

# The Cascadia Subduction Zone

A LITERARY  
QUARTERLY

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Mexico Night



Susan diRende

IN THIS ISSUE

## ESSAY

Unbought and Unbossed  
by Karen Lord

## POEMS

Contemplation  
by Tonya Liburd

Canals of Mars

In Which Miss Emily Bethel  
Wakes a Hundred Years Later  
in Every Possible Future

New Moon: Naming, Rites,  
by T.D. Walker

## GRANDMOTHER MAGMA

*The Handmaid's Tale*,  
Margaret Atwood  
by Jewelle Gomez

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The People in the Castle*  
by Joan Aiken

*To Shape the Dark*  
edited by Athena Andreadis

*The Devourers*  
by Indra Das

*The Geek Feminist Revolution*  
by Kameron Hurley

*Arabella of Mars*  
by David D. Levine

*Fae Visions of the Mediterranean:  
An Anthology of Horrors and  
Wonders of the Sea*  
edited by Valeria Vitale  
and Djibril al-Ayad

FEATURED ARTIST  
Susan diRende

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

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In This Issue

## VOL. 6 No. 3 — JULY 2016

### ESSAYS

Unbought and Unbossed: *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Amaryllis Collymore*,  
by Karen Lord ☉ 1

### POEMS

Contemplation, by Tonya Liburd ☉ 3

Three by T.D. Walker

Canals of Mars ☉ 3

In Which Miss Emily Bethel Wakes  
a Hundred Years Later in Every Possible Future ☉ 4

New Moon: Naming, Rites ☉ 5

### GRANDMOTHER MAGMA

*The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood

by Jewelle Gomez ☉ 6

### BOOK REVIEWS

*The People in the Castle*, by Joan Aiken  
reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia ☉ 8

*To Shape the Dark*, edited by Athena Andreadis  
reviewed by Lauren Banka ☉ 10

*The Devourers*, by Indra Das  
reviewed by Anil Menon ☉ 11

*The Geek Feminist Revolution*, by Kameron Hurley  
reviewed by Karama Horne ☉ 14

*Arabella of Mars: The Adventures of Arabella Ashby*, by David D. Levine  
reviewed by Cynthia Ward ☉ 16

*Fae Visions of the Mediterranean: An Anthology of Horrors and Wonders of the Sea*,  
edited by Valeria Vitale and Djibril al-Ayad  
reviewed by Joanne Rixon ☉ 18

### FEATURED ARTIST

Susan diRende ☉ 20

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# Unbought and Unbossed: *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Amaryllis Collymore

by Karen Lord

Amaryllis Collymore was a mulatto slave, born in Barbados in 1745. She formed a liaison with Robert Collymore, a plantation owner, and they had five children. In 1780 Robert, who was not her owner, bought her and their children from the woman who *did* own them, a free colored hotelier named Rebecca Phillips. By 1784, he had arranged for them all to be manumitted, and he and Amaryllis went on to have six more children together. Robert made Amaryllis independently wealthy when he acquired a small plantation of forty-two acres (forty-four slaves included) and ensured that she and her heirs were given full rights and ownership.<sup>1</sup>

The history of Amaryllis Collymore intrigues me. She was the great-great-great-grandmother of Frank Collymore, a teacher and writer celebrated for his contribution to the development of West Indian literature during his tenure as editor of the literary magazine BIM.<sup>2</sup> In a way, the Frank Collymore Literary Endowment prize money that I won for my first two books is part of her legacy.<sup>3</sup>

History is complicated, not romantic. It is neither possible nor useful to speculate whether Robert and Amaryllis were bound by a genuine, mutual affection or whether Amaryllis had, like many before and since, seized the chance for protection, financial support, and a better life for her children by entering a transactional relationship with a man who possessed the necessary social and financial leverage. If it was the latter, then she differed little from many women of that time, slave and free, whose ambitions were severely restricted by law and society.

In this rare case, the slave Amaryllis gained wealth and independence, but free, upper-class women lost ownership and control of their dowries on marriage. Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

(1966), whom Jean Rhys based on the madwoman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), is an example of this highly-favored, yet ultimately tragic heiress. She is rich and pretty, but constrained to live in a stifling, incestuous society created by the peculiar boundaries of race and class. She looks for someone to save her, to give her an escape and a happily-ever-after—but she is the first Mrs Rochester, and her search will end in fire and fall.

If Antoinette Cosway is raised to marry well, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is raised to work hard. She doesn't look for a savior. She learns early in life that guardians, teachers, and husbands cannot be depended on to love you or protect you. She is too poor and plain to catch the attention of a suitor. She is expected to earn a living and have her own money, and she is suspicious of gifts and the obligations they impose. Her story is not a romance centered on Edward Rochester and St John Rivers; it is a bildungsroman about her search for independence.

Rochester is of the moneyed class (coffers topped up with his mad wife's dowry), an arrogant and entitled man who has little incentive to change. His response to Jane's discovery of his attempt at bigamy is to offer her the role of pampered mistress, which she rightly scorns. (Please note that the true shame stems from the dependency, not from the lack of matrimonial rites.) He is forced to undergo a drastic transformation: a baptism by fire, then the loss of his sinful right hand and sinful right eye. Only then is he fit to be in an equal relationship with "a free human being with an independent will."

History is complicated, but I'm guessing that if Robert Collymore gave his children and the mother of his children manumission *and* a plantation, he saw more clearly than the sighted Rochester that freedom *de jure* is not freedom *de facto* unless there is also freedom of choice. Affection isn't part of the equation at all. You can be very fond of the things (and people) you own and never once desire their independence from you. In fact, you

*History is complicated, not romantic. It is neither possible nor useful to speculate whether Robert and Amaryllis were bound by a genuine, mutual affection or whether Amaryllis had, like many before and since, seized the chance for protection....*

*You can be very fond of the things (and people) you own and never once desire their independence from you. In fact, you can be particularly fond of dependence if it means that no one can walk away from you....*

1 [https://issuu.com/millerpublishing/docs/iobgi14\\_ebook/254](https://issuu.com/millerpublishing/docs/iobgi14_ebook/254)

2 <http://www.kaieturnewsonline.com/2010/03/20/book-review/>

3 <http://www.fch.org.bb/Literary-Endowment>



## Unbought and Unbossed (cont. from p. 1)

*Amaryllis intrigues me, Antoinette saddens me, but Jane makes me glad. What other 1800s work so perfectly flips the script on that era's gender roles and even overturns our contemporary tropes?*

©  
2 *Vex money, fuck-you money, whatever you want to call it—it's a very good thing to have in case you want to walk away.*

can be particularly fond of dependence if it means that no one can walk away from you, no matter how much they may want to, unless you allow it.

Amaryllis intrigues me, Antoinette saddens me, but Jane makes me glad. What other 1800s work so perfectly flips the script on that era's gender roles and even overturns our contemporary tropes? She informs Rochester that not only is she rich and "her own mistress" (a delightful term on so many levels), but also she, plain Jane, could have chosen a classically beautiful, blond virgin as her husband. (Overlook for a moment St John's issues, which would take a whole new essay to discuss.) *That's* freedom of choice.

My mother told me, and her mother told her, *Always have your own money so you don't have to depend on a man for anything.* My father provided the sequel, *If you ever get the chance to work for yourself, take it.* If you must live in a capitalist society with longstanding and unresolved power imbalances, being in charge of your own income gives you a greater range of choice. Vex money, fuck-you money, whatever you want to call it—it's a very good thing to have in case you want to walk away.

These three stories—one real, two fictional—show that it is never safe to be owned and always a risk to be dependent. It does not matter if the person who has bought you, the person who keeps con-

trol over your food and shelter and movements, is someone who claims to love you. Do not accept affection or validation or attention for the price of independence. In the words of Shirley Chisholm, another famous Bajan, it is better by far to stay *unbought and unbossed.*

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Award-winning Barbadian writer Karen Lord is the author of *Redemption in Indigo*, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, and *The Galaxy Game*, and the editor of the anthology *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean*.



*Paris Looking Down*



## Contemplation

by Tonya Liburd

One African night,  
Worn of living, tired of not dying,  
feeling deep within my heart  
the absolute certainty I did not fit  
into the grand scheme,  
I raised my face skyward,  
regarded the black-skinned sky,  
the black-skinned universe,  
black-skinned me,  
and dug myself an early grave.

She laughed at me, her lips luscious  
red as blood,  
red as the blood we drank,  
red as the blood we need,  
...She laughed at me then  
And told me all I would find if I buried myself  
was that Mother Earth had not abandoned me,  
Undead child of the moon that I was.

In the grave, I turned my face  
from sky, from moon, from her,  
to the earth,  
and waited on eternity  
for the answer.

Meanwhile, as human civilization went on and on,  
Trees' roots embraced me, surrounding my arms, legs,  
rich loam attached to my eyelashes.  
Peace whispered secrets, leaching, into my bones,  
filling my emptiness, and I knew  
this was the answer.

At length I rose with the African moon, empowered  
with what I was—a creature of the Earth like any other.

She was nowhere to be found, but black-skinned men  
pounded spikes, hammered tracks  
intended to cross the continent, they told me  
everything controlled by pale-skinned men, who miser'd  
knowledge  
and had guns.

One approached me, deferring to me, elder to eldest.  
I lifted my head to the black-skinned sky,  
the black-skinned universe, child of the moon that I was,  
a new purpose bestowed,  
and set out to give oppressors terror, and to men, freedom.

---

Tonya Liburd's work is used in workshops as an example of "code switching." Her fiction has been longlisted for the 2015 Carter V Cooper (Vanderbilt)/Exile Short Story Competition. She is the Associate Editor of *Abyss & Apex Magazine*. You can find her blogging at <http://spiderlilly.com> or on Twitter at @somesillywowzer.

## Canals of Mars

by T.D. Walker

We dig the canals to move fluid between base and developing base.  
We dig the canals to learn about what lies beneath the soil we cannot call earth.  
We dig the canals to transport goods between what we've learned to call cities.  
We dig the canals to build archways over, to mark the passage of time.  
We dig the canals to store our increasing refuse: an outgrown space suit, a Casio keyboard,  
a broken charm bracelet.  
We dig the canals to complicate the images returned by reconnaissance missions.  
We dig the canals to throw our teenage diaries in, when the prospect of return has passed.  
We dig the canals to bury the cat who invented his own flap into the darkness.  
We dig the canals to relieve the weight of milk after the child has gone.  
We dig the canals to burn our maps of earth by.  
We dig the canals to connect ourselves to an imagined past.



# In Which Miss Emily Bethel Wakes a Hundred Years Later in Every Possible Future

by T.D. Walker

“My week has come to an end. Short though it has been, it has been full of interest, full of all that I have accounted life. A good exchange for a year or two of mere existence.”

—Catherine Helen Spence, *A Week in the Future* (1888)

We never saw her without the cracked *valise*, a new word for the little black bag we'd thought was a doctor's. *Call me Aunt Emily*, she'd said when my sister called her Dr. Bethel and asked

whether she'd come because the dog was dying. Like the old gray dog, Aunt Emily'd shown up one summer afternoon in 1988 at my grandparents', the August heat far too much for her heavy coat.

Later, we'd find *Florence Bethel*, a fading leaf on the watercolor family tree my grandmother had painted soon after she'd arrived in Texas as a war bride. She'd captured again and again

in watercolor and ink the gray and heavy English village she'd left, each a landscape seen from farther and farther away until the last painting showed only mist and the hint of a church

©  
4 tower. My grandmother offered tea and Aunt Emily refused. She'd dropped her coat on the floor and asked whether my grandmother had a sprinkler and a swimsuit she could borrow. Aunt Emily ran outside with us

girls, gripping the paper snowcone cups that leaked blue raspberry syrup onto the sidewalk in front of our grandparents' suburban home. *Too far back again*, she'd said, but we didn't ask what she meant, only pulled the dog and sprinkler

farther into the lawn. Later we'd see her pull a small cracked mirror from the valise. She half closed her eyes and slightly opened her blued mouth and looked at herself. We'd spent the afternoon

running, she'd run harder than either of us girls, and all of us, hair still damp and fingers sticky sat on the porch swing watching the August sun setting or resisting setting. After my grandmother

passed the *valise* and the paintings to my sister and me, we resisted opening the little black bag until summer had passed. The mirror had finished breaking, the black dresses overlain with lace

hid the journal she'd kept: full accounts of London, and London again, weeks in Hong Kong and Istanbul, Delhi and Bombay, Sydney and New York, a little village in Brazil. She'd stopped writing down the future

after a year had passed, after she realized that she'd never escape these possible futures. The houses, after all, were houses, full of people or not. The schools taught what they taught.

Couples married, had children, grew apart. Some died from diseases cured long ago in alternate worlds. The last page of the diary recorded us:

*Week 5,738: Suburban Houston.*

*This time, it's Elizabeth again, or this instance of her, and her landscapes, that little square of gray longing. Where is this home she repeats? Her granddaughters staying with her for the summer.*

*I'll leave the valise again. When I meet Elizabeth again, a dozen or two dozen weeks from this one, I'll tell her, the her I find there, that the light is never true: rising over the village, reflecting in those vast pools, catching itself in the spray of fountains whose sources we lose in the process of desire.*



*Cimetière Montparnasse, Paris*



# New Moon: Naming, Rites

by T.D. Walker

A Partial List of Names  
Submitted for Earth's Second  
Recently Captured Natural Satellite:

Hanwi: Lakota  
goddess of the moon

Máni: Norse goddess  
of the moon, sister to the Sun

Mayari: Philippine goddess  
of the moon who'd lost an eye to her  
brother and so shone less brightly

Changxi: Chinese goddess who bore  
twelve moons, perhaps now  
she's had another

Yemoja: Yoruba Orisha of water, perhaps  
the new moon will charm the tides

Saint Frances: Patron  
saint of emigrants

Yavanna: Queen of Middle  
Earth, wife of Aulë

Jeanne Baré: dressed as a man, she was  
the first woman, it's reported,  
to circumnavigate the earth

Tara: lover of Chandra, a Hindu lunar god

Coyolxauhqui: Aztec goddess of the moon--  
she attacked her mother  
and was flung into the sky

Saint Dymphna: Patron saint of runaways

Lilith: allowed to return to the garden,  
or where the garden should have been

*The new body wandered toward  
us and settled into its orbit. Still  
there was no explanation for it, just a need*

*for a name that made it somehow more  
ours, though really, wasn't it less ours and more*

*the old moon's companion? She'd been  
appointed to the post, first reader*

*of all these suggested names. She'd imagined these  
children and former children looking up at night,  
trying to see what cannot be seen with the eye*

*alone, looking up these stories we'd once told  
our past selves about the moon we could see.  
She knows two names will never be on this list:*

*her college roommate who'd dropped out, gone  
without an explanation, and years later*

*at the resale shop in a little town somewhere  
between Austin and Houston, a woman with her*

*aged face sorting through second-hand wedding  
gowns, bridesmaids' dresses or prom dresses,*

*mending straps where the weight of homecoming  
mums had torn through the satin: she was sure  
the woman wouldn't recognize her now.*

*She'd waited up nights, watching for*

*some sign of return. She didn't know now whether  
she'd remember which of the two names had been  
in the college directory, which on the name tag.*

*She'll trim the list, cutting away names, mending*

*what remains: another's cast off body  
of stories shaped into the space where the new  
moon's body will make its passage.*

---

T.D. Walker's poems have appeared in  
*Abyss & Apex*, *The Stonecoast Review*,  
*Star\*Line*, *Cold Mountain Review*,  
*Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and  
elsewhere. She blogs occasionally at her  
website, [freethinkingahead.com](http://freethinkingahead.com).



☸ *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

by Jewelle Gomez

*As I finished reading it the first time, around 1987, I learned a terrifying political lesson about the repression of human rights: it happens while we're looking directly at it.*

In the late 1970s and early '80s, I devoured any fiction I found by women writers, and especially lesbian/feminists. I was reshaping both my personal world and my writing future by reading as closely as I could to see where and how far women might go. If the late author Joanna Russ (see *CSZ Vol. 4 #3*) had had such things as acolytes, I would have been one. I was in love with her mind, her vocabulary, her storytelling. I was so enraptured with Russ, and her output was so limited because of ill health, that I routinely reread her work. I was also captured by the prolific novelist Chelsea Quinn Yarbro (who has written 30 Count Saint-Germain vampire titles so far) as I tried to develop my own feminist reframing of vampire mythology. Deeply ensconced in the worlds of these two authors, I almost missed Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* when it was published in 1985.

When it was mentioned to me, the Atwood book struck me as achingly heterosexual and white. Fortunately, I didn't settle for a secondhand impression. As I finished reading it the first time, around 1987, I learned a terrifying political lesson about the repression of human rights: it happens while we're looking directly at it. And as I live through the post-Roe v Wade and post-9/11 eras, that knowledge is even more terrifying.

*The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in a near-future in which Christian demagogues, blaming Islamic terrorists and moral decay for the failures of the society, have taken over the government, creating the new Republic of Gilead. The abuse of U.S. environmental resources has left many people sterile, and for the good of the country a system is devised to assure that the "right" people procreate. Women are categorized according to their function in society: wives, daughters, Jezebels (women forced to be prostitutes), and handmaids. The Republic—using Biblical references as justification—places handmaids into households to have monthly sex with the husband (while lying in the

arms of his sterile wife!) in order to bear the couple a child.

Handmaids, of course, come from parts of society which have been looted and dismantled, and pressed into service as seen fit by Commanders. They have no privacy or personal lives, travel in pairs, and must always wear red robes and huge white wimples, giving the impression of exotic birds.

Told from the point of view of Offred—whose name means "of Fred"—the observations making up the bulk of the novel are revealed in language that is stripped as bare as the lives that have been appropriated by the Republic. Following retraining, which is strict and cattle-prod brutal, Offred experiences the desperate boredom of living in a room that must remain unadorned to avoid providing instruments that might aid suicide attempts. She is almost at the end of her mental as well as physical tether when she finally hears the rumors of a rebel underground.

As the story continues to unfold, it becomes clear that as tightly as the Republic controls the society—especially its women—human nature will always find a way to crack through the concrete. Whether two handmaids figure out how to talk to each other in public without arousing suspicion (turning their heads to see around their headgear would cause trouble) by looking at each other in the glass of a window or a full-scale bordello functions on government property—Atwood assures us that humans are irrepressible. That's a relief, because the cruelty of the Republic is unrelenting: its most obvious villainies include hanging unconverted Jews from public hooks to die and shredding "deformed" children. Behind these acts lurk more subtle aggressions that remind me eerily of 2016.

Newspapers today report on the vastly successful attempts by Christian coalitions to impede women's access to abortion or even contraception information through many means, beginning with state-by-state legislation. "At no time since before 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion, has a woman's ability to terminate a pregnancy been more dependent on her zip code or





financial resources to travel” (*Bloomberg Businessweek*, 2/26/16).

Murder is an accepted strategy as well—according to the *New York Times* (11/29/15) at least eleven people have been killed in attacks against contraception clinics since 1993. This is in reality, not the novel!

On another front, the current efforts by conservatives to roll back gains made through the Voting Rights Act of 1965 have also been successful. Students, the poor, people of color, and the elderly in many states are now finding it difficult to amass the identification required to cast their votes. In 2012 (during President Obama’s campaign to hold onto his office), the NAACP brought the issue to the United Nations Human Rights Commission. In their online newsletter then-NAACP President Ben Jealous stated: “We’ve come full circle. In the past year more states in this country have passed more laws pushing more voters out of the ballot box than at any point since the dawn of Jim Crow.”

The recent recommendation by a candidate for U.S. President that Muslims be prohibited from entering the country echoed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1880, but was not met with the derisive laughter it deserved. This regressive trend continues with the dismantling of labor unions and the de-valuing of nurses and teachers, actions aimed at limiting the benefits earned by those in working-class and traditionally women-centered professions. Progressive gains in human rights in the U.S. are being drowned by legislators, judges, and conservative activists in a rolling, deadly wave. As Atwood’s main character, Offred observes: “It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this.”

Atwood’s genius lies in not tying this dystopian turn of events simply to Christian fundamentalists. She implies that the lack of foresight of liberal thinkers and progressives plays into the hands of the conservative forces, creating the proverbial perfect storm. Citizens react to the reports of terrorism with more terror rather than by considering new strategies. Candidates toss bogey men into crowds like smoke bombs, and people race around sightless, gasping out solu-

tions: dump Obamacare, cut all welfare and social security, and put women back in the home to avoid rape and other contamination. Atwood conveys the presence of these danger signs as well as the undercurrent of corporate capitalism running beneath the veneer of Christianity, which further reveals the complexity of the rise of autocrats and links the story to present-day reality.

During the so-called second wave of feminism we thought we were short-circuiting the march of patriarchal repression but underestimated how easily people forget the past and how institutions conspire to turn revolutionary revelations into for-credit coursework. Today one can get a BA in Women’s or Gender Studies without ever hearing the word revolution. As Offred says, “We were revisionists.”

Most of Atwood’s books are not identified as speculative fiction, but occupy a range of genres. However, they all have at least one thing in common: the author’s astute observation of how the suppression of women’s rights stunts society as a whole. Beginning with her proto-feminist novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood has kept her eye trained on the cloud of anxiety under which women must live—consciously or not—in order to navigate a culture in which, as Audre Lorde said: “we were not meant to survive.”

Having collected a pile of literary and social awards, Margaret Atwood continues to write books and stories that defy mainstream categorization and do not betray her humanist vision. Perhaps being a Canadian writer provides her with an independence that emboldens the work. Whatever the reasons, *The Handmaid’s Tale* reminds us of how women fell from grace in the Bible: Eve fell “from innocence to knowledge.” If we hope to rescue our society from corporate greed, conservative narrowmindedness, and fundamentalism of all kinds, we have to each be willing to fall.

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Jewelle Gomez is the author of eight books and three plays. Her black, lesbian/feminist, vampire novel *The Gilda Stories*, winner of two Lambda Literary Awards, just celebrated its 25th year in print with a new edition from City Lights Books.

*Candidates toss bogey men into crowds like smoke bombs, and people race around sightless, gasping out solutions: dump Obamacare, cut all welfare and social security, and put women back in the home to avoid rape and other contamination.*



*Atwood has kept her eye trained on the cloud of anxiety under which women must live—consciously or not—in order to navigate a culture in which, as Audre Lorde said: “we were not meant to survive.”*



## ⚙️ Snapshots from a Distinguished Career

*The People in the Castle*, by Joan Aiken,  
Small Beer Press, March 2016, 256 pp., \$24.00.

reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia



*Drawing from thirteen collections published between 1955 and 1990, The People in the Castle offers a panoramic view of Aiken's fiction career.*

*The People in the Tower* is a curated selection of stories from the long, productive, and influential career of British fantasy powerhouse Joan Aiken. Aiken, who died in 2004 at the age of 79, was the author of more than 100 books, a winner of the Edgar Allen Poe Award, and a former editor for the iconic British pulp magazine, *Argosy*.

Though she worked in a wide array of genres that ranged from maritime adventure to children's ghost stories to Jane Austen pastiche, she is undoubtedly best known for the *Wolves Chronicles*. A twelve-volume young adult adventure series, the *Wolves Chronicles* are set in an alternate eighteenth century, wherein the noble Stuart dynasty retains the British throne despite Burgundian and Hanoverian skullduggery, and commercial hot air balloons soar through the skies above London. Since the 1962 publication of its first volume, *The Wolves of Wiloughby Chase*, the series has remained a great favorite of children and adults alike and is frequently cited as an example of early steampunk.

Though many *Cascadia Subduction Zone* readers are bound to have at least a passing knowledge of the *Wolves Chronicles*, Aiken's short work may be less familiar—a situation that *The People in the Castle* is designed to correct. Drawing from thirteen collections published between 1955 and 1990, *The People in the Castle* offers a panoramic view of Aiken's fiction career. Edited by Kelly Link, it showcases many of Aiken's stranger and more experimental stories but provides a balanced perspective by including a substantial quantity of her more straightforward fare. And while the collection is more than a little uneven, the best stories are astonishingly good. A high percentage of *Cascadia Subduction Zone* readers should find something to enjoy here.

The first story, 1969's "A Leg Full of Rubies," is among the collection's strongest. Here, Aiken takes a number of evocative fairytale elements (a caged

phoenix; a cache of mysterious jewels; a job that cannot be left, even by death, unless a successor is chosen) and weaves them into a quietly realistic depiction of everyday life. The combination recalls Alan Garner's work, but the story has a fleetness and a cheery fatalism that are entirely unique. Powerful and elegant but still undeniably light, the piece is a thrilling bit of wordcraft.

The second story, "A Portable Elephant," is another gem. Here, a young bureaucrat is tasked with entering a forest made of words. To do this, he needs a passport, but to get a passport, he needs an animal companion that he can carry—an almost insurmountable challenge in Aiken's barren and strangely sorted world. The story reads like a collaboration between Franz Kafka and Hope Mirrlees—and though it dates from 1984, it still feels dazzlingly fresh. Throughout, Aiken does a commendable job of allowing her readers the space to discover her unusual world for themselves, while providing enough subtle guidance to prevent them from ever becoming truly lost.

Similarly surreal but a bit less controlled is "A Room Full of Leaves," which is about a beleaguered young boy who is heir to a vast, magical, and ancient house—and to many generations' worth of obnoxious family quirks. After the house is let to a movie crew, who bring with them their own potent brand of oddness, the boy must learn to claim his own power or lose everything he cares about. First published in 1955, the story is warm, intriguing, and gently gonzo. Fans of Edward Carey should not miss this one.



"Listening" (1977) is significantly more subtle but no less weird. Here, a university administrator sets out to evaluate a class about field recordings, but is hampered by a housecat's inexplicable, multistory fall and an even less explainable act of vandalism. He soldiers on, having strained in class to make sense of the recordings, but his perceptual frame has shifted, and he begins to apprehend the heavy, alienating strangeness of the city he calls home. Interweaving notes of whimsy with moments of existential dread, this story is a carefully crafted treasure. The fact that it bears the undeniable stamp of the 1970s only adds to its charm.

The book also includes a considerable quantity of more straightforward fantastical work. "Furry Night," published in 1976, shows us what happens when a pack of sporty young people, determined to win a quirky inter-village competition, trespass on the land of an aging Shakespearean actor-turned-werewolf. Containing more than a little gothic intrigue, the story combines familiar tropes in amusing ways. "Some Music for the Wicked Countess" (1955) is another riff on traditional fantasy material: in this quick, airy, little piece, Aiken shows us that when guile and faerie magic are pitted against the jangling power of *avant-garde* piano-playing, there can be no winners. "Sonata for Harp and Bicycle," a paranormal romance from 1971 involving roses, a harp, a telephone, a bicycle, a parachute, and a bottle of wine, is another piece that should appeal to readers who like their fantasy light, sweet, and clever.

Aiken is also capable of putting traditional fantastical elements to darker uses. In 1976's "The Cold Flame," the ghost of a would-be poet makes a last, fevered effort to get his work into print and is foiled at every turn by his mother. A broad and wicked comedy of manners, the story does a lethally good job of depicting both casual narcissism and respectable passive aggression. "The Dark Streets Kimball's Green," a 1976 tale about a neglected child who copes with bleak circumstances by creating a highly detailed imaginary existence for herself, is even grimmer and more pow-

erful, though it does pull its punches in the end.

Unfortunately, a number of pieces in the collection are just not as interesting as the others. "She Was Afraid of Upstairs" (1980), a supernatural story about a child's unremitting fear of buildings' upper levels, is neither creepy enough, nor surprising enough, nor substantial enough to make much of an impact. "Lob's Girl," a tale about a large, sweet, and unflaggingly loyal dog, likewise delivers no surprises. The collection's other dog-focused story, "Humblepuppy," is a bit odder, and a bit more satisfying, but still feels thin.

Also irksome is 1987's "The Lame King." There, we follow an aging-but-still-sharp novelist and her husband as their feckless son and testy daughter-in-law drive them to a mysterious facility where their lives, as they know them, will end. Though nicely structured and wholly competent, the piece lends itself to a deeply unfavorable comparison with Leonora Carrington's landmark 1974 novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*. While I do not have any reason to believe that "The Lame King" was in any way influenced by Carrington's work, the two do cover strikingly similar terrain. And where *The Hearing Trumpet* is vivid, defiant, and joyfully sloppy, "The Lame King," feels workmanlike, bland, and rather sullen. Loving the one has left me incapable of liking the other.

I should also add that, as with so much fantasy of the twentieth century, a very limited segment of humanity finds representation within this book's pages. Though we do see people of diverse ages who come from a few different economic strata, there are virtually no characters here that do not immediately read as Caucasian, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied, and at least tacitly Protestant. Readers who want to see a broader band of the human spectrum may find this a bit frustrating.

In sum, though the book contains some truly wonderful work, it is a decidedly mixed bag. Readers interested in this title must be prepared to tolerate low levels of diversity and a substantial amount of filler.

*Aiken is also capable of putting traditional fantastical elements to darker uses.*

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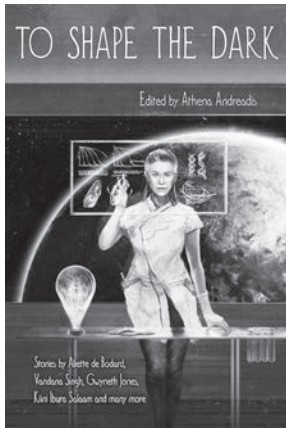
Victoria Elisabeth Garcia's fiction has been published in *Polyphony*, the *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her husband, comics creator John Aegard, and a chunky but agile little dog.



## ☼ Thousands of Ways to Be

*To Shape the Dark*, edited by Athena Andreadis,  
Candlemark and Gleam, May 2016, 394 pp., \$22.95.

reviewed by Lauren Banka



Message: *There are thousands of ways to be a woman, and thousands of ways to be a scientist; here are a few.*

*Singh's story reminds us that recognizable science doesn't require recognizable culture, in a subtle rebuke of the snobbery and cultural supremacism that are still all too common in SF.*

*To Shape the Dark* is a new specific anthology about women scientists doing science, as editor Andreadis says, “not-as-usual.” Despite the political commentary inherent in its premise (and the need for its premise), it is uninterested in providing critique or commentary. That is to say, the political work of the anthology is not *reactive*, it is *creative*. The stories are inventive and wildly varied. In many, the shape of gender—and of scientific activity, for that matter—is barely recognizable. Message: *There are thousands of ways to be a woman, and thousands of ways to be a scientist; here are a few.* Amidst the current grind of literary apocalypses and super-violent epic fantasies, that sense of possibility is a breath of fresh air.

The first story in the collection, “The Carnivores of Can’t-Go-Home” by Constance Cooper, is powerful in setting this tone. A pair of botanists cataloging the plant life on a swampy, Earth-like planet stumble upon what’s left of a dead body, decomposing in the gullet of an enormous carnivorous plant. The twist, and much of the characterization, rests upon this future society’s varied and contrary interpretations of a piece of half-remembered history: the event that transported them from an uninhabitable Earth to this new, strange, livable planet.

A wide array of quasi-religious groups have sprung up to explain this event, complete with a common term for the entity responsible: AOE. Depending on whom you ask (and which sect they lean toward), that might stand for Agency of Extraction, An Omnipotent Entity, or Alien Overlord Enemies. By this point in the story, I didn’t really care whodunit anymore—I just wanted to immerse myself in this utterly recognizable depiction of human response to crisis. Our inventiveness and our contrariness, our violence and our altruism.

Vandana Singh’s “Of Wind and Fire” is perhaps the most mind-opening story of the collection. It focuses on Vayusha, a woman who lives in a floating village that

slowly falls down the side of a mountain, rich with gardens of air-plants, slowed by sails and balloons. As a windworker she begins to deduce what we would call Newtonian physics, and even equips the children of the village with emergency parachutes. When her daughter is blown off the edge of the village, what does she do? Of course she jumps after her.

The brilliance of this story lies in how tightly science, culture, and mythology are intertwined. Vayusha’s discoveries about physics are familiar to us, but they are unmistakably colored by her downward-drifting life, and when she makes discoveries that color her understanding of her gods, they are afforded equal seriousness. Late in the story, she engineers a way to float upward, the “forbidden direction,” despite growing up knowing that “All journeys are one way... As time runs, so does our path in space.” That’s a natural maxim for a gently falling culture, and it’s a testament to Singh’s empathy that it is given the emotional prominence it deserves.

Like these stories, the most inspiring stories in the anthology conjure twin feelings of familiarity and strangeness, and between those feelings an expansive curiosity. Singh’s story reminds us that recognizable science doesn’t require recognizable culture, in a subtle rebuke of the snobbery and cultural supremacism that are still all too common in SF. Cooper’s story lives in a cultural uncanny valley: it’s both too close to home and too far from familiar for us to comfortably parse into allegory.

Of course, there are true first-contact stories as well, most memorably Jacqueline Koyanagi’s deeply queer *Sensorium*. Ten years after aliens landed on her planet, Yora is one of a pilot group chosen to bridge the environmental, sensory, and conceptual differences between the two species. The aliens are satisfyingly alien, and the queer details are satisfyingly mundane: Yora’s multi-partner relationship and the aliens’ nonbinary pronouns are treated as a matter of course. However, the communion between her and the alien is forgettable: the differences between them are so emphatically established that their ultimate communication and transformation feels rushed, unearned.



*To Shape the Dark* is emotionally and contextually anchored by two stories that take their cues from women's fiction, the genre of understated, winding stories of family, emotion, and relationships between women. That feels like it should be ironic, but it's not—it's necessary. When I read "Fieldwork" by Shariann Lewitt, I'm reading about me and my mother, a hell-raising biology PhD. When I read "Building for Shah Jehan" by Anil Menon, I'm reading about my sleepless/delirious relationship with my friend who dual-degreed in sculpture and architecture in four years, her litany of surgeries and one removed organ notwithstanding. I enjoyed nearly all the stories in the collection, but these were the two I truly felt I had a *stake* in.

"Fieldwork" is a particularly luminous story, the standout of the collection. Anna, a promising volcanologist, grapples with her relationship with her Fields Medal-winning mother, who is traumatized by a childhood on Europa and overshadowed by her own mother, who led that off-world expedition in search of alien life. The mother's trauma is untangled just in time for our heroine to announce at the dinner table that she has accepted a spot on a mission to—of

course—Europa. We do eventually get some hints on the question of alien life, but the true resolution comes in the twisting generational cycle of brilliance, love, and pride.

Alongside their *ligne claire* depictions of relationships between women, these stories are rich with the tedium of science as it is actually practiced today: Anna's mother is successful in part because of her talent for grant writing, and the architecture students in "Shah Jehan" cram for their final review and bicker about the best way to deal with indecisive clients. I find myself thinking of them as a bridge between my world and some of the more distant worlds represented in the collection. The anthology isn't constructed as a roadmap, but because of these stories, it can be read as one.

*To Shape the Dark* is defined by imaginative ambition; where it falls flat, it is because its reach exceeds its grasp. I consider that a good problem to have. And the anthology so rarely falls flat: Andreadis has curated a remarkably eclectic, remarkably consistent collection of stories, tied together by a deep sense of curiosity and possibility. I've already recommended it to my partner and my mother; I recommend it to you, too.

*Alongside their ligne claire depictions of relationships between women, these stories are rich with the tedium of science as it is actually practiced today....'*

*To Shape the Dark is defined by imaginative ambition; where it falls flat, it is because its reach exceeds its grasp. I consider that a good problem to have.*

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Lauren Banka is a writer, artist, and bookseller. Her first collection of poems, *You don't scare me.*, is available from Red Beard Press.

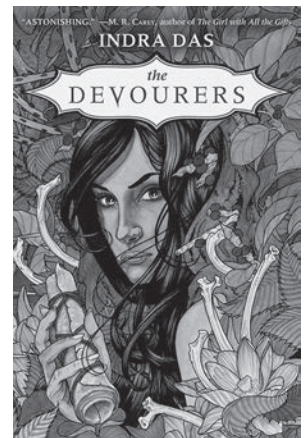
## Desiring Consumption

*The Devourers*, by Indra Das, Del Rey, July 2016, 306 pp., \$26.00.

reviewed by Anil Menon

If difference always signifies, then the monster signifies to erase its unique difference. For example, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the monster reveals that his murderous actions had their origin in his singularity: "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded." In *The Devourers*, the werewolf Fenrir suffers on account of a similar exclusion. Unlike Frankenstein's monster, he is not alone; Fenrir has werewolf comrades and plenty of werewolf-sex for the asking. But like the monster, he longs to procreate. Werewolves can turn humans into werewolves, but they cannot create life. True to his monstrous nature, Fenrir tries to erase this difference, and the result is a fardel of sorrow and an interesting, well-written novel.

However, *The Devourers* isn't about Fenrir. Like Guy Endore's classic werewolf novel, Das's novel also begins with an ordinary human scholar's framing tale. Alok Mukherjee, a history professor, describes how at a gathering of the Bauls (itinerant rural bards) in a Kolkata park, he had met a chilled-out stranger claiming to be a werewolf. In their second meeting, the nameless stranger hires Alok to transcribe a manuscript. The manuscript is Fenrir's account of how he'd met a Muslim woman, Cyrah, in a bazaar in early seventeenth-century Mumtazabad, a town meant for the migrant workers building the Taj Mahal. Cyrah is unattached and therefore unprotected. Fenrir is hooked; he asks for a lock of Cyrah's hair, returns at night, and



*Cont. on p. 12*



## Desiring Consumption (Cont. from p. 11)

*Das is very good at evoking the feel of a place, ancient or modern, with a few deft strokes. Indian scenes aren't turned into spectacles, as is sometimes the case with authors catering to Western audiences.*

rapes her, all the while insisting that he's only seeking to create life.

His comrades Makedon and Gévaudan aren't happy. For Makedon, the act is no different from bestiality and disgusting beyond measure. Gévaudan, originally from Paris like his historical namesake and hopelessly in love with Fenrir, shows little of his countrymen's legendary sang-froid. He is jealous that Cyrah could evoke such passion in Fenrir. Meanwhile, Cyrah is pregnant and wants an explanation from her rapist, who appears to have abandoned creative pursuits and taken off for parts unknown. There is also the mystery of who exactly the stranger is.

The novel proceeds to work towards a resolution, mostly via the awkward mechanism of old manuscripts. Even if one sets aside the suspicion that the literature of a lupine species would revolve around odor and not words, there are other problems. For example, I couldn't understand why the stranger needs Alok to transcribe his notebooks. We are told the original manuscripts are filled with marvelous illustrations. Why does the stranger only want the text? Then there's the fact that Fenrir's account is addressed to Cyrah, not the reader. So it is a mystery why Fenrir would narrate conversations he had with her (complete with "you said" speech tags); she was there, wasn't she? On the other hand, Alok's narrative is addressed to a reader outside the text. He provides footnotes "to keep my own thoughts about the whole thing straight." But it is clear they aren't a historian's technical footnotes; they are Das's footnotes for the reader.

The other structural problem is that the narrative's equal interest in several different relationships—Alok and the stranger, Fenrir and Cyrah, Cyrah and Gévaudan, Fenrir and Gévaudan—suggests the novel needed to be much bigger.

On the plus side there is genuine suspense as to what is going to happen next, since the werewolves aren't domesticated in the least. Das is very good at evoking the feel of a place, ancient or modern, with a few deft strokes. Indian scenes aren't turned into spectacles, as is sometimes the case with authors catering to Western audiences.

Das's narrative style also makes it easy to become immersed in the story. The choice of the right linguistic register is always a problem with stories in English set in worlds that had no English. Here, Das resolves it with a judicious mix of formality and colloquialism. I found the stranger implausible, but the other key characters—Alok, Fenrir, Gévaudan and Cyrah—were complex and distinct.

Especially Cyrah. She is a strong woman. Perhaps strong women are all strong in the same way, irrespective of the era. However, it seems more likely to me that a strong seventeenth-century "Indian" woman would have a different kind of strength from her modern counterpart. I only have my experiences with my Indian grandmothers and my ancient in-laws, and family stories of great-grandmothers to rely on here, but these older women's strength—their ability to endure incredibly difficult times—feels different from how feminine strength is imagined and expressed today. This is an important issue, because it pertains to how Cyrah's rape is interpreted by Cyrah. Das chooses an interpretation that makes us empathize with Cyrah, permits us to rage with her and fully support her pursuit of accountability. I appreciate what he's done with that choice, but I cannot help wishing he'd challenged my moral imagination more and given me a Cyrah far harder to understand.

That said, the story isn't about Cyrah's rape. Nor is it about European werewolves and a South Asian woman. Indeed, why does the story need werewolves at all? In fact, the werewolves make it a point to insist they don't care what they're *called*. They see themselves as shape-shifters and count djinns, vampires, ghosts, rakshasas, et cetera as belonging to the same genus, if not the same species.

I don't buy it. These are werewolves. Were they vampires or djinns, *The Devourers* would have been a different novel. As the philosopher and critic Tom Tyler pointed out, animals in fables serve either as ciphers, animals serve merely as placeholders; one may be easily substituted for another. For example, the indecisive ass in the parable of Buridan's ass could easily be an indecisive pig or goat or cow.

*...animals in fables serve either as ciphers or indices.*



All that matters for the tale is that there be some animal unable to decide what to eat. An indecisive ant vexed by two granules of sugar would work just as well as a donkey vexed by two bundles of hay. An “enciphered” story is an encoding in an animal alphabet whose letter-shapes are irrelevant.

But when animals function as indices in a story, then they not only point to a revelation—perhaps a hidden fear, or more disquietingly, a moral—but they also cannot be replaced with other animal bodies; not easily, at least. That’s because the pointing function is encoded by the animal’s body and its behavior. For example, in Little Red Riding Hood or Freud’s Wolf-Man case-study, the shape-shifting wolf figure cannot be replaced with a tiger or a lion or a vampire. These stories need a wiry, hairy animal that is all claws and teeth and anus and a red-tipped penis. The wolf’s body and behavior uniquely indexes a rabid, all-consuming sexuality.

Such an index is needed in cultures where sexuality is a cause for social anxiety. So it is interesting that historically, werewolves don’t seem to be indigenous to the subcontinent. As Alok Mukherjee tells the stranger in the park: “You’re the first Indian werewolf I’ve heard of.” Vampires, werewolves, and zombies have had little purchase so far on “the” Indian psyche. There are tales involving shape-shifters, *bebrupias*, but they are tricksters, and very much human. Similarly, there are Hindu myths involving dog-men, but their function in the post-Vedic period, roughly, isn’t to point to sexual perversion, but rather to the perils of spiritual pollution and the blurring of caste boundaries.

However, the arrival of the British solidified a sexual repressiveness that had been evolving on the subcontinent for some time. So it shouldn’t be surprising that werewolves would follow. Indeed, what is surprising is that it has taken Indian fiction this long to put them to work as indices.

It isn’t hard to identify who the werewolves index in *The Devourers*. The content points to the frame. The werewolves point to Alok’s sexual nature. Alok sleeps with both men and women. He

gets pleasure in transcribing a story written on a boy’s skin. He hooks up with strangers in parks. He wishes he could commit to a friendly female colleague, but somehow never does. Commitment would mean sharing his nature, and that guarantees rejection. His own family has kicked him out. He longs to be a woman. He longs to be a man. He longs to consume. He longs to be consumed.

The novel’s structure reflects that culinary longing. As Francis Zimmerman explains in his classic text on Ayurveda, foods are divided into “jangala,” all that is nutritious and healthy for a given body type, and “anupa,” all that is unhealthy. The Sanskrit word “jangala,” from which we get “jungle,” referred to cultivable land, to land that could be civilized. Paradoxically, it referred to dry land, instead of the association with forests it has today. “Anupa” land referred to marsh-land, the suspected source of strange fevers and monstrous bodies. The novel starts with Alok meeting the stranger in a park, the epitome of a cultivated, civilized space. The novel ends in the Sunderbans, a mangrove swamp, and as the stranger explains, “one of the largest delta forests in the world” that lies “just hours south of here.” The novel’s quest, like all quests, involves a geographic traversal, but here it is an Ayurvedic one, one that seeks a physiognomic cure for Alok’s soul. Thus this quest is something of a monster in the family of fantasy quests; in his acknowledgments, Das thanks his editor for embracing an “uncategorizable novel.”

I read *The Devourers* as a story about Alok Mukherjee and his incarceration in a body not flexible enough for the mind’s desires. Hindu theology considered reincarnation a satisfactory solution for this problem. With the modern age’s intolerance for unverifiable promises and impatience with delayed gratification, shape-shifters seem destined to inherit the earth. In the South Asian context, this novel represents a bold and noteworthy start.

*The wolf’s body and behavior uniquely indexes a rabid, all-consuming sexuality. Such an index is needed in cultures where sexuality is a cause for social anxiety. So it is interesting that historically, werewolves don’t seem to be indigenous to the subcontinent.*

*The novel’s quest...is something of a monster in the family of fantasy quests; in his acknowledgments, Das thanks his editor for embracing an “uncategorizable novel.”*

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Anil Menon’s fiction has been translated into Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, and Romanian. With Vandana Singh he edited *Breaking the Bow* (Zubaan Books 2012), an anthology of *Ramayana*-inspired speculative fiction. His most recent work is *Half of What I Say* (Bloomsbury, 2015).



## ⚙️ The Voice of the Llama

*The Geek Feminist Revolution*, by Kameron Hurley, Tor, May 2016, 236 pp., \$15.99.

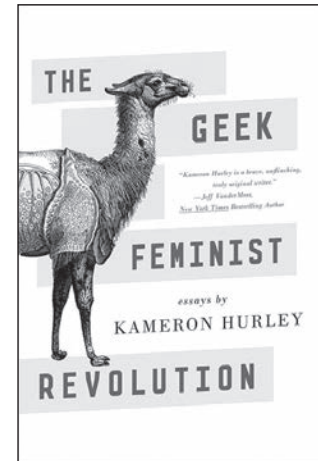
reviewed by Karama Horne

The Geek Feminist Revolution does not seek to convince you “Hey! Women are in scifi, fantasy, and gaming too! We have a right to be here!” The writer assumes you’re smart enough to know that already.

*The Geek Feminist Revolution* is an autobiographical essay collection by science fiction/fantasy writer Kameron Hurley. This award-winning author’s goal is to “inspire people to change the world,” ideally into a place where women and marginalized voices don’t have to fight so hard to have their stories heard or their characters’ complex backstories taken seriously. The book is both a compilation of previous works, (her Hugo Award-winning essay “We Have Always Fought” is included) as well as pieces written exclusively for this collection. The book is organized into four sections: Level Up, which is about the craft of writing itself; Geek, which covers female characters in the media; Let’s Get Personal, which outlines her coming of age as a writer and her battles with illness and self-doubt; and Revolution, an honest look at how we as individuals can make changes to “the system” one story at a time.

Writing stories that go against the grain is a difficult task, but not an impossible one, and Hurley is direct in her approach and frank with her advice. “Don’t let the bastards win,” she says. “We are the heroes of our own lives, we can be masters of our own stories,” she admonishes. *The Geek Feminist Revolution* does not seek to convince you “Hey! Women are in scifi, fantasy, and gaming too! We have a right to be here!” The writer assumes you’re smart enough to know that already. Instead, these essays are treatises on successfully navigating the evolving dynamics of geekdom as a woman and a feminist, emerging with your soul intact.

Hurley’s feminism as defined in this work is decidedly non-intersectional, in that she doesn’t go into how racial and gender oppression within geek culture go hand-in-hand. However, she does acknowledge racial oppression on a larger scale and even admits that people of color, specifically black men, are often used as a backdrop and barometer for the violence committed in the foreground by



others, as demonstrated in her character study of Season 1 of *True Detective*.

Understandably, Hurley’s in-depth look at geekdom is mostly confined to the fans and creators of the scifi and fantasy literary world, but she does touch on Gamergate and the vilification of women within the gaming community. These are the spaces in which Hurley thrives, and I am commenting on these definitions merely to give a bit of framework to readers who, like myself, prefer more sequential writing and animation in their geekdom.

From the beginning, Hurley is absolutely unapologetic about her voice and the voices of others writing the speculative literature genres. She stresses that persistence is the name of the game. She implores genre writers to stop comparing themselves to writers like Margaret Atwood who have been diligently honing their craft for decades, especially if they may have been writing for only a couple of years themselves. She talks about the long game and how to turn failure on its head and look at it as a learning experience. Hurley notes that she was rejected hundreds of times before being published, but points out that it’s not always about your writing, because perceptions of your book and how it’s marketed make a difference in its acceptance.

Hurley is absolutely unapologetic about her voice and the voices of others writing the speculative literature genres.





And yet publishing's antiquated systems cannot be used as an excuse not to write good stories. Instead we must "fail harder and fail better" and learn from our mistakes. Rather than tossing away previous works we must open them up, rip them apart, and learn from them, then stand on top of them in order to get to the next level. Eventually, your voice and your story will be heard.

The topic of sex and sexuality within the scifi and fantasy genres is also discussed. Even when given the opportunity to write about any type of gender or sexual orientation, writers, readers, and society still default to heterosexual attraction and procreation. I was surprised when the author pointed out that even as a purveyor of non-traditional fiction, society had ingrained in her a code of heteronormativity. Though she didn't adhere to it externally, Hurley fought internally against defaulting to this type of characterization.

The author wants writers to make a mental shift in their writing and not just to write non-binary sex scenes but to actually create worlds for their characters that are completely different from their own. A world where men are scarce? Possibly. How about one where the female hero takes different lovers and is emotionally distant, but still manages to save the day?

Why not?

Why not write women who behave horribly and make poor choices but then grow from them? Male characters get to behave horribly all the time. Actually, we often make the men heroes and give them sequels for this type of behavior. Again, as Hurley points out, we are used to excusing male characters and allowing them to misbehave, often without reproach.

The geek gaming community is one of Hurley's examples of sanctioned cis white male bad behavior. She provides one of the most succinct and accurate descriptions of Gamergate I've read:

*"Gamergate was the organized, fully weaponized version of the stalker ex-boyfriend."*

Hurley also discusses quite candidly the fact that the more successful she has

become as a writer, the more all kinds of people have begun criticizing her and "coming for her." Hurley advises us that there is no way to avoid "haters." However, when *real* mistakes are made, you must own up to them and do better.

Hurley's examples are very personal ones, and she often uses her background to describe her worldviews. I can relate to some of her issues: the scrutiny focused on a woman working in a male dominated field, self-image and weight issues, dealing with chronic fatigue yet having to make deadlines and attend conventions. She also is quite frank about just how privileged she has been, and how most people in this country have been raised in isolation from other cultures, and how even as a child, the first time she saw a black man her reaction wasn't fear or revulsion but simply confusion.

She had no idea what she was looking at.

At this point I got the feeling that I was no longer in the room with Hurley but standing on the other side of a wall of glass looking out at her. That feeling grew stronger when she described what her time in South Africa taught her about being a white woman in America. Up until that point I had really given Hurley the benefit of the doubt. She clearly understood that people of color and other marginalized voices needed to be heard, and I honestly did not expect her to write from the perspective of those marginalized voices. However, I did bristle a bit at the tone she took in this section:

*"I too know what it is to be comfortable and safe and pretend everything's fine. I'm white. My parents aren't poor, and I make decent money now. I get how annoying it can be, to get called out on that, and to have to listen to people who have problems you don't. Real fucking problems and issues that exist on a continuum of shame, disrespect, and forced subservience they've had to deal with their whole lives."*

Right there is where I realized that much of this work, (or maybe this particular essay) wasn't written for me, an African-American nerd girl or "blerdgurl." It was written for women who want to know how to *deal* with me. That saddened me, because I agree with so

*Rather than tossing away previous works we must open them up, rip them apart, and learn from them, then stand on top of them in order to get to the next level. Eventually, your voice and your story will be heard.*

*Why not write women who behave horribly and make poor choices but then grow from them? Male characters get to behave horribly all the time.*

*Cont. on p. 17*



## 🌀 Interplanetary Imperium

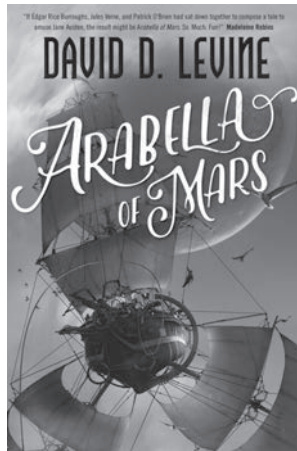
*Arabella of Mars: The Adventures of Arabella Ashby*, by David D. Levine,  
Tor Books, 352 pp., July 2016, \$25.99 hardcover.

reviewed by Cynthia Ward

“To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annexe the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.”

—Cecil Rhodes

Hugo Award winner David D. Levine’s long-anticipated debut novel surely offers the first Regency-era sailing ships to rise beyond the stratosphere....



Sir Isaac Newton’s crucial insight born from watching a rising soap bubble has unlocked the stars—or at least Venus and Mars. The British Empire has absorbed nearby heavenly bodies. British Regency ships face French foes as they sail the breathable atmosphere of interplanetary space.

These are matters of little interest to Mars-born Arabella Ashby, whose father’s plantation produces the lightweight but tough *khoresh* wood used in airship construction. The sixteen-year-old prefers playing games of strategy under the hurtling moons of Mars and the watchful tutelage of Khema, her indigenous nanny. Then Arabella is injured, and her mother concludes she’s becoming entirely too hoydenish. Mother decamps with Arabella and her younger sisters to damp and distant England, where they are meant to become proper, marriageable young women.

Instead, Arabella’s beloved father dies an untimely death, and her insolvent cousin makes a desperate dash for the red planet. There’s an entailment on the estate, and if the cousin, Simon Ashby, can engineer the death of Arabella’s unwary brother, he’ll inherit everything,

leaving Arabella’s immediate family destitute. Conveniently for Simon’s interplanetary quest, Mars is in opposition, which means only a two-month sail from Earth. Inconveniently for Arabella, she escapes captivity at Simon’s isolated home too late to prevent his departure.

Near-penniless but resourceful, Arabella procures a man’s clothes, and “Arthur Ashby” joins the crew of the fastest-sailing airship of the Mars Company. The captain, foreign-born Prakash Singh, has noticed “Arthur’s” skill with automata, which she learned from her late father. However, her ability doesn’t earn her nearly as much work as she would like with “the Turk,” Singh’s complex, almost lifelike navigational automaton, because an airman’s lot is near-constant physical labor. Still, Arabella comes to love her new existence.

Sailing the three-dimensional aerospace sea introduces the disguised young woman to several novel experiences, including a stir of unfamiliar feelings for the captain, a mutiny, and a devastating battle with Napoleonic privateers. With the ship temporarily disabled by the battle, Arabella fears she must arrive on Mars too late to save her brother. Then an indigenous uprising puts the British settlement to the torch, and both brother and cousin go missing.

*Arabella of Mars* isn’t the first intersection of science fiction and the Age of Sail. Honor Harrington owes much to Horatio Hornblower; Temeraire and William Laurence owe much to Aubrey and Maturin; and no less a science fiction author than Walter Jon Williams has written Napoleonic Era nautical history novels (under the byline Jon Williams). Nor is *Arabella* the first novel to posit a breathable interplanetary atmosphere;

Sailing the three-dimensional aerospace sea introduces the disguised young woman to several novel experiences, including a stir of unfamiliar feelings for the captain, a mutiny, and a devastating battle with Napoleonic privateers.



Edgar Rice Burroughs offered readers one in *Beyond the Farthest Star*. However, Hugo Award winner David D. Levine's long-anticipated debut novel surely offers the first Regency-era sailing ships to rise beyond the stratosphere, hot-air balloons swelling above their proud masts and salt water dripping from their barnacled hulls.

*Arabella* certainly rouses and satisfies the sense of wonder.

Levine has gone out on a limb for his fictional form of astrophysics, which is likely to draw criticism from hard-SF purists, but doing so ironically highlights the places where he doesn't venture out far enough along other limbs. His indigenous Martians view females as the natural warrior sex, which inverts the concept of binary gender but doesn't undermine it. Arabella's relocation to an entirely different planet in pursuit of maintaining traditional gender roles inventively exposes the cancer of gender essentialism, but the novel offers limited additional perspectives on the human costs of such oppression. Arabella's mother accepts the image of Proper Womanhood uncritically; Arabella's younger sisters, who might offer alternative responses, barely appear; and Arabella herself never really wonders

whether the space-faring life she comes to love, and the sort of marriage she comes to want, ought to be made available to other women.

Most significantly, the critique of imperialism implied by the indigenous rebellion gets undermined when we learn the spark that ignites it was struck by an outsider new to Mars, and the Martians lay down their arms once they gain custody of the outsider, without wondering whether they ought to keep going and reclaim their planet.

Such tidy solutions to the book's concerns with imperialism and oppression end up creating the unintentional impression that oppressors aren't so bad after all. The result is a novel likely to please a large readership. However, I think Levine possesses a longer reach. In the remaining books of his *Adventures of Arabella Ashby* trilogy, I hope he'll eschew the commercially safe choice of picking the lower-hanging fruit to reach for lightning. He has the talent to close his hand on brilliance.

*Such tidy solutions to the book's concerns with imperialism and oppression end up creating the unintentional impression that oppressors aren't so bad after all.*

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Cynthia Ward has sold stories to *Asimov's SF*, *Shattered Prism*, and elsewhere. She edited *Lost Trails: Forgotten Tales of the Weird West*. She coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Her novella *The Adventure of the Incognita Countess* is forthcoming from Aqueduct.

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17

## The Voice of the Llama (cont. from p. 15)

much of what Hurley has to say. But this passage reminded me why I don't call myself a feminist without the intersectional identifier.

That being said, I still think that *The Geek Feminist Revolution* is worth a read. Hurley gives extremely helpful advice about how to write female characters who have meaning and depth, as well as about the realities of getting published and navigating the online landscape of the white male-dominated science fiction genres, puppies, loyal llamas, and all.

Hurley doesn't simply point out problems with the media and with the portrayal of women, she actually gives action steps to solve the problems that we're seeing. Although I don't agree with absolutely every essay contained in this collection, ultimately, I commend the

author for what she's trying to do, and I think the book is a worthwhile read. By the end of *The Geek Feminist Revolution* it was clear to me that Kameron Hurley doesn't care if you like her voice; she just wants to inspire others to do something with theirs.

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Karama Horne is a video editor by day and comic-book-reading, anime-watching, live-tweeting, blog-writing geek by night. She is on a mission to shine a light on indie artists of color through her blog, <http://theblerdgurl.tumblr.com/>

*Hurley doesn't simply point out problems with the media and with the portrayal of women, she actually gives action steps to solve the problems that we're seeing.*



## A Map of the Salt Roads

*Fae Visions of the Mediterranean: An Anthology of Horrors and Wonders of the Sea*, edited by Valeria Vitale and Djibril al-Ayad, Future Fire Publishing, March 2016, 166 pp., \$10.00.

reviewed by Joanne Rixon

*A tension between timelessness and the passage of time is present in many of the stories. Continuity and divergence exist side by side, perhaps capturing a secret about the Mediterranean itself.*

*The anthology was explicitly crafted with the goal of including pieces in multiple languages, and this diversity makes the book stand out among other speculative fiction anthologies.*

*...when the multilingual approach works, it really works. For example, in "Buzzing Affy," Adam Lowe (a.k.a. Beyoncé Holes, drag queen, poet, and performer) translates Sappho and modernizes....*

Each of the pieces in *Fae Visions of the Mediterranean* drips with history. Alongside brand new stories, the editors have included selections from Marco Polo and *A Thousand and One Nights*, for a total of twenty-four pieces of poetry, fiction, myths, and translations. The offerings from new and veteran authors span nine languages, thousands of years, multiple countries and cultures, and genres from erotic poetry to creature horror to science fiction. Many of the original pieces rely on historical settings or figures from myth and legend; this permanence contrasts with the shifting waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the force that holds the book together.

A tension between timelessness and the passage of time is present in many of the stories. Continuity and divergence exist side by side, perhaps capturing a secret about the Mediterranean itself. In S. Chakraborty's "Bilaadi," an eternal river spirit saves a girl from drowning; because he disrupted her fate, he is cast out of the water to live as a human boy in a human town, until revolution comes. In Tahrir Square he collides with history. He returns to the water, stripping off his human form and becoming a shape-changing, eternal spirit once more. In this way, history is both the march of time from past to future, and also an endless cycle.

The anthology was explicitly crafted with the goal of including pieces in multiple languages, and this diversity makes the book stand out among other speculative fiction anthologies. "No one will understand all of them," editor Valeria Vitale acknowledges in her preface, but "that is not the point." Each language adds layers of complexity to the anthology, creating a unified aesthetic of deep age and tangled cultures.

These multilingual offerings won't work for everyone. But it's impossible to look at, for example, "Mimikrija/Mimicry" by Urša Vidic and not be left

with an impression of a liminal space, a crossing over between worlds and between histories. Vidic uses formatting in nonstandard ways, in a language many Americans may not even be able to identify, and bends genres including poetry, science fiction, and even elements of dramatic performance. She writes about the way the sea transforms the body into something animal, even monstrous, but also joyful. The story would lose its delight if it were written more typically.

Every non-English piece includes at least a short paraphrase in English. Some include a literal translation, others a more artistic translation. Some of the translations are awkward and may be less interesting for readers who are primarily looking for an artistically crafted genre fiction story. Some of the paraphrases are more frustrating than illuminating, like the paraphrase of Álvaro Mielgo Gallego's "Ya duerme el mutado," which is only a few sentences long.

But when the multilingual approach works, it really works. For example, in "Buzzing Affy," Adam Lowe (a.k.a. Beyoncé Holes, drag queen, poet, and performer) translates Sappho and modernizes: "The haters still come. And you—my avatar, / cover girl, superstar—wait while I sulk! Quick, / blow kisses when you text back. Spit me a rap, girl, / I need your reply." Firmly anchored in history, the poem is transformed into something electric and modern.

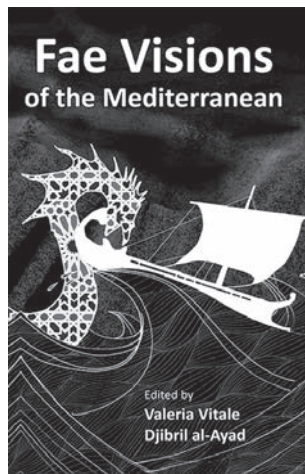
The Sappho is not the only queer piece in the anthology. Several other pieces feature woman-identified women as main characters. These span a continuum of attitudes. On the one hand, in Lyndsay E. Gilbert's "The Strangest Sort of Siren," love between women is a force stronger than the gods. On the other, in Claude Lalumière's "Xandra's Brine," lesbianism is a creepy and alien force that brainwashes otherwise heterosexual women, transforms them into alien creatures, and drags them into the deeps.



Despite many instances of bodily transformation, usually undergone by women, usually tied to immersion in the sea, there are no transgender or gender-bending characters in the anthology, a distinct lack. There are also no gay male characters.

This absence may be due to a focus on heterosexual female characters, whose sexuality is identified with the sea itself and is frequently devouring. For instance, in Simon Kearns' "Mare Nostrum," a human trafficker is lured under the waves by the sea in the form of a beautiful woman, seduced, and then drowned. In "The Return of Melusine," Angela Rega writes from the point of view of a Venetian mermaid who breaks up with her human boyfriend and returns to the sea. She regains her scales and tail at the same time that she transforms mentally. Though she begins with sympathy for her lover and the city, by the end she hungrily drowns him and joins her sisters' plan to sink the entire city of Venice.

Many of these stories conclude with immersion in water, a dissolving of dry-land bodies and selves into something deeper, something with scales and tails and gills. Salt water is a central character in the anthology, the force pulsing through it. Mother, lover, and monster, it nurtures, it transforms, it consumes. While this can be horrific, this aesthetic is undeniably Mediterranean, accessing a truth about life with the sea, and in that sense this anthology is an unconditional success.



*Many of these stories conclude with immersion in water, a dissolving of dry-land bodies and selves into something deeper....*

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Joanne Rixon lives in Seattle and has a BA in History from the University of Washington. Her fiction has appeared in *Crossed Genres Magazine*.



*Africa from Gibraltar*



In January of 2014 I found out that my beloved little house in LA was going to become an Airbnb property. My landlord friends gave me the year to decamp, and I decided to get rid of everything. My home of 10 years was the partner in the artist life I'd built as a writer, artist, and filmmaker. Now, it felt as if a person I loved were dying, and I burned bitter with grief.

So I sold or gave away most of my possessions, left about 10 boxes in a corner of my sister's basement, and hit the road. I didn't think painting would work with the travel, but figured I could write or make videos so long as I had my laptop, my camera, and a few portable hard drives. After living in the shadow of Hollywood and a world where art serves profit, I wanted to explore outside the standard forms of linearity and narrative. I would go where chance led me and create with what showed up on my plate.

Just before leaving LA, an artist couple I know asked me offhand if I could use any white plastic PVC cards—2 x 3.25 inch blanks for those ubiquitous cards you carry in your wallet. A friend had gotten a shipment of 7000 by mistake from China, and they were not worth returning. I took two packs of a hundred, thinking I might draw on them instead of travel sketching in a journal. I bought some Sharpie pens and began to experiment.

Almost immediately, I was captivated by the possibilities. The cards and pens are easy to carry and use, impervious to weather, and surprisingly beautiful. Sharpies are made to write on plastic, but Sharpie on Sharpie on plastic blends almost like paint. What started out as a casual and random impulse turned into a year-long art journey. I committed to doing a card a day for all of 2015.

January 1, 2015, I began the new year in New Zealand, with a 4-month artist residency at New Zealand Pacific Studios near Masterton. This lovely 100-year-old farmhouse and the surrounding countryside couldn't have been further from my last 15 years of living in LA.

The practice of spending the day looking at the world around me, casting my eye like a lure to catch a living impression and bring it to the canvas, kept me in the present moment as never before. My heartache slowly mended in the expansive now that bloomed as I drew and wrote and walked, always looking, always seeking surprise and beauty.

After the 4 months in New Zealand, I headed to the US for the summer, deciding to visit all the places I'd ever lived. I went looking for ghosts. I didn't realize until midway through my wanderings that the ghosts were all inside me. Place casts a spell to awaken them, but they do not dwell there. Only the chains of my own attachments link them to this house or that vista. I am a ghostyard of sleeping spirits.

Still, I was shocked at how completely they failed to appear. Instead of finding ghosts, I became like one, lacking the solidity of habit or ambition. My old life dwindled in the rear view mirror as I flew to Europe in the fall, where I spent the last months rendering buildings, beings, vistas, and oddities as I sponged up the dense, Old World habits of living. I floated, sleepy in a heavy mist like gentle, warm snowflakes. Weightless in razors of arctic light. Silent in the sea of city noise. Warm in ancient marble ruins.

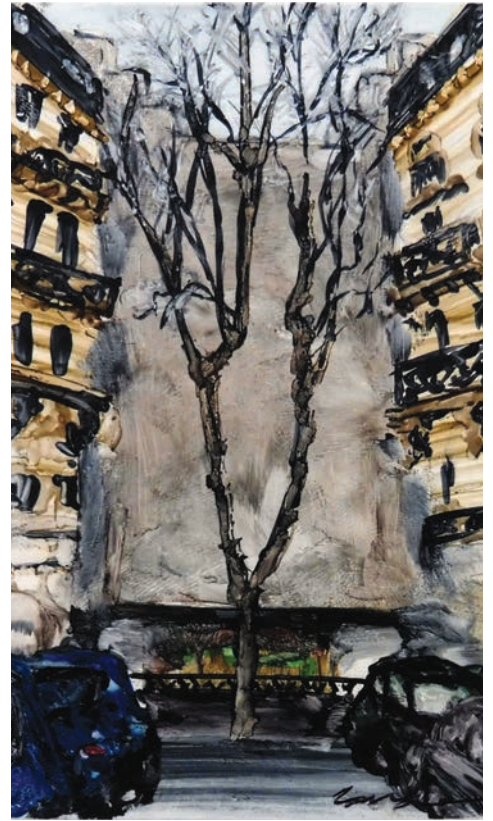
I'm far away, away from my ambitions and my lifelong habits of thought and dream. Like the scoured ridges rising in the far horizon, I feel at times hollow as an empty dumpster and at other times magnificently filled with a cornucopia of presence. This is angel joy, having no connection to human smallness but fused with the glory in beauty of creation. At some point I will have to attach myself to another place, marry my present to a future in a new house. But not yet.

[sudirende.tumblr.com](http://sudirende.tumblr.com)

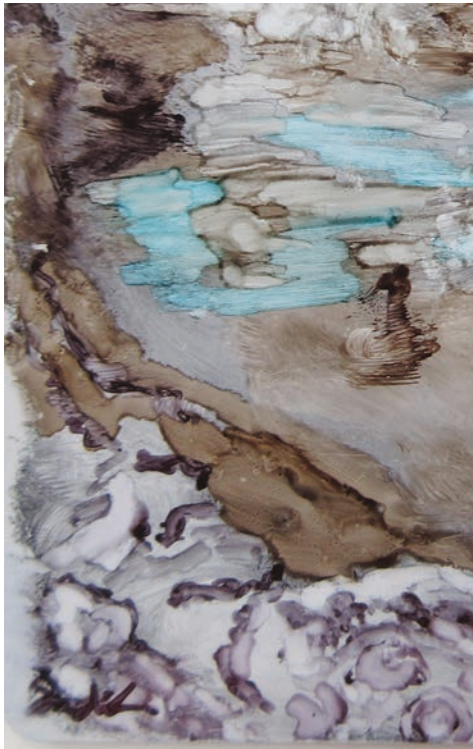




*405 Meets the 10—LA, USA*



*Cité Vaneau—Paris, France*



*Mud Springs—New Zealand*

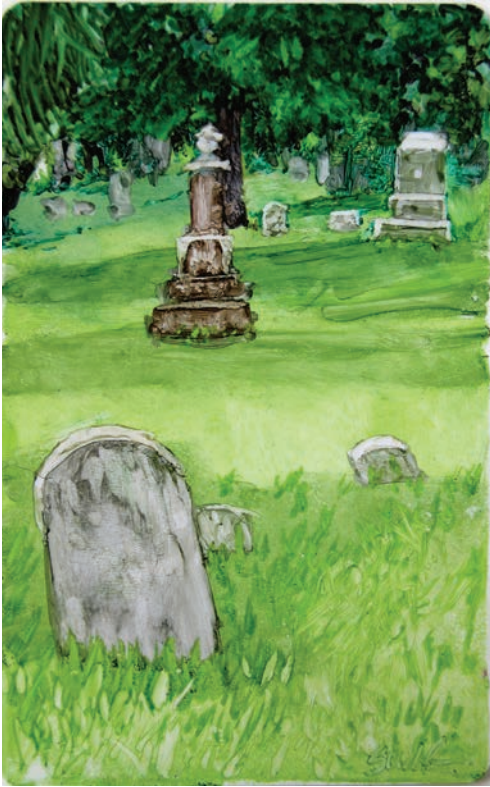


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