuff.”

The next morning, while reading the news over breakfast, I decided Blockbuster was onto something with his absurdly narrow scope. He’d succeeded, after all. He had done most of the work, and I’d contributed a minimal push. This all occurred to me as I read the article detailing the rather substantial binder theft a few blocks from the medieval men. A theft I could have stopped if I’d not been distracted by another hero’s

fight.

I'd let my original focus slip away into an abstract idea of heroism. I'd had a single purpose which I lost sight of in a single night. Binders. Blockbuster Bandit had his Blockbusters. Firemen had their fires. I had my binders. And they were all equally important.

I decided to refocus myself, my crusade, my cause. The following night I patrolled the streets. I passed Blockbusters, I passed fires. Then I found a binder thief, and I leapt to action.

He'd targeted a Target and was just making his escape as I came upon him. The sliding glass door lay in pieces at the entry and the wheels of his dolly crunched the glass as he pushed a load of binders toward a waiting car.

"Halt, fiend," I said. Instead of doing that, he dropped the dolly and began to run toward the car. I felt that familiar bolt of energy shoot down my spine and I rushed forward, intercepting him. "Gotcha, binder thief," I said. Just as I was about to kick him in the shin he said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to interject. I understand I'm a suspect, but is it possible you're not correct?"

"What?"

"It's never the one you most expect, and you have left the store unchecked. You know what that does not reflect? At all well on your intellect."

"What? No, stop that," I said. Then I kicked him. Right in the shin. Quite hard.



ANGELA LUJAN is a writer and student at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is the staff writer at *Insight Magazine*. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in *The Brushfire Literature & Arts Journal*.



RING A RING 'O ROSES

RAQUEL CASTRO

TRANSL. BY RUTH CLARKE

Once, for my birthday, I got a zombie. He was the cutest thing: grumbly, stinky, slight homicidal tendencies. Really sweet. I couldn't wait for school to start so I could take him to class with me (the kids always brought their toys in after Christmas or their birthdays to show them off to all their mates. I had double bad luck: first, my birthday fell, and still falls, in the middle of the summer holidays—even though I don't get summer holidays anymore; and second, I didn't have any mates).

On the first day of school I took him with me, hidden, of course. It's not easy to hide a zombie, because it won't fit in your school bag, and because you have to be careful it doesn't bite you, its master (unlike dogs, zombies do bite the hand that feeds them). But I managed it—I disguised him as a new classmate. A bit large, a bit smelly, but then worse things have been seen at my school.

Nobody realised that day that he ate Juanito, the kid who always pulled my hair, because I sat Zambi (that's what I called him, in honour, obviously, of a certain baby deer who was fashionable in those days) in the place next to me. The teacher saw all the seats were taken and didn't even register the tall, greenish kid devouring part of a leg in the front row.

On the second day it was Lucila's turn. She was a girl who always pulled faces at me. She stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes and, suddenly, it was her eye that was sticking out. Or rather Zambi bit it out.

But since we were playing with plasticine, nobody noticed. My school was like that.

The teacher assumed Lucila had been moved into a different group. That happened a lot in the first few days of school. And because the secretaries worked at a leisurely pace, they normally gave out the class registers sometime in November. So Zambi had no problem.

Then three more kids went missing on the same day. "I'd swear I saw them in the playground this morning" said Miss Terri, my teacher (I liked her name, it sounded like "mystery"), but she never said another word about it and went back to her Reader's Digest condensed novel. Meanwhile Zambi was having the all-you-can-eat feast of his life (or his un-life) in the sandpit outside.

When there were only seven or eight kids left the teacher got seriously worried: could there be a new chicken pox epidemic? Worse still: measles? Miss Terri had never had measles, and she was quite scared of it. So she asked us whether we were feeling ok. My classmates nodded their heads, pale, nervous, and terrified by my threat: anyone who pointed the finger would be dealt with by Zambi.

I nodded too, although I was rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed and grinning.

The trouble was that Zambi didn't nod, and the teacher noticed his complexion, somewhere between cerulean and pistachio, his vacant stare, and the fact that he looked generally unwell. That made the teacher suspect something even worse than measles: hepatitis. So, bravely, she ran off to get the nurse.

It's a shame that Miss Julia, the nurse, tried to look at Zambi's tongue. I could sweeten the story by simply saying that she won't be writing with her right hand anymore, but the truth is it wasn't only a hand that she lost, may she rest in peace.

And it's a shame that Miss Terri went crazy: she was shrieking and looked like she was going to pass out. Zambi got sick of this performance and bit her, but only a tiny bit.

When the head teacher realised my group hadn't gone outside at break, she got a bit worried. This came on top of several parents calling the school, anxious because their children hadn't come home. She told them that young people were more and more rebellious these days and it was to be expected: "Give him time, you'll see, he'll just be out raving. Yes, I know he's five years old. But I'm telling you they start younger and younger with sex and drugs nowadays". Well, that's what they say she said. She even thought about splitting up our group and mixing us in with the other third year kindergarten kids, but, in the meantime, she went to look for us, imagining she'd find us drunk or sleeping it off, or who knows what.

Of course she realised straight away that Zambi wasn't registered: he'd been there for almost a month as a stowaway, without paying his tuition fees. Unthinkable! The head teacher tried to tell Miss Terri off, but she responded by ripping out a tiny bit of her intestines, and then another piece, and another, until she'd eaten her completely. I don't

think Miss Terri likes being told off.

The rest of the year was pretty quiet. The other kids in my class gave me their lunches, and played whatever I wanted to play; partly because they were scared of Zambí and Miss Terri, but also because they learned to love me. After all, I was a nice person, and I even let them choose which boy or girl from the other groups Zambí and Miss Terri were going to eat the next day.

But all good things come to an end: one morning, almost at the end of the year, my mum realised that I was taking Miss Terri and Zambí to school, and she got really cross: “What a terrible school, letting children take their toys in like that!” she said. And she made me leave them at home.

I thought the first year of primary school was going to be really boring, even when I could still play with Zambí and Miss Terri at home, but luckily I was wrong: for my next birthday I got a poltergeist.



RAQUEL CASTRO (México, 1976) is a writer, scriptwriter, professor and cultural promoter. She won the Gran Angular Prize for young-adult literature in 2012. As part of the production team for the Mexican tv series *Diálogos en confianza*, she has won the National Journalism Prize twice. She is the author of the novels *Ojos llenos de sombra*, *Lejos de casa*, *Exiliados*, *Dark Doll*, and *Un beso en tu futuro*, as well as the co-anthologist of *Festín de Muertos*, a Mexican zombie fiction collection, featuring many of the greatest weird fiction authors from her country. She has a column about children and young adult fiction in *LeeMas* magazine. Her work has appeared in English in *Latin American Literature Today*, *World Literature Today*, *Nagari*, *Palabras Errantes* and other publications. She can be found online at her [YouTube channel](#) and tweeting at [@raxxie_](#)

RUTH CLARKE (transl.) is a freelance translator working from Spanish, French and Italian into English. Her obsession with Latin America began in Mexico in 2005 and has led, amongst other things, to an ma dissertation on the translation of travel writing, some impressive journeys across the Andes, and translation jobs ranging from luxury hotel promotion to the Peruvian Civil Code. She currently lives and works in London.

SHOOT

PEPE ROJO

Shoot.
Shoot.
Shoot, motherfucker.
Shoot.

Shoot.

Kill them all.

Shoot the last one of them. Here they come. Shit. What's wrong now? Another bug. Fucking bugs. I programmed it so that if she keeps the keys we couldn't head back to pick the money. The app's not working on FB. Fucking testers. Why won't they answer. One call. Five calls. Ten e-mails. Report the bug. Wait for the engineers. Electricity bill is here. Fucking cold. So expensive to keep us warm. Get cash. Paper money is useless. I mostly use cards. Supplies defend the supplies. A horde is coming. Two hordes. Hit them in the head, save ammunition. Fucking job. I fucked up programming a WhichChoices, the game freezes. I need to fix it, quick. But the zombies keep on coming. I just can't finish killing them. I need more weapons. I light a cigarette. Then another. My partner says I don't tell her I like her anymore. Their heads explode, splattering blood. They're quick. I can't reload. I am no hero, just trying to survive. Killing zombies is the only thing I'm good at. But I'm pretty damn good at it. Pretty damn good. My lungs ache. Logic error. If I already saw the video that option shouldn't be there. Algorithmic narrative processes. Clicking here restarts the story. Eat. Work. Sleep. I can think like a machine. I know how the zombies move. I know how long it takes for them to reanimate. New data. Get it on the server. Eat. Take care of the kids. Feed them. Kill zombies. They don't like my cooking. More zombies approaching. I feel cruel. I yell to whoever gets in my office. I can't get the supplies to

the helicopter. I need more medicines. I kill more zombies. I've got to check illustrations. I cough. Black phlegm comes out. Maybe there was blood on it. Didn't get a good look at it. Report to hand in. And kill more zombies. Gotta check the scoreboard. Mobile app is not working. Unblocked missions. Eat. Report in. I dream intruders get into my house. I dream my lungs are rotting. Wake up. Withdraw cash. Tuitions to pay. Last day to do so. Before, I kill some zombies. Change dialogues. Reprogram storypaths. I've got to make myself acquainted with beauty projects. I know it's a weekend because the kids are in the house. Download the Muppets. Pretend to smile. Pretend to be interested. Haven't received my payment. Rescue a survivor. She looks nice. I'd definitely fuck her. No money. Out of cigarettes. My partner gives me some cash. They are killing Evelyn. Fucking zombies. In the head. In the head. I love how they programmed their movements. Dragging their legs. Twisted neck. Limits of human movement. Crawl, motherfucker. Nothing stops them. Relentless digital choreography. Until you shoot at them long enough. Drop in a pool of blood. Splattering. I've got olfactory hallucinations. I can smell their rotten meat. Sleep. Kids still here. They are hungry. Yesterday, the game crashed online. Twenty mails reporting it. We are losing money. Client won't pay. Is it the engine. Is it my data. Is it the server. I'm a Zombie Slayer. I eat right in front of my computer. Waiting for reports. They are fighting. I'll ignore them. Fix an easy bug. It wasn't my fault. Games are running again. Characters are trapped in their programmed routines. We need more options for them. Nothing noticeable. I program a couple of storypaths. And kill some zombies. At night, we watch some TV. I can't sleep. I go down. Light a cig. Kill zombies. Check product placement. Seventy brand impressions each ten minutes. Replayability is three games. 210 brand impressions every half hour. In the head. Drops dead. My aim unblocks more challenges. I should get a raise. They never pay me enough. And I eat. And I sleep. And I kill zombies. My partner is looking for lovers. These guys are morons. The game is down again. The phone won't stop ringing. I take a bath. I kill zombies. Seattle. Buenos Aires. Programmers in Poland. It's not registering addresses. Promotion isn't working. Engineers aren't answering. My son has learned how to kill zombies. We buy guns together. Eat. Program some more endings without opening up the tree. There's an ending you can't get to. Supplies. Kill more zombies. Medicine. Kill more zombies. Watch TV. My partner falls asleep on my lap. Great job! You've got four endings! There are reports of gamers getting to the happy ending. I rest some and then kill more zombies. A game for men. A game for women. Wake up. Three projects in four months. We're due this week. Advertising will be up. Thousands of players. I get more supplies. New zombies incoming. Shoot. Shoot. Kill them all. Rejuvenating weekly treatment. Include all legal data in every single drawing. I love paychecks. Somebody! Please! Support me! Now! Me? I kill zombies. They are biting

Evelyn. I won't be able to save her. The helicopter leaves the survivors. I've got to change storypaths. Client didn't approve them. Game is down again. If client doesn't pay, I won't get money. Lots of mistakes, little time to fix them. Pay for food. Pay for extra classes. Tuition again. Vacations. A party. Limits of human movement. Code more options. Many mistakes. Many gamer complaints. I'm not here. I don't pay attention. I don't answer the phone. I can't afford a grenade launcher. Friday. Get drunk. Wake up. Fifteen mails. Bad programming. Whose responsibility. Fuck. I can't see with my left eye. Fuck. How about closing it. There's a meeting with client tomorrow. Placement isn't registering. Can't see. Shoot. Shoot. Can't stop. Don't get distracted. To the head. Get them asshole. No mistakes. Too many of them. Hadn't we agreed to go to the movies. Advertisement may be recalled. Engineers won't answer the phone. And this. And that. And this.

And that.

And this

And that.

Meanwhile, I kill zombies.



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IT ALL MAKES SENSE HERE

ALBERTO CHIMAL

TRANSL. BY JESSE WARD

There are two men in the video. They're walking between the cars through the parking garage. The camera is attached to the ceiling, or maybe to one of the concrete pillars, and both are moving away from it. One of them is wearing a really dirty orange jumpsuit, and the other a greenish t-shirt that might at some point have been black denim pants, and old, worn-out tennis shoes. Their faces will never be clearly visible: right now, their backs are turned, of course, but in any case, their shadows will always be thick and black, in high contrast. Besides, the texture of the image is blurry, with low resolution. The colors are very intense—oversaturated—, which suggests that the recording was tampered with.

Suddenly there's movement at the edge of the screen. A third man has appeared in front of the other two. This one's dressed as a clown: green pants, a red jacket, and yellow shoes. He's wearing a white mask, probably rubber, with tufts of fake blue and purple hair.

The mask's features are those of a demon with big fangs.

The other two men, obviously baffled, stop in their tracks. For a few seconds, they don't move.

At that point, we notice that in front of the clown, between him and the two watching him, there's a body stretched out on the ground. It looks like it's moving a little. It's partly hidden by a shadow on the ground and looks, at first, like a blot, a shapeless form. The movement resolves into a coherent image: his head, with unclear facial features; his left arm—a long sleeve, a big, shapeless spot that must be a hand—

and maybe part of his torso.

Seconds pass. The other figures—the one in the jumpsuit, the one in the t-shirt, the clown—look like statues and allow us to focus our attention on the stretched-out body. Its movement might be intermittent or spastic, out of control. Is it wounded, drugged?

We'll never know. Suddenly the clown holds up a huge hammer (metal? did he always have it in his hands?) and swings it hard into the head of the body on the ground, which booms (or explodes? what's that sound?) and shoots out a red stream onto the jumpsuit guy and his friend.

Both scream. Both turn around, showing the camera their chests and faces splattered with the red liquid. Both run away with the clown right behind them, brandishing his hammer. All three leave the frame and don't come back.

The video ends. The reporter closes the tablet and hands it back to the editor.

"It's one of those hoaxes," he says. "The ones with a hidden camera. That thing on the ground is a dummy. The head is a ball filled with some kind of liquid, and there's a spring or something that moves the arm. The page doesn't say who made it, right? There's no logos or anything..."

"No."

"It's probably edited: they took it from another site. Typical. More than likely it's processed, which is why it looks that way. Send me the link so I can watch it later at home. And too bad about the jumpsuit guy, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"They guy was a real porker. The moment he started running he must have had a heart attack."

They both chuckle a little, slightly.

"So, you'll send me the note tomorrow morning? What did the specialist tell you?" the editor asks. She's referring to an academic who agreed to talk with the reporter about his story: urban legends (and their many modern derivatives, including of course videos like the one with the clown) and their massive popularity in some countries with high rates of violence.

The reporter takes out his own tablet, turns it on, and opens a file. He says:

"It's a little obvious, what he said. That reality is always stranger than fiction, that people know that the most meaningful horror stories are the ones from real life, the massacres... Here, let me find the section." He uses his finger to move the text across the screen. "People in countries like ours, he says, can't 'escape,' or distract themselves with these violent stories like people who don't have that stuff nearby. Simply because that's their reality. Unless they're very rich, politicians, or gangsters, they don't need escapism. And so, they have to search for alternatives. That look real, but that have to do with other threats. Killer clowns, space monsters with lots of tentacles, the Slender

Man..."

"What's that?"

"The Slender Man? A really skinny guy, about 9 feet tall with no face who shows up in photos."

"And people are scared of him?"

"He's really popular. But the point, according to this guy, is that people like monsters not because they're entertaining, but because in the end they provide comfort. Their victims are always seen from far away, they're always worse off than you are, and what's more, you can understand what's going on, how they got into danger, what mistakes they made. You could say that the same thing happens in execution videos, decapitations: "what is that idiot doing in Syria," "why do they mess with drug traffickers." The editor makes a face and the reporter makes quotation marks in the air. "That's how people think. But it looks bad to admit that you're entertained by watching a real death. Better to watch deaths that are just as violent but that you can defend by saying they're fake. The guy says something else..." The reporter looks at the file again. "Here it is. In real life, you don't understand why things go bad, why you don't have money, why your partner leaves you, why people with power do the things they do. But it all makes sense here."

The editor chats some more with the reporter. Later he says goodbye and leaves the small office. On the other side of the door is the Attacker, but the man passes by him without paying any attention: he doesn't look like a clown, a demon, an inhumanly tall being, a tentacle space monster, or a dangerous criminal. In other words, the Attacker and his friends' strategy of misinformation—which is very arduous and complex: which includes videos like the one with the clown and a lot of other things—continues to work, and nobody notices him.

The reporter walks to the elevators. The Attacker briefly considers how easy it would be to follow him, tackle him in some discrete location, and carry him off. Nobody can fight back. The best they could do, once caught, would be to come up with some explanation and understand, helpless, what was going to happen to them.

But, of course, something like that would be absurd. Why would he attack a reporter, when he's one of the people who spread the faked or debunked stories that allow precisely the activities of the Attacker and his friends?

"Don't shit where you eat," White Face, one of the Attacker's closest friends, often says. He's a vulgar and unpleasant person. He likes to be seen and then punish whoever makes the mistake of looking at him too closely. His saying may be unpleasant, but it's not wrong.

The Attacker waits until another elevator arrives. He goes down to the parking garage, pays his ticket, gets into his car, and drives out onto the street. He drives at a

moderate speed without committing any traffic violations. Before long he pulls up to his house, parks, enters, and goes down to his huge, perfectly equipped basement.

The people he collected last week are still in cages or tied to tables. And they're still alive, conscious, lucid.

None of them sought him out. None of them had a prior fondness or interest in conspiracy theories and ghost stories. None of them are important enough that people would miss them or investigate their disappearance.

Some of them scream, begging or cursing him, but almost all of them are silent, tamed by their days or weeks or months of captivity. The most ravaged ones, the ones that no longer have their limbs or their skin, aren't always the most docile.

"What do you think?" the Attacker says, in a loud voice, but it's a rhetorical question. He steps into his little closet and comes out dressed in his white lab coat with a rubber apron, ready to select the tools he'll use tonight.



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MUSIC AND PETALS

GABRIELA DAMIÁN MIRAVETE

TRANSL. BY MEGAN BERKOBLEN

TUESDAY

Every time I go downstairs, I hear it. I don't want to go; it scares me. The music is horrible. They yell out my name and I know they'll ask me to go down there, but I don't want to. There are always things to bring up from Down Below: pots, pestles for grinding, the small grill, gas for the stove, the special dish that my mom uses to make chicken when someone comes to dinner—and it's always me who has to bring them up. Why? Sometimes Mom sends my brother to do it, but then he just orders me to, and I can't refuse because if not...

Maybe what my brother does isn't any worse than the music. But I don't like it.

It was fine going down to the basement before, inventing stories to fill the empty picture frames. And the trunk with all the old dress clothes from my deceased relatives, clothing so tight that it seemed like they had purchased it as skeletons. Sometimes I would put them on and play dress up between the objects Down Below. There was no reason to be afraid because I played with the lights on, shining down upon the heaps of random things, one time I remember I even swallowed a spider web just to see what it tasted like (like nothing, but it sticks horribly to the roof of your mouth).

Until I started to hear the music.

How do I describe it? *Ta ta ta... tara tá taratá...*

It's not for nothing that some very smart people invented a method of writing down

how music sounds, because I don't think it's understandable when copied down like this. We keep the books from the piano lessons my brother gave up on some years ago Down Below, but all the same, I don't want to go downstairs.

I'd like to be able to describe what it sounds like. Sometimes I feel like if someone else could hear it, they would say to me: "Poor thing, what you must go through!"

Then I wouldn't feel so alone.

MONDAY

Our new neighbors arrived today. My mom says that that house, the one right next to ours, used to be a cigarette factory that once belonged to some of our relatives. It was there that they stripped the leaves and hung them to dry; the house always had a rich smell, like an unlit Negro San Andrés.¹ And at one time, that basement had been connected to ours. I stood with my mouth wide open, imagining how big Down Below would be if they were joined. Mom stroked my hair. I dared to ask: "Don't you hear the music sometimes?"

"What are you talking about?" she responded, with the hint of a smile that made everything clear. If she had heard it, she would have said: "Yes, and I wouldn't want for you to hear it, too."

She has no idea, poor momma. It's better that way.

FRIDAY

The new neighbors are young. The wife is really pretty, with dark hair and delicate features. And her skin! Exactly like polished wood. If you get close, she smells delicious, like a brand new ladle. I haven't seen the husband, but another neighbor said that he looked like one of those Spanish priests that you see in paintings. Maybe I'll meet him later this afternoon.

My brother has been pretty calm, but it seems like the wife unsettled him. We'll see how bothered he gets. I don't want to hear the music, everything seems so normal right now...

The first time that I heard it I was descending the stairs. They had asked me to bring up a wool blanket because a strong wind was blowing; most nights cooled down like that. The melody came across as hollow, muffled, as if through a wall. I thought that maybe someone next door was playing an instrument, practicing the same melody over

and over again, a very short one—inistent. But, of course, the house was empty. There's nothing else to say, only the air blowing through a metal tube in order to repeat that phrase: what's it saying?

When I hear it, I feel the same sadness that I did when we visited the lighthouse on the harbor. To me, the siren sounded like a howl, but Mom said that the lighthouse stopped boats from getting lost in the seas at night. It seemed like the lighthouse was yelling: "Turn back, because here lies the danger, here there is nothing." That's what the music sounds like.

It's hard to explain. Perhaps the day that I manage to, I'll stop hearing it.

SATURDAY

My brother is a hypocrite. The bastard is a sweetheart when our mom is around. I don't tell on him because that would really disappoint her, and with how hard she works, and how alone she is...

Yesterday, the idiot was prowling in the area behind the two houses, taking advantage of how long the rain-nourished grass was in order to hide. I saw him watching the neighbor, who wasn't doing anything special, nothing more than arranging her cooking utensils in the kitchen and looking everywhere for a little packet that she then opened desperately. That's when her husband arrived. Luckily my brother wasn't watching anymore, although her husband was bothered quite a bit anyway. "What do you want?" he said sharply. "Nothing, I heard an animal running around over here," said his voice, which I loved to hear so frightened. To my surprise, the man must have sensed my presence, because he turned to look at me in my clumsy hiding place behind the curtains. My brother turned around as well, and I only had to look at his face to know what was going to happen to me afterward.

He called his wife. Her name sounded strange, serious on his lips. My brother said good night and sped into the house through the stalks and mosquitos. "Let's go downstairs," he said. "No," I answered in a whisper, while he dragged me by the hair and led me to the stairs behind the door. I heard the music again when my brother shut off the lights Down Below; then he, along with all the junk, turned into shadow.

Sometimes I don't know what's worse, the music or my brother's labored breathing.

In the depths of my head the melody booms alongside a groan, deep and dry; the combination submerges me in a thick drowsiness. I feel so heavy that I sink, I feel like all of me is paralyzed, but the strangest part is that it's not my body that can't move, but me. And, yet, there I am, I see everything happening in front of me while the notes repeat themselves, while the terrible sensation of a never-ending fall tickles my legs, and

the sensation that it's me and not my body that's submerged in a black well of heavy waters, the music taking hold of my hands, of my flesh... My brother puts back on his face of eternal idiocy as he climbs the stairs. And it's only at that point that I return from that darkness, from that death.

It didn't use to be like that. The first few times it didn't last long.

But now he's more resistant each time. More dissatisfied.

MONDAY

Today I went out for a walk by the river and found my neighbor wandering barefoot around the shore. "Come here" she said, "Will you help me?" I stopped at her side and she took hold of my arm. She raised one of her tiny feet, so tiny, and with the other hand she pulled out a thorn caught inside of it. She thanked me with a flirtatiousness that I lack. She was swathed in a large sweater, now necessary due to the strange fog that descended upon the region during that time. She rummaged through her pockets and took out a cigarette, which she lit like one of those elegant movie stars. She spoke of different things, but I didn't pay much attention until the wind caused me to shiver and she touched my arm. "Are you cold? I have hot chocolate at home, it's my treat." And I went.

Her house is almost the same as mine, even though the odor of the factory remains. The neighbor served the hot chocolate in blue cups, pretty little things, holding back the tight curls far from her face. It made me feel a bit sorry for her. She seemed lonely, mostly because she chatted with me as if I was a friend her age. She even asked if I had a boyfriend (I turned red, of course). "You're very pretty. If I were you I would do my hair like this and this" (she said this while lifting my hair to the top of my head and twisting it on both sides, fastening it with hairpins). "You'll have to scare away the suitors." Her expression suddenly seemed sad; she examined me and with a sigh said, "But you still have a girlish curiosity about you." If she only knew. I didn't know whether you could get drunk on hot chocolate, but I felt my face burning and my voice brave, so much so that I impertinently asked: "Do you like your basement?" She let out a laugh and answered, "Do you like yours?"

Come, she said, and I followed her for the third time.

We opened the door that lead to that other Down Below, and a colorless face came down upon us, like that of candle wax, eyes far-away, glass-like. Her husband.

"We're going downstairs," she informed him. The man didn't answer. He only looked at her, entranced and crippled like a doll made of wax that had descended from its pedestal, disoriented. He then walked on.

The basement had fewer objects out compared to ours. There were piles upon piles of boxes, some old pieces of furniture, others that belonged to the tobacco company. Better lit up, that's for sure.

"They told me that our basements are connected," I said, still drunk on chocolate.

"Yes, you go through here," she said, gesturing languidly to the wall. "It's sealed up now."

I didn't expect that answer. I got closer. Between the boxes and wooden crates I saw that you could make out the trace of a silhouette upon the wall, that of a door, perhaps. It seemed an irregular and illuminated scar that spoke of some wound suffered by both houses. Leaning against that same wall was an elegant black box. The box of who knows what musical instrument.

"It was my father's," she told me, as if she had read my mind. *El Negro* she said booting the words from her mouth with bitter mocking.

It began like that, with nothing more. I felt uncomfortable but, once again, I thought of her loneliness. Talking about her family, now that she was married and far from her own, was the most logical thing for her to do.

"They had him here in the corner. Tied up. You know how people were with their slaves."

She opened the box with her long, tanned fingers. It was some type of long flute, with lots of keys and disassembled tubes at its sides.

"It's called a bassoon. God knows how it works," she said, somewhere between scornful and smiling.

She shut the case. She then grabbed the rag she had in her apron in order to clean the box tops now covered with dust.

"Your family employed my father since he was a boy; he was their hired-hand. You should know what they say: that it was my father who infected your uncle, the crazy one. But it wasn't like that. Everyone knows it was the other way around...but you have to blame it on the *negro*..."

She looked at me anxiously. "Ay, I don't think I should talk to you about that..." and her face went from tan to the color of brick.

"I know the story, my mama tells it all the time," I told her. A lie. My mother hates to speak of it. She hates to admit that my brother is like my papa's family, she hates to remember that they, so fair and pure, preferred to marry amongst themselves, that she had been a bean amongst the rice of that French stock. How they looked down on us for staining their lineage, so reluctantly letting us live in our house when my papa died.

"Then you know why I'm here," she said. I suppose that my cluelessness was evident because she gave a long sigh, sat on a crate, and taking out the packet that she had been looking for the other day, continued telling me the story.

“My father took this to stay lucid and strong,” she said while showing me a handful of colored petals contained in the packet. “What is it?” I asked. “Another type of tobacco,” she responded with a strange glow in her eyes, as if holding back a smile. It smelled like a mix of vanilla and that secret musk of men, one I had only known on my brother. “My father worked with your uncle, there was something about him that he liked. He took him with him everywhere,” she began to say, putting a pinch of petals in her hand, some dried-out, others smooth. “He was his right-hand man, until my father fell in love with my mother and I was born. But you already know what your uncle was like, or didn’t they tell you?”

She didn’t give me time to respond, and I don’t think she expected me to say anything. She closed her eyes halfway as if trying to focus the image of that omnipresent man in my house, in the objects from Down Below, in the dust-covered photographs that my mother never even wanted to touch. “He was really stubborn, aggressive. Whatever he wanted, he got. He lost himself to those urges.” Now the neighbor put the petals on her tongue. “He had his eye on my mother. As fair-featured as he was—just like your brother—he felt like no one could resist him, but my mom wouldn’t give in so cooperatively... then he poisoned my father with this stuff,” she said shaking the petals that sounded alive, like pebbles swept along by the rain. “It drove him mad. He howled. I remember.”

Outside, the cicadas and mourning geckos were the only noise of the twilight. My skin felt sticky and moist inside of that place into which the life above trickled down: the steam of hot chocolate, the man of the house’s cologne, the aftertaste of the lime that whitened the walls, the honeyed aroma of those petals. Where did these flowers come from?

The woman chewed two or three as if they were tobacco. Her eyes widened; they seemed blacker, more brilliant. She looked at me strangely, but it didn’t scare me. I wanted to know.

“Your uncle was the madman from birth. My father was turned into one.”

And with that last sentence she coldly let out a laugh, her curls tangling up more and more. “He worked during the day, and at nightfall they locked him up here, in the basement. They thought that we would carry him off far away if he stayed with us, in our miserable little house. Nor did we have the choice to leave, taking our sorrow to some other town. My mother put on her Sunday best each time we went to the basement, as if rouge could bring back his sanity. But neither his wife nor his daughter brought him peace: only the music could. Your uncle had given him his bassoon because he never learned to play well due to his laziness, carelessness. His filthiness. He preferred to keep himself busy with other things, like impregnating his sisters and sisters-in-law, even though they were married. My father learned to play the bassoon

while he passed his confinement, in his basement kingdom. My father was a total Yanga.² He played beautifully...” the neighbor let her eyes, suddenly lit-up, close half-way. To me, everything seemed shining, magnificent in that moment, I don’t know if she had noticed.

“As if he spoke to us through the music. The beautiful words he couldn’t say he blew to us in those notes, which inflated like balloons so that we could understand them, in order to caress us with their melody.”

“Do you want more?” she asked, offering me the packet with its fragile petals, so beautifully colored. I then realized that she had infused my hot chocolate with them. I laughed more than I should have. I shook my head no and let myself experience that soothing sensation. The neighbor continued, her dark eyelashes casting shadows on her cheekbones. “My mother took me to visit, dressed in my Sunday best as well, my hair done-up with ribbons. How huge and dark my father was. His eyes shone brightly—white, wide-open—in the thickness of that basement. He took me into his arms and kissed me so carefully, as if he were going to break me. He adored my mother. He caressed her cheeks, looking at her for a long time. Then he began to cry. He took up the bassoon and played those beautiful songs that he had composed himself. Until your uncle... anyway. After that he only played the one melody, over and over again, an unfinished song, out of tune, terrible.”

The neighbor’s gaze was lost in the corner of the basement, as if her eyes were cast upon an atrocity. Suddenly I felt my stomach drop and the music, my music, left her mouth. *Ta ta ta... tara ta tarata*. She then looked at me. Her eyes shone frenziedly. She kept silent for a moment. Then her delicate face transformed. “Your uncle ruined her, right here. My father tied up over there, watching. I was sleeping. He knew my mother was fierce, fearless, that she would do something after such injury. That’s why he killed her.” She looked at the petals with bewilderment, putting two of them into her mouth. Her eyes changed once more, deep and compassionate like those of an animal. “*Ay, linda*, what a filthy world,” she said, her voice faltering.

TUESDAY

“I don’t like you nosing around with the neighbor. Her husband is a snob.” Mom told me today. “Did you know we’re almost related?” I retorted sarcastically; I had never spoken to her that way. I thought she’d get angry but instead she seemed surprised. “I supposed so,” she responded. This confirmed that my mother knew everything. Does she also know about my brother, about me...?

Anyway, we're already so miserable that my misfortune has no means of inheriting a house to pay for the wrongs of a demented son.

WEDNESDAY

I asked the other neighbors what they knew about my uncle's death. "His own madness killed him," they told me. They also said that they treated him for *espanto*,³ but to no avail. Some think that they cast a spell on him; others, that rage consumed him. The one thing they all say is that his coffin was empty, God knows why. It didn't seem strange to anyone because the family was like that with their things: off, detached. Indifferent. That's how crazy people are.

It didn't matter that I had asked about *El Negro*. As soon as they began to whisper about my new friend, theories slipped from their loose tongues: that she killed a young boy, that she fled one evening upon a cloud-colored horse, her enormous hands, blood-covered, staining its mane.

The other women on our street treated her well when they saw her in person, but they spoke about her impertinence behind her back, that you could see through her skirts, that she didn't wear a bra. About how her husband must be crazy for not realizing what kind of wife he had at home.

She waves at me normally, pretending like she didn't tell me anything. I haven't heard the music since. My brother walks about distracted in another neck of the woods, and I, happy, help my mom wash the mountain of laundry that remains to be done, imagining that she and I are all alone, that we're all each other needs in this world.

THURSDAY

I saw what happened through the curtains.

My brother was speaking with the neighbor. He was carrying some records, and he gave them to her. It flattered her a bit, but then she seemed very uncomfortable. She didn't sit down with him for even a second. She isn't the type of woman that the others claim she is. I don't think any woman is like what those women describe, the one they so like to insult. Afterward my brother got really close to her. So she opened the back door for him to leave. He started to make a fuss, saying rude things and making rude gestures. The neighbor pouted and made the same face that little girls do right before

crying, but she didn't respond with the same nonsense. I wanted to leave, go to where mama was, surely in one of the houses where she went to iron. But when I opened the door, trapped in that strange fog, hot as it was, he caught me as he passed. "We're going downstairs," he told me, his voice filled with that smell.

While descending the stairs, my brother screamed horrible things about how woman live only to provoke men, to be only anxiety in a man's life, and how we liked to play dumb about it. He pulled my hair, biting me and squeezing my flesh, my poor flesh began to paralyze, to hear the music. We tripped over the piano bench, the sheet music scattered across the floor like a deck of cards. Would the antidote for this terrible music drawing near be written there? A shapeless mass of sweat, blond hair, and tongue was my brother inside of me, and the music! An unexpected, relentless bang choked me. Then the music synchronized its rhythm with that of my heart, darkening everything. The light breath that I was fell into a slumber. My still body suddenly opened my eyes, other eyes. My hands, other hands, rose up thickly against the white neck of that man, squeezing tighter and tighter... My brother hit my girlish face, but my face, another face, slammed into his and bit it, devouring his cheeks in small chunks that tasted sweet, the sweetness of pork, and the warmth of blood in my mouth, another mouth, a big mouth, with white, white teeth. And then all of my body, another body, tall and raging, subjected my brother to kicks and bites; it detached his skin in blows, it ground and separated his limbs. My body, that other body, made of music, of solid melody, knocked down the wall that divided both basements in rage, and there it threw the bones and arms and hairs of that almost pure lineage, along with those other dreadful bones, old and eaten away. Afterward my glorious body, my fibrous other body, resounding, searched for something to close the opening in the wall.

I guess this time the music was hard to ignore. My mom had already made her way to the basement, Down Below, with me. She waited for me at the foot of the stairs with the shovel and a sack of cement.



Note: this short story was published in *Palabras Errantes. Latin American Literature in Translation*: <http://www.palabraserrantes.com>.



CABRIELA DAMIÁN MIRAVETE is a writer of narrative and essay. Film and literature journalist. Together with other authors, artists and people from different scientific disciplines, co-funded *Cúmulo de Tesla*, a collective that wishes to strengthen the relationships between art, science and science fiction. She has published in several anthologies in Spanish: *Los viajeros. 25 años de ciencia ficción mexicana*, *Festín de muertos*, *El silencio de los cuerpos: relatos sobre feminicidios*, and in *Three Messages and a Warning* (Small Beer Press, 2010), nominated for the World Fantasy Award. Twitter: @gabrielintica

MEC BERKOBIE (trnsl.) is a writer and translator. She is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Michigan. Her work has appeared in the journals *Words without Borders*, *A Public Space*, and *Poets & Writers*, among others.

1 Cigars made (manufactured) with black tobacco grown in the town of San Andrés Tuxtla, Veracruz

2Yanga: located some 150 km from the port of Veracruz, inhabited by slaves brought from Africa, who rebelled against Spanish colonialism on January 6, 1609, becoming the first free town in America. It is named in honor of Gaspar Nyanga, the leader of the rebellion, who is often described as a prince or warrior.

3According to popular Mexican tradition, *el espanto* (fear) —also known as *ngitsé*, *susto* and *xiwel*— is a sickness from which both humans and animals suffer (especially children). It is described as the loss of spirits or energy due to shock or intense fear.

CLEAN AIR WILL SMELL LIKE SILVER APRICOTS

WRITTEN AND TRANSLATED BY ANDREA CHAPELA

EDITED BY KELSI VANADA

Rikka wakes up, jumps out of bed, sticks her feet into the pink, flowery slippers that wait beside it. Dad always used to scold her when she went barefoot. She runs to her mom's room. The door is open, the bed made, the book *World Trees* still open on the pillow to the chapter they read last night, the curtains are tightly drawn, and Mom isn't there. Rikka turns around and runs down the stairs to the kitchen.

She finds her mom sitting down, there's a mug in front of her, probably cold because there's no steam coming out of it. She has her head in her hands. The kitchen is dark and the shadows pile over Rikka, making her feel like she has to keep quiet, especially because for the last month her mom has been jumping at the smallest noise. But Rikka is sick of silence.

"Can I go check the levels? Can I? Please?"

Mom raises her head. She smiles softly and reaches out her hand. Rikka crosses the kitchen to walk into her arms. She lets her head rest on her mom's breast, and the smell of safety cloaks her. With her fingers, her mom combs back the straight, black strands of her hair. Rikka can bear the peace for only so long. When she can't wait any longer, she wriggles out of the embrace.

"Can I check the levels?"

"Can't you wait for your grandpa? He'll be here soon. You know what day it is today? We're going to the Regional Forest."

Rikka nods. Of course she knows.

"But we can check them before Jiji gets here."

“Rikka...”

“Pleease,” she says, drawing out the vowel.

Mom stands up and Rikka notices she isn't wearing pajamas; she still has on yesterday's clothes. Rikka follows her to the glass door that opens onto the garden. The white capsule is waiting at the back, near the fence, where there aren't any trees to cast a shadow on the ginkgo that sprouted from it just a couple weeks ago. The capsule, or “pot,” as Mom calls it, is just tall enough to reach Rikka's neck, and wide enough that when she embraces it, her fingers touch on the other side.

It arrived twenty days ago. Jiji brought it in his truck and, without saying a word about his back pain, carried it into the garden. Since that day, Rikka has woken up early every morning to ask her mom if she can check the levels of the pot. Humidity, nutrients, light. This morning, Rikka presses every switch and looks seriously at the graphs on the little screen. Then she analyzes each small leaf with care, comparing their size to her own fingers to measure how much they've grown. She has been keeping track of every little change in number, color, and size. When the inspection is done, she smiles at her mom.

“I'm going to tell him about my tooth,” she says, displaying the new gap.

“Jiji will be here in an hour. Do you think you can be ready by then?”

Rikka nods and her mom goes back inside the house. Then the girl starts telling the ginkgo tree every detail about the tooth that fell out the night before. Mom was reading out loud to her while she fiddled with her tooth, enjoying the sensation of its movement, how close it was to falling out, when suddenly pop! the tooth was in her hand. A gentle breeze moves the green and golden leaves, making Rikka feel like it's listening to her. In the last few days it has grown so tall that it's ready to be planted somewhere else. Rikka was told several times that normal trees don't grow so fast, that the pot has been filled with modified nutrients to accelerate the growing process, but she hasn't understood much of this. Her interest lies in all the little changes she's seen from day to day: the seedling coming out of the earth, the first branches, the first leaves, the changes from green to yellow to falling and regrowing. Soon, Jiji has said, it will be as tall as she is. Right now, if Rikka grips the trunk with both hands, it is thick enough that her fingertips barely touch.

She has been told that the ginkgo represents resilience, survival, and even rebirth. A hundred years ago, when the atomic bomb hit Hiroshima, a single ginkgo survived, and is still alive today. World Trees dedicates a chapter to the ginkgo, and it is this chapter that Mom reads to Rikka every night. So many times now that the girl can correct her mother when she gets distracted and skips some little detail. The Ginkgo biloba is a living fossil, a tree that existed even before the dinosaurs were alive, and is the lone survivor of its species, with no living relatives. Its lifespan is one of the longest

in nature, and it makes a great air purifier. That's why it was selected thirty years ago as the species that should be genetically modified and replanted around the country to clean the air. Rikka has never been to a Regional Forest, the closest reservoir, but she's seen lots of videos, and Jiji has answered all her questions about them, because he's the best at knowing funny facts. He told her, for example, that when the president announced the new air-cleaning initiative, and how the citizens would contribute to it, he finished by saying that in the future the air would smell of apricots. Rikka crossed her arms when Jiji told her this, and told him that the ginkgo fruit smelled gross, not like an apricot, which was the translation of the Chinese name.

"Rikka! Jiji will be here soon. Please get dressed."

She chooses her best dress, a lacy white one she loves. She wears her yellow hiking boots. They're heavy, but her dad bought them for her so they could go camping for the first time next summer. When the doorbell rings, she runs down the stairs two at a time, yelling that she'll get it. Rikka doesn't slow down until she's wrapped in her grandfather's arms. Jiji, a giant of a man, has white hair, but his arms are strong, and he easily catches Rikka. She starts to talk about her tooth and the capsule, mixing everything together. Her mom embraces her father-in-law and looks Rikka over with disapproval.

"That dress—"

"Don't bother the child. She can wear whatever she likes," says Jiji.

Mom sighs, but she doesn't press the issue.

"At least go upstairs and get a sweater. It's chilly."

Rikka walks up the stairs again. She grabs her sweater and, at the last moment, picks up the tooth she hid among her socks the night before, so the tooth fairy wouldn't find it.

Back downstairs, she goes to the garden. She stops by the glass door and then walks to the spot where the pot used to be. The only sign that it ever was there is a yellow circle of dead grass. Do they really have to take the ginkgo away? Wouldn't it be better for him to stay here? Won't he clean the air wherever he is? Jiji's voice from over by the fence makes her turn her head. She walks to the garden door, toward the truck.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"Can't he stay here with us?"

"The regulations are very clear. Ginkgoes must live in the Regional Forest," her mom says. She's standing by the open door of the truck, leaning against it like her knees might give way at any moment.

"But..."

"We have to go, Rikka. We have an appointment."

Rikka gets into the truck. They back out of the driveway onto the street, and drive away from the neighborhood with all its traditional houses. The small town passes by quickly. Her mom and dad chose to live there so that Rikka could grow up close to nature.

They cross a river. Its clear water shines in the sunlight. Twenty minutes later, Rikka points at a line of trees ahead. Then they pass under the arch that announces entry into the Regional Forest and drive slowly, looking for plot 3307.

A man waits for them next to the road. He's tall, dressed nicely in a dark suit with his very long hair in a low ponytail. He bows when they park and then approaches the back of the truck where the capsule is. He helps Jiji lift it out, but Jiji insists on carrying it alone. The man guides them into the Forest.

Rikka looks around. The trees, all ginkgoes, are huge. Bigger than the book said they would be. Some have started to turn golden, announcing the beginning of autumn. In front of each tree is an altar; some have pictures, and others only plaques with names and dates. Most of the trees here are more than twenty years old. Rikka looks at each of the nameplates, reading them out loud, still feeling the pleasure of her recently gained ability.

When they reach the plot, a hole has already been made. The man and Jiji put the capsule in it, but they pause before turning on the little digging robot that made the hole and will soon fill it again.

"Do you need a moment?" the man asks Mom. "We have incense if you'd like."

She shakes her head, then turns to Rikka, who pulls on her mother's sleeve.

"Rikka?"

"Can I leave this?"

Rikka pulls her hand out of her pocket and shows her mom the little tooth. Her mom nods, unable to speak, and Rikka approaches the pot. She bends down and looks at the tooth for a long moment before burying it in the little patch of dirt between the sensors.

She walks back toward her mom, who takes her hand and squeezes it like she needs that touch to keep standing. The man turns the digging robot on. For the next ten minutes, the only noise is the metal shovel going up and down. Rikka doesn't take her eyes from it; she doesn't want to look at her mom, whose hand is trembling. With every metallic clank of the shovel, she thinks that maybe she should ask them to stop, maybe she should say something, maybe it's not right that the pot stays behind, maybe he could come back with them. But she can't find the words. The trembling of her mom's hand silences her. When the digging robot has finished, the man bows again and walks back toward the parking lot, to give them some space.

Mom doesn't say anything before turning around to follow him, still holding

Rikka's hand, but Rikka doesn't move. She pulls in the opposite direction, refusing to walk away.

"What's wrong?" Her mom's voice is a whisper full of tears.

"Are you sure Dad can't come with us? I don't want him to stay anymore."

Mom kneels so that she is the same height as Rikka. Her eyes are red.

"Love, Dad needs to stay here. Remember? We talked about it. Dad is a tree now. Dad is now a ginkgo, and he'll live in the forest. He's making oxygen and helping the planet. We'll come visit. I promise."

Rikka looks at the small tree, even smaller in between the full-grown trees. Her father's ashes fed the tree when it was growing faster than it should. They are one now. She knows this, but she still doesn't move. Jiji has probably noticed her hesitation, because he takes her in his arms. Rikka feels like a hole is opening inside her, and for the first time since Jiji took her home from the hospital, she starts to cry as they walk away. What does it matter that a ginkgo signifies rebirth or that all the trees are cleaning the air so Rikka can play outside, unlike the generation before her, or that going to a cemetery now means entering the woods, transforming every forestry issue into a human one? What did anything matter, if Dad had to stay behind?

Of the last night she saw him, she remembers the noise of the rain against the windshield mixed with the sound of classical music from the station Dad always used to listen to. Rikka was sitting in the back seat, reading every sign along the road out loud. Mom and Dad were fighting in the front seat. She remembers the sound of their voices, but not what they were saying; she remembers her dad's face when he turned around to ask her to stop reading; she remembers the shame she felt, her complaints, his warning voice, and then the light that blinded her, and the sound of a horn. The sudden swerve, the crash, the silence. A smell like something burning. Arms pulled her from the car, her mom's voice coming from somewhere in between the cries of the ambulance's siren.

In her memories, the hospital is a white stain with people coming in and out of it. The next clear image is the arrival of the pot. Mom had explained to her that morning a month before how to open the capsule, how to mix the ashes with the fresh dirt to fill it, how to plant the modified seed, how to seal the capsule and attach the sensors. For a month, Rikka made a ritual out of observing how her dad became a tree, but now, as they walk away, she looks at the tree from Jiji's arms, and she can't stop remembering lying in the car, looking out the window into darkness and tree branches lit by the beam of the car's headlights.



ANDREA CHAPELA (México, 1990) has a degree in chemistry from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and an MFA in Spanish Creative Writing from the University of Iowa. The four books of her saga *Vãudiz* were published between 2009 and 2015 by the publishing house Urano. Some of the poems from her MFA thesis have been published and translated into English. She started translating while at the University of Iowa. In 2016, she was awarded a Jóvenes Creadores grant for a science fiction short story collection. Some of these stories have been published in *Samovar*, *Tierra Adentro* and *Alucinadas IV*, a Spanish anthology. She is an alumna of the Clarion West class of 2017. She lives in La Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, where she was given a grant to work on an essay collection. She continues to translate and write poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

KELSI VANADA (North Carolina, 1987) has an mfa in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and an mfa in Literary Translation from the University of Iowa. Her translation of *The Eligible Age* by Berta García Faet (in Spanish, *La edad de merecer*) was published in 2018 by Song Bridge Press. Her poems and translations from Spanish and Swedish have appeared in various journals. She works as Program Manager for The American Literary Translators Association (ALTA).

RHIZOME

LIBIA BRENDA/RICHARD ZELA



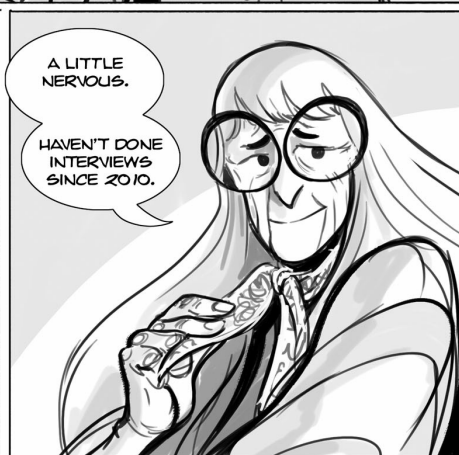
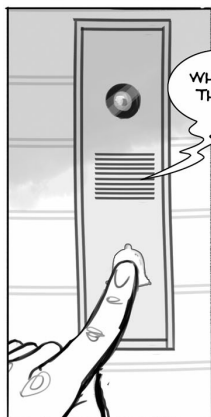
Language is a virus from Outer Space William Burroughs (retomado por Laurie
Anderson)

YEAR 2043

I'M NERVOUS.

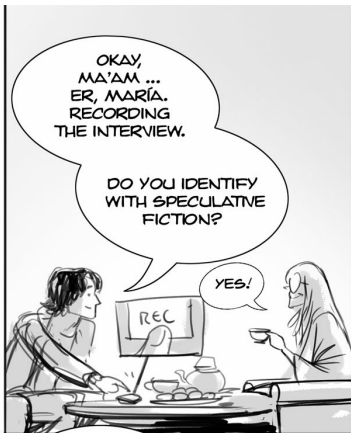
WHAT WAS THE SILENCE
MARIA LUISA

I'M GONNA MEET MY FAVORITE WRITER.





AFTER YOU LIVE SO LONG, YOU LEARN TO LAUGH A LOT OR YOU BECOME BITTER.



OKAY, MA'AM ... ER, MARIA. RECORDING THE INTERVIEW.

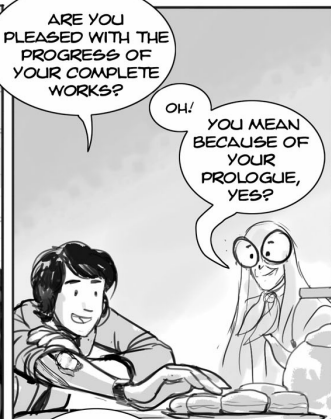
DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH SPECULATIVE FICTION?

YES!



WHY JUST SHORT STORIES AND NOT SOMETHING LONGER?

YIKES, NOT SURE WHAT TO SAY I ALWAYS PREFERRED...



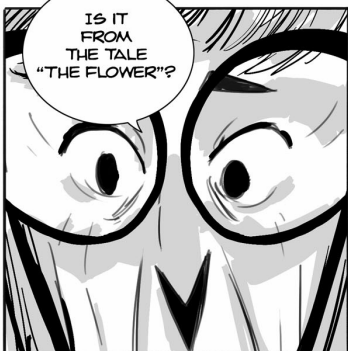
ARE YOU PLEASUED WITH THE PROGRESS OF YOUR COMPLETE WORKS?

OH!

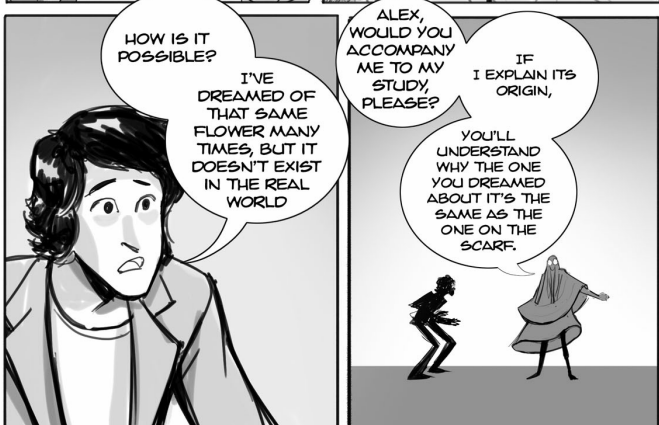
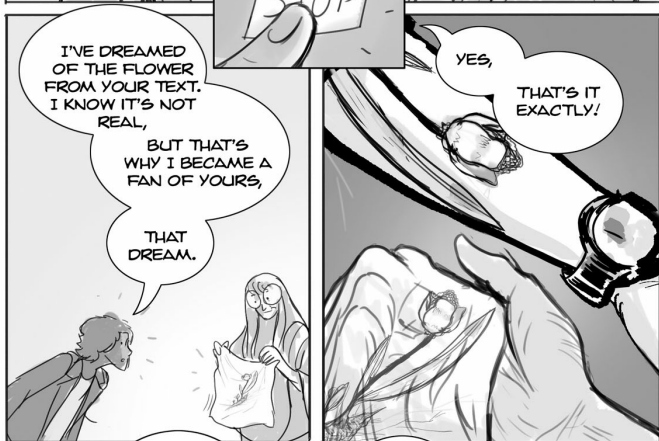
YOU MEAN BECAUSE OF YOUR PROLOGUE, YES?



WHAT'S THAT DRAWING?



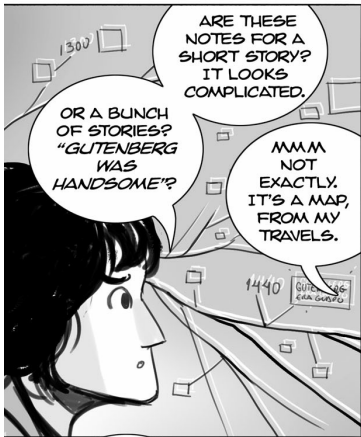
IS IT FROM THE TALE "THE FLOWER"?





IS IT A
TIMELINE?

WELL...
IF YOU CAN
CALL IT A LINE,
THEN YES.



OR A BUNCH
OF STORIES?
"GUTENBERG
WAS
HANDSOME?"

ARE THESE
NOTES FOR A
SHORT STORY?
IT LOOKS
COMPLICATED.

MMM
NOT
EXACTLY.
IT'S A MAP,
FROM MY
TRAVELS.



YOUR
TRAVELS?



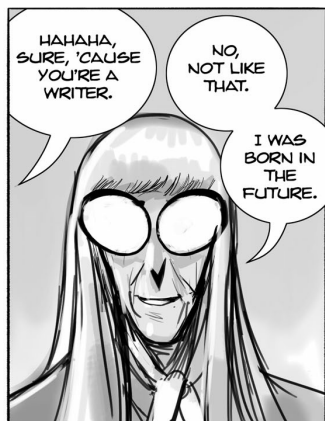
I HAVE
VISITED ALL
THOSE
MOMENTS.



YOU
MEAN,
LIKE ...
TIME
TRAVEL?

ALEX,
I KNOW HOW IT
SOUNDS, BUT
YES, I CAN TRAVEL
THROUGH
TIME.

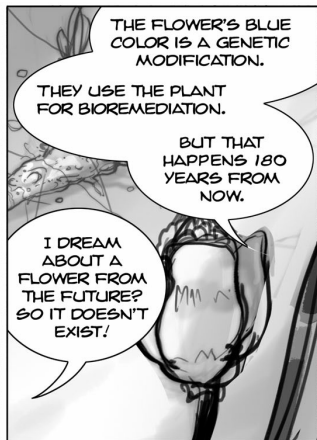
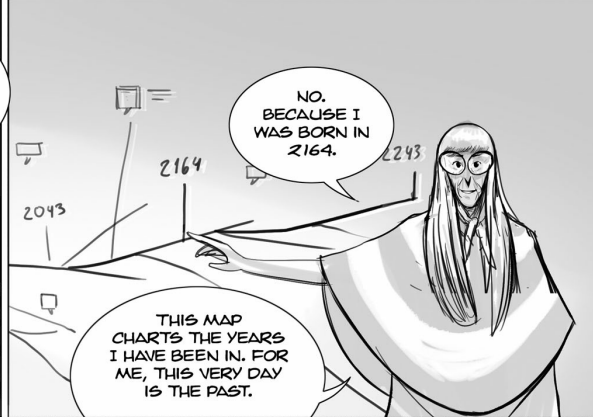
THROUGH
YOUR
STORIES?

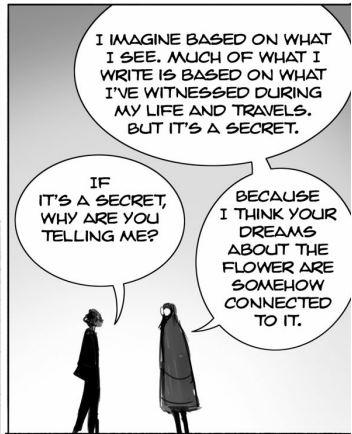
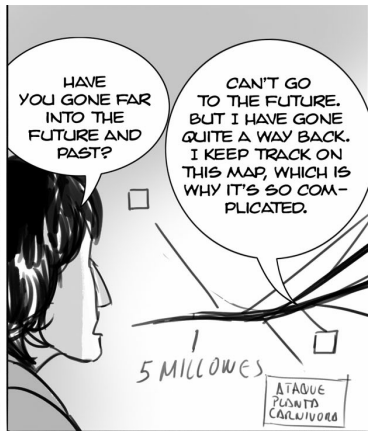
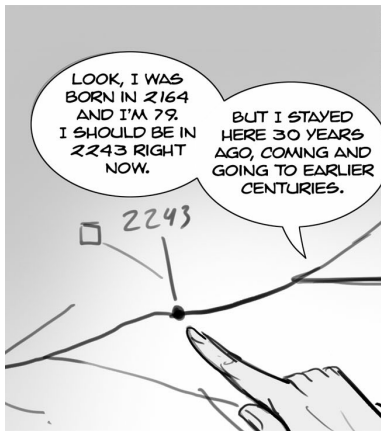


HAHAHA,
SURE, 'CAUSE
YOU'RE A
WRITER.

NO,
NOT LIKE
THAT.

I WAS
BORN IN
THE
FUTURE.



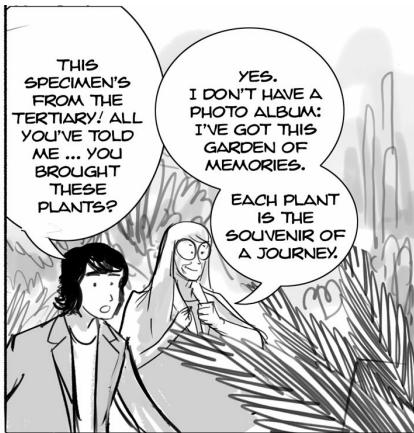




UNBELIEVABLE!

I'VE SPENDT HOURS HERE FOR SO MANY YEARS.

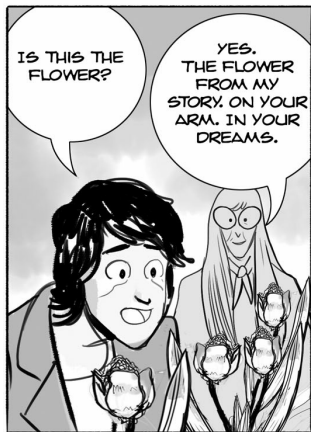
I'M A GOOD GARDNER, AREN'T I?



THIS SPECIMEN'S FROM THE TERTIARY! ALL YOU'VE TOLD ME ... YOU BROUGHT THESE PLANTS?

YES. I DON'T HAVE A PHOTO ALBUM: I'VE GOT THIS GARDEN OF MEMORIES.

EACH PLANT IS THE SOUVENIR OF A JOURNEY.



IS THIS THE FLOWER?

YES. THE FLOWER FROM MY STORY. ON YOUR ARM. IN YOUR DREAMS.



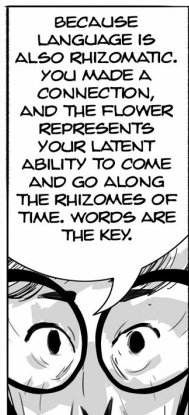
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! IT'S REAL!

I DREAM OF A FUTURE FLOWER..

IN MY TIME, PEOPLE CALL THEM BLUE TULIPS, THOUGH THEY'RE NOT THE SAME SPECIES.



BUT HOW CAN I DREAM OF IT IF I'VE ONLY SEEN IT IN WORDS?

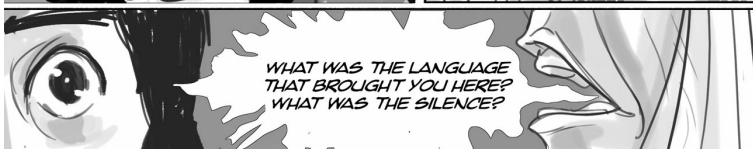


BECAUSE LANGUAGE IS ALSO RHIZOMATIC. YOU MADE A CONNECTION, AND THE FLOWER REPRESENTS YOUR LATENT ABILITY TO COME AND GO ALONG THE RHIZOMES OF TIME. WORDS ARE THE KEY.



COULD I TRAVEL THROUGH TIME WITH THIS FLOWER?

NO. THERE'S A PHRASE THAT CONNECTS IT ALL. YOU COULD MOVE THROUGH TIME IF I TOLD YOU. THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED TO ME, LONG AGO.



YEAR 2243

HOPE
HE HAD
TAKEN CARE
OF THE
GARDEN

WELCOME
HOME,
MARIA LUISA.

IT'S GOOD
TO BE BACK

COMPLETE WORKS, MARIA LUISA

MARIA LUISA
-ALEX-

Dear Maria Luisa,

*When you arrived, I will be long gone.
I hope you like how I preserve the library, and how much
it grew year after year.*

Time travel has been ...