

Advance Praise for *The Rampant*

“*The Rampant* is one of the most original Apocalypse tales I’ve read in ages. Julie C. Day avoids cliché and gives the reader the end-times by way of Sumerian myth—except this particular end-of-the-world stalls when one of its principal players decides not to show up. What unfolds is a journey into the underworld filled with joy and horror, hope and loss. It’s a wise and lovely story—exactly what I’ve come to expect from Day.”

—Nathan Ballingrud, winner of the Shirley Jackson Award; shortlisted for the World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Bram Stoker Awards.

“I loved the epic journey of our two teenaged lesbian heroes, Gillian and Emelia, through the sprawling horrors of the Sumerian afterworld. The clash of their modern feminist sensibilities with the cruel and rigid theocracy of the very oldest gods out-weirds much of the New Weird. In *The Rampant*, Julie Day calls us to visit a fantastical landscape in a voice that is hers alone.”

—James Patrick Kelly, winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus awards

“*The Rampant* was so much fun to read! Is that the right way to blurb a horror novel? I don’t know, but it’s the truth. Julie Day’s novel is smart, playful, sly and, yes, horrifying too. A short gem of a book.”

—Victor LaValle, author of *The Changeling*; winner of the World Fantasy, Shirley Jackson, and British Fantasy awards.

“The girl-powered post-apocalyptic Sumerian underworld quest I didn’t know I needed.”

—Sarah Pinsker, winner of the Nebula and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
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The Rampant

by
Julie C. Day





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My life is full of the wondrous. When I fail to take note, that is all on me. If I've forgotten to mention your name, you deserve all my thanks whether it's written down or not.

To my father, Eric Day. You taught me the both the power of bold thinking and of calm in the face of sea-tipping disaster. You also conveyed something even more fundamental: we are all travelers in our own life-until-death adventure. I love you dearly.

Chapter 1

The seven evil gods, death-dealing and fearless are they,
The seven evil gods, like a flood, fall upon the land,
Like a storm, they rise, do they,
Before the gleaming Sin, they set themselves angrily;
—from the sixteenth table of the
“Evil Demon Series”

[*The Devil and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*, London 1903]

July, Aboveground

Screaming is pretty standard at my house, and tonight is no exception. As I tell Mel way too often, “Another night another nightmare. Baby, bring on the end of the world.” At this point, I’m lucky all she gives me in return is an eye roll. Even friendship has its limits.

I take a breath, smell the candle wax of my bedroom shrine. Definitely awake. The summer’s hot, humid air is like a familiar blanket pressed against my nose and mouth. The weighted darkness of my bed’s canopy is just as suffocating. And then there are the tears. I’ve been sleep-crying again. At least there are no more screams, though my room isn’t entirely silent. There’s a banging sound, and a voice.

“Gillian, will you open the fucking window?” Mel. It feels like she’s been repeating the same words for a while

now. Mel's bedroom is only twenty feet from mine. Pabst cans, leftovers from her father's old stash, are scattered all over the side yard between our houses. Once again, she's outside at night looking way too much like a willing sacrifice and some monster's late-night supper.

Mel is the sister I never had and the best-of-all-possible friends. Mel with her long, dark hair and that half-ironic smile. Whether it's here in Decatur, Indiana, or down in the Netherworld, I know she'll always have my back. Forget the moon; it's way too close. I love that girl all the way to Nibiru and back again. Not that any of us are exactly sure of Nibiru's location.

It's ten years since the hordes of old-world gods, the Anunna and Anunnaki, and all their various demi-gods arrived to kick off the Rapture. The chosen, we're told, will ascend to Nibiru, the home of the King of Heaven and Earth, and join the pantheon of gods as His anointed human servants. As it turns out, life's best of possible outcomes is cleaning up after some sharp-beaked god with a craving for live offerings. And even that promise is a dud.

The Rapture is like a birthday party your parents never get around to throwing. Ten years in and I still get up, brush my teeth, and wonder if today is going to be the day. Then each night I say my prayers before my bedroom shrine, ignore that poster above my bed—a supposed cross-section of the earth: crust, mantle, and all the rest—then fall asleep, and dream. Some nights I travel beneath the earth to the Plains and a purgatory of broken and dead bodies, other nights I drift along the Hubur River on a bone and sinew boat, and then there are the nights I reach the Netherworld itself—the land of the perfectly preserved dead. Incomplete human corpses and godly types might be denied entry, but some nights a liv-

ing person can dream themselves to the Netherworld, especially if they have one particular god's invitation.

Like tonight.

Tonight was Netherworld Central. The odors were classic: there was something sickly-sweet and rancid, like rotting fat, and something else close to the biting stench of burning hair. But the visions were worse. Tonight I stood in the Rampant's very own mud-brick house. Through an open window, I could see a woman trapped on the other side of the compound's circular moat, a river of red liquid dripping from her arms. A dead woman, obviously. This is the Netherworld, after all. Even in my sleep, it was easy to imagine the jagged gashes that went along with all that blood.

"My baby," the woman moaned. "Alistair, Mommy's here!"

Some things I wish I didn't know. Despite her perfect corpse, despite the fact that she'd actually pulled it off and reached the Netherworld, that woman's mission was doomed before she even arrived.

Pastor Edwins never mentions it, but I've seen the truth. Human babies arrive in the Netherworld as young magpie hatchlings with black-and-yellow beaks—no arms or mouths. Give them enough time and they eventually learn to fly, but that's it. In the afterlife, babies are birds forever more. Amen. That woman wasn't getting her Alistair back, no matter what elegant death rite she employed to travel down.

I force back that dark and familiar sense of shame. Unlike the woman and her lost baby, all I have to do is open my eyes and I'm back in my own bed.

"Gillian, come on." Mel sounds impatient. "Open the window. It's dark out here, and you know I smell delicious."

I untangle my legs from the cotton sheets and force myself to sit up. “Delicious my ass. You better have brought some fucking beer.” I reach for my bedside candle, then realize my mistake.

Indiana is gods-damn hot. Like every other summer night, tonight—after anointing the screen with oil—I’d left the window open.

In most ways I’m a good little Sumerian Revivalist. I generally trust in my prayers and the blessed screen to keep the monsters at bay. But I haven’t lasted ten years without learning a few things; demi-gods are unearthly mimics. Just because the voice sounds like Mel doesn’t mean the creature standing outside my window isn’t some squiggled-out monster looking for a midnight snack. It doesn’t even mean Mel is still alive, another thought I ruthlessly slap away. PTSD used to be a crippling illness. Now trauma is the norm, and raging anxiety is one of our world’s almost-sins. As our Sunday School teachers are always telling us, big feelings get in the way of the important stuff, like trying to stay alive.

I reach down next to my bed, searching for my pastor-blessed knife and supplication mat. Basic Salvation training. Knife first, always, no matter how much worry you’re forcing down. Death by minor deity is just a plain bad way to go. Still, despite the ritual’s life-saving practicalities, all that freely offered blood and begging have always struck me as incredibly pathetic. If I were a god, I’d eat the loud ones straight off, if only to stop their wailing.

Mat and knife ready, I finally light my bedside candle. The flame’s glow shows me everything I need to know.

The window’s mesh screen separates Mel’s face into tiny metal squares. Some squares show sections of eye, others show the wisps of long, black hair that clings to her cheeks. Each of those stacked, metal-boxed Mels looks

poised to hurl themselves out into the darkness and shatter into a multitude of pieces. Anything to avoid the pain.

“You look like a tiny bomb-face about to explode,” I say as I swing my legs onto the wooden floor. The kind of thought I only share with Mel.

“Tiny bomb-face,” she snorts. “Maybe you really did drink all the empties out here.” Mel pushes up against the screen’s metal frame. “I mean it, Gillian. Give me a hand.”

“K.” The screen shudders in protest as I unclasp the spring-loaded latch and push.

“You need to oil this screen with WD-40, not that church shit,” Mel says, not for the first time, as she hands me her backpack, which is thankfully full of clinking cans.

“You need to stop wandering the neighborhood at night,” I say, meaning it. A dead and dismembered Mel seems more likely all the time.

In addition to our secret group project, Mel is on her own mission, one she refuses to discuss. It’s obvious all the same. Two years in, Mel is still trying to find bits of her dad, any bits, in the hope of adding them to his grave.

Another truth I could do without: only whole, perfect bodies make it beyond the purgatory of the underworld’s Plains and on to the actual Netherworld. Despite all the bullshit his children pull up top, the King of Heaven and Earth doesn’t like his corpses full-on damaged. The hypocrite. With digestion and all the rest, even if Mel came across the gods who ate Mr. Bareilles, it’s a hopeless cause. In the gods’ eyes, Mr. Bareilles will always be imperfect.

While Mel closes the screen, I set the candle next to my bedside shrine and slip on my old, royal blue Colts hat. I used to think it would bring me luck. At sixteen I know better, but it still feels good to pretend. To be honest, it feels better than good. “Here’s to the end of the world and no more bad dreams,” I say.

Mel knows the drill. She doesn't mention the lingering tears on my face. Instead, she claps her hands together and smiles. "Amen. Ready to kick off the Rapture?"

"Let's do it." Tears wiped, I pull our planning notebook out from underneath my mattress and adjust the angle of my hat. "Rapture planning engaged." Our parents would freak if they knew what we were up to. Heads down and stoic is what it's all about these days, if you want to survive anyway. Doesn't matter that the gods' big Rapture party is stalled. Those assholes take exception to the idea that they need a human's help with anything. And the Rapture is their most holy of messed-up holies. Yet another reason Mel and I need a solid plan; a pissed-off god, really a pissed-off anyone with power, equals nothing but bad news.

"How about we just skip the prayer book?" Mel has settled on my bed, back against the wall. She's doing that one-eyebrow-raised thing that is all Mel. The room is dim enough that it hides my sudden blush. Probably. Mel's always been tall and skinny like her dad, but these days willow describes her even better. Sometime in the last couple of years the girl found her curves. Lately, I've had to add these non-friend feelings to the list of things best sealed away. Some nights, like tonight, I'm more like a sieve.

Mr. Bareilles was kind of hot, at least that's what Aunt Cecilia used to say. And Mel is, too, in a girl sort of way. As well as her height, Mel has that Bareilles hair that kinks when it gets long and the light brown skin that tans dark in summer. Me, I'm more of the short, pale, Colts-hat-wearing wallflower type—with delusions of world-ending grandeur. Not that it matters: romantic love isn't part of the god-ordained, post-Ascension lifestyle.

"Earth to Gillian? What do you think? Leave the prayer book?" Mel pulls a beer from her backpack. "We

only have so much room in our packs, and that book is huge.” As she talks, she restlessly flicks the can’s tabbed-top with her thumb and forefinger.

“Okay. Yeah. It’s out.” Even with the extra thin Bible-paper, the Sumerian Revivalist prayer book is a heavy lift, twelve inches tall and at least six inches deep. Plus, its contents are as irritating as fuck. Gods are, predictably, huge egotists. Each one requires a special series of prayers and invocations, some of which can take hours to perform. And it’s not like all that work is a guaranteed save. Those prayers aren’t worth shit if a god happens to be bored or hungry, which these days is most of the time.

Forget the four horsemen of Biblical fame. It turns out the MCs at the end of the world are the seven Evil Messengers aka the Rampant and his six siblings. The Rampant’s brothers, six of those seven Messengers, arrived ten years ago, ready to wave the Rapture starting flag, just as the King of Heaven and Earth had scripted. The Rampant, however, had other plans. Ten years later that guy’s still a no show. But being godly means the Rampant still makes his presence known.

Nightmare messages. What else would you expect from an Evil Messenger. And for whatever reason, he just won’t shut up. The Rampant tells me missing his cue was a huge mistake. The Rampant tells me he’s stuck. Once I fall asleep the Rampant pulls my dream-self down below. Bedtime has become a night pass to the land of the dead.

Silver-lining time: despite the horrors, my travels have given me hope.

Forget the waiting, or praying, or trying to get those godly invocations right. Mel and I have an actual workable plan to fix things. The two of us are going to escort the Rampant above ground and kickoff the Rapture. Wholesale perfect deaths for everyone along with a home

in either Niburi or the Netherworld, that's the pitch. For some reason, the Rampant keeps adding the Netherworld to our list of Rapturous, post-Earth options, which none of the texts or pastors mention, but whatever. Compared to our current lives, either of those resting places sounds like heaven.

Pain and years-long terror has given me some fucked-up wisdom: gods are way too comfortable with those lies of omission. And the Rampant hasn't exactly bothered to share his entire plan with me, despite all the dreams. That's okay. Once we're down in the Netherworld, there'll be plenty of time for questions: like why he blew off his scheduled ascension and why he needs my specific help. I know who I am. I'm Gillian Halkey, just another living sixteen-year-old girl who's fucking pissed off with our god-created universe.

One thing I'm sure of: gods shouldn't get to call all the shots. What with Mel and all her crazy nighttime wandering, I've made one crucial change to the plan. Forget waiting for the Rampant to finish laying out all his precious details one nightmare at a time. Mel and I are heading down now. The two of us have survived here for ten years, surrounded by the King of Heaven and Earth's Sumerian horde. We can manage whatever Rampant details are left undone. Ruthless demons,

At least I hope so. Truth is, the only thing that's going to stop Mel's night-wandering is this mission, so off we go. Saving what's left of humanity isn't worth shit if Mel isn't a part of the crowd.

The Small Catechism
[of the Sumerian Revivalist Church]

*To all faithful and upright pastors and preachers.
Grace, mercy, and peace in our God,
the King of Heaven and Earth,
and in all his godly and demi-godly children.*

The Realms of the Dead

Introduction

If you are going to go down to the Plains, let me advise you! It is one of many kingdoms in my realm.

Question: Does God, the King of Heaven and Earth, rule over more than one realm?

Answer: Yes, the King of Heaven and Earth rules over all four realms.

The Four Realms

1. Nibiru, the home of the King of Heaven and Earth.
2. Living Earth.
3. The Plains of the imperfect dead.
4. The Netherworld

Question: Will the sun or the stars ever appear over the Plains of the imperfect dead?

Answer: No. The King of Heaven and Earth resides in Nibiru in his many-roomed home. He is surrounded by the gods he cherishes most. On that final day, He will bless those human servants who are pure of heart and allow them entry to his heavenly realm. The Plains contain only those who have failed him.

Question: Can the imperfect dead cross from the Plains into the Netherworld?

Answer: No, the waters of the Hubur prevent all residents (gods, demi-gods, and the imperfect dead) from leaving the Plains and entering the Netherworld.