

The Cascadia Subduction Zone

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Ocean Guardian ☉ Margaret Stermer-Cox

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2018: A Year of Clarification

by L. Timmel Duchamp

The abandonment of a common world leads to epistemological delirium.

—Bruno Latour

A few years back, I suffered from a terrible sense of falling out of synch with the world around me. That sense was crystallized by a Tiptree story that suddenly held a new meaning for me.¹ In that story, one John Delgano, caught up in a time-travel accident, moves in his space suit at a less than glacial pace in relation to the world around him, falling, over the centuries, increasingly out of synch. “These days,” I wrote gloomily, “I consciously strive to change with the world, but as age takes its toll, I know that if I live long enough, I’ll inevitably fall too far behind to have even the illusion of being part of it.” (*Letters to Tiptree*, 89)

I delivered that conclusion a couple of years before the cataclysmic political events of 2016. Those events appear, in the early days of 2019, to be instances in a cascading series. At times—when, that is, I forget just how unpredictable history actually is—this cascade of events seems to portend cataclysmic failure.

In that same essay I wrote about epistemic breaks and shifts, particularly a couple of those I have myself experienced during the course of my nearly seven decades of life.² I first encountered

the notion of epistemic shift back in the 1970s, reading Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, which illuminated the idea by contrasting a list of things categorized together in the sixteenth century with such a list from the seventeenth century. The change, in the underlying logic of not just political reality but also of knowledge itself that Foucault describes swept through every area of French life. Before Foucault, historians typically assumed that by bringing rational thinking into the world, the scientific revolution was responsible for such changes throughout Western Europe³ (rather than being one aspect of the shift). Later, I read Francis Barker’s *The Tremulous Private Body*, which looks at the epistemological shift that occurred in seventeenth-century England, focusing on the de-realization of the body. Barker’s book in turn helped me think about shifts that had taken place in the US in my lifetime.

In early 1991 it had dawned on me that we had undergone a discursive shift of such magnitude that many of us felt we had been stripped of our voices; some people gave up trying to talk about things that mattered to them, while others, like me, went back to the drawing board. Only later did I perceive that that shift wasn’t simply a matter of altered meanings of words, but that the very ground of truth and knowledge had jolted beneath us. For me, this was characterized most prominently by the depoliticization of processes and structures that had been previously understood as political. From the vantage point of 2019, I now view

In early 1991 it had dawned on me that we had undergone a discursive shift of such magnitude that many of us felt we had been stripped of our voices;... For me, this was characterized most prominently by the depoliticization of processes and structures that had been previously understood as political.

1 I wrote about this in my second letter to Alice Sheldon. Both of my letters to her can be found in Twelfth Planet Press’s *Letters to Tiptree* (2015), eds. Alexandra Pierce and Alisa Krasnostein.

2 Epistemology refers to ways of knowing and knowledge practices. Epistemic shifts aren’t necessarily “good” or “bad,” but they are disruptive, altering language (most obviously vocabulary, and sometimes even syntax) and thus our shared store of ideas shaping our consensual reality. (When this occurs within disciplines, it’s often called a “paradigm shift.”) For someone like me, each shift that has occurred since my intellectual formation has made it necessary to re-think almost everything. The recurrent process of reconfiguring my thinking has had the salutary effect of making me excavate and even question my basic underlying assumptions, an effect that can be exhilarating as well as frustrating. It

also has frequently meant losing hard-won insights that I found it impossible to “translate” into the newly altered language and categories of thought that constitute such shifts.

3 Following the example of my advisor, I looked for the logic in late medieval ideas and behavior that had been previously taken for an irrational farrago of superstitions. Foucault’s argument provided a theoretical basis for rejecting the “progress” narrative that assumes knowledge is a simple accumulative, inevitable process.



Clarification (cont. from p. 1)

I believe that we may be moving toward a shift in the ways in which we think about what the world and life itself is. More bluntly, I believe that the survival of our species depends on our making such a shift....

I feel confident that although many things have changed in the last two years, the conceptual tools we already have for acting in the world don't all need to be discarded or reinvented.

this shift as the finalization, as it were, of neoliberalism's stamp on our shared reality: the very logic of our thinking and political grammar had altered irrevocably. Though this shift unfolded over the course of the 1980s, I experienced it as a shocking rupture.

Interestingly, I have come to think that 2016 did not mark such a rupture. This conclusion gives me heart, first because such ruptures are impossible to avert and can never be reversed, second because it allows me to escape the helpless sense of being caught up in a cascade failure, and finally because I believe that we may be moving toward a shift in the ways in which we think about what the world and life itself is. More bluntly, I believe that the survival of our species depends on our making such a shift, and thus if I am to imagine a human future at all, I must be hopeful about the prospects of such a change.

Bruno Latour astutely insists that the prominent events of 2016 are expressions not of a "rise of populism," but, rather, of "the panicky desire to return to the old protections of the nation-state," a desire most news media have refused to acknowledge much less examine.⁴ Many people, though, have become anxious that these events were the leading edge of such a shift, heralding the destruction of our most cherished democratic institutions and the advent of a culture in which the powerful are no longer compelled to pay even lip service to the rule of law.⁵ For me, this particular

4 Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*.

5 An index of this fear is the way in which professionals in the mainstream media constantly express anxiety about speech in a "post-truth" world and their permanent sense of being under attack by a rival they can't seem to overcome in the form of "fake news." (For myself, I'm constantly struck by the irony of their outrage as I recollect how continually venues like *The New York Times* distorted and misrepresented the "facts" in their 1980s coverage of Central America, which usually came from US embassy "sources" rather than from investigative reporting.) Mainstream media professionals (as well as the Hillary Clinton wing of the Democratic Party) continue to imagine that the tactic of "fact-checking" should be (even if it isn't actually) a winning

hasn't-yet-happened is the soil in which we can root our efforts to create another world than the one mainstream discourse assumes is the only one possible. If the events of 2016 had indeed been the beginning of an epistemic shift, the hope that drives radical resistance (i.e., not the "resistance" now being claimed by the DNC) to Trump and everything he represents would have grown increasingly tenuous and to a certain degree impossible, given that such ruptures usually re-form language and other forms of communication in such a way as to demand new figurations of resistance. I don't mean to suggest that new figurations are necessarily a bad thing; but such a demand can wrong-foot and derail even massively supported struggles. Stuart Hall describes such an instance in his account of the miner's strike against Thatcherism in the UK, massively supported across multiple political lines, "which was fought and lost, imprisoned in the categories and strategies of the past."⁶

The difficulties many of us had articulating dissenting views following the rupture of 1990/1991⁷ instilled in me a chilling sense of how this would work. But here at the beginning of 2019, I feel confident that although many things have changed in the last two years, the conceptual tools we already have for act-

strategy. I suppose this is partly because US elites have had very little exposure to history, and partly because most US elites think that any attention to epistemology is boring and impractical. For more on how "fact-checking" is a losing political strategy, see Emmett Rensin "The Blathering Superego," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 18, 2017.

6 Stuart Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 2015. This epistemic shift took place in the UK in advance of the one that struck the US a few years later.

7 I spell out some of this in my second letter to Tiptree (and hope to write about this problem more extensively in future essays). More than a quarter-century on, this shift appears to me to be an unconscious, wholesale adoption of the logic of neoliberalism in combination with the trickling down of concepts drawn from postmodern theory. Many of the words that changed meaning or were no longer available for either academic or ordinary discourse dismissed the importance (or even existence) of community in favor of individual agency and responsibility.



ing in the world don't all need to be discarded or reinvented. This is not to say, of course, that the moment doesn't demand serious thinking and rethinking: it's just that things haven't changed so drastically that we suddenly find all current modes of resistant thinking out of synch with common modes of speech and citation. Yes, such a shift might still happen, but I sense that resistance to a new political and cultural regime is far broader and better represented than was resistance in the 1980s to the political regimes that delivered the triumph of neoliberalism.

This actually suggests to me that the next shift won't necessarily entail subordination to our current political regimes but could, in fact, be accompanied by a different sort of political change. Social media have been and are being used to manipulate individuals on a previously impossible scale, but they are also being used to amplify what used to be effortlessly muted by mainstream political and cultural channels of communication.⁸ Scientists, science studies theorists, and cultural theorists tackling the difficulty of understanding humans' relation to the terrestrial sphere as it undergoes rapid, severe change have been inventing new conceptual frameworks, which suggests to me that our ways of knowing the world are on the move. Even the mainstream media seem to be changing their attitude toward the "global warming" story after years of positioning it as a single-question issue, viz., whether it is "real" or not.

For me, the trickiest complicating factor so far has been the tendency of the mainstream media to subsume resistance to Trump within its own tightly circumscribed purview, as though a fundamental set of values unites all the strange bedfellows speaking out against all things Trump. I often encounter expressions of relief and triumph when long-time Republican speakers raise their voices against Trump. But such a variety of expressions of dissent confuses the issue for a lot of people, as though the only real problem

8 For more on social media as a double-edged sword, see Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Yale University Press, 2017.

we face is the spectacle of Trump itself. For me, though, such mainstream vocalizations simply underscore the painful truth that "centrist" Democrats and "moderate" Republicans share many of the same ultimate aims for and underlying assumptions about the world.⁹ Still, given the outcome of the 2018 midterm elections, I'm hopeful that this confusion will be cleared away in the coming year.

About halfway into 2018, I realized that a good chunk of my reading for the year would be books and essays either written in direct response to the spectacle of authoritarianism that had become a dominant obsession of mainstream media in the US, or reframed before publication as a factor needing acknowledgment (among other factors, such as #MeToo, the amplification of White Supremacist language and ideology, and the rising awareness of anthropogenic climate change). For a few months I entertained the intention of writing a review essay on such readings, but I eventually dropped this due to the heterogeneity in subject matter and unevenness in quality of the books that happened to seize my attention.¹⁰ The

9 Which is not to say that I don't agree with Noam Chomsky that given the choice between Trump and Clinton, Clinton was the necessary choice.

10 Here are some of the titles, in no particular order: Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*; Emmett Rensin, "The Blathering Superego at the End of History"; Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto*; Adam Tooze, *Crashed*; Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*; Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*; Mari Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*; Frederic Jameson, "An American Utopia"; Olivia Laing, *Crudo*; Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*; Rebecca Solnit, *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)*; Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Tiny Books of the Resistance"; Johanna Drucker, *The General Theory of Social Relativity*; Alexis Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*; Sean Willentz, *The Politicians and Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics*; Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Russian Roulette: The Insider Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump*; and Saskia Sassen, "Expulsions: A category for our age" (a talk given at the University of London, available

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Cont. on p. 4



Clarification (cont. from p. 3)

...mainstream insistence on upholding neoliberalist policies for managing the ongoing global disaster, which these same policies have accelerated, is leading everyone who lacks billionaire status, little by little, into a precarious state.

sheer scope and quantity of such titles were far beyond my ability to sample by myself (much less amass a comprehensive list of and recruit others to read and review them). In addition to my reading, I listened to hundreds of podcasts from a wide range of sources (too many, in fact, to list): political, cultural (in which I include the subcategory of literary), and academic. I should perhaps also mention that although I read some “news” online, this year I avoided television coverage of any kind (except for an occasional item on PBS’s *News Hour* that Tom brought to my attention); it may well be that cable news shows may have changed over the past year. And of course I continued to read pre-2016 work that helped me think my way through the year.

I make a point here of the volume and variety of materials I took in over the year in order to dismiss the conclusion that my past sense of confusion came from too great a profusion of inputs. (Media overload, after all, is the most common explanation for the anxiety plaguing most people in the US.) Recalling my 2015 discussion of Tiptree’s “The Man Who Walked Home,” I had to wonder why I no longer feel out of synch with the world as I know it. Well, I have at least two theories about that.

One theory is that the mainstream media has become suspended in a moment of time it doesn’t know how to break out of¹¹: its obsession with the spectacle of Trump and its accompanying specter of authoritarianism has it mesmerized (and its audiences, too, tuned as we are to the 24/7 news cycle blasting out its continual proclamations of “breaking news” that usually amount to endless gossip fests that reduce po-

on YouTube).

11 I tend to see the mainstream media as suspended in time because their allegiance to neoliberal ideology makes it impossible for them to look past the spectacle. For them, Trump is an outrage to neoliberal notions of normality, which a lot of people in the West still assume is the only rational way of viewing the world and conducting business. This ideological framework, I think, is what makes most narratives about “Trump voters” (and, in the UK, pro-Brexit voters) so simplistic and stereotype-based.

litical reality to the flattest form of soap opera). Rather than I, it’s now the mainstream news media that is looking to me like Tiptree’s John Delgano, more clearly than ever out of synch with the living, moving world.

Another, possibly complementary, explanation is that the vote for Brexit and its continuing aftermath as well as the 2016 presidential election (including its candidates’ campaigns) have made it starkly apparent that mainstream insistence on upholding neoliberalist policies for managing the ongoing global disaster, which these same policies have accelerated, is leading everyone who lacks billionaire status, little by little, into a precarious state. Since precarity, for Western nations, had previously been confined largely to what used to be called the “underclasses,” this is a shocking development for previously comfortable white people, now just one serious illness away from personal bankruptcy and homelessness.

In short, my sense of being out-of-synch dropped away when I realized that the sense of confusion about Big Data (aka “weapons of math destruction”) and social media I’d been struggling with were simply details (albeit important ones) in the larger problem confronting us. I had been mistaking the various spheres of social media and the machinations of Big Data for the world, which they are not. As events of the last year have demonstrated, the most threatening face of our ongoing world disaster is climate change and the concomitant increase in the expanses of dead zones on land and sea, which continuously generate wave upon wave of distress. Climate change is not something that is simply happening to us; it is, rather, an on-going accumulation of deliberate choices silently accompanying every land-use deal, every policy of “deregulation” that is imposed, and every policy assigning resource allocation to corporate interests. Such decisions and policies are usually made in the name of Progress, and they make up a constellation of policies that merely “believing in” climate change will not alter a jot. Our politicians can do little to mitigate climate change without first learning a different way of conceptualizing the world, private property, health,

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and safety, thus scrapping misleading concepts like “agency” and “nature.”

The mainstream media long insisted that the only politically valid question that can be posed about climate change is whether or not it is “real” due to its stubborn adherence to the anti-philosophical premise that “objectivity” means always positioning itself as the center between two extreme poles of any issue—poles determined by the GOP and DNC leadership respectively, poles that have since 1980 moved continually to the right, poles that have excluded any position not supported by the largest campaign donors. This positioning has meant that many of our day’s most important issues cannot be articulated by the mainstream media at all, and thus are unlikely to receive political traction with the major parties.

The Trump presidency has thrown a spanner into this mechanism, for most reporters, editors, and pundits have found it difficult to take Trump’s utterances as both truthful and made in good faith (in the way the mainstream media have always taken other administrations’ utterances seriously, however ill-informed and false they may have been). His first press secretary tied himself into knots trying to do it, and failed. It is not just that Trump’s reality is morally ugly; it’s also that it isn’t plausibly consistent, and is thus impossible to present as coherent. And so it’s become impossible for the mainstream media to continue claiming that objectivity lies in splitting the difference between the usual two poles of “truth.”

During the final stages of the 2016 campaign, many people seemed to think that revelations of how many times Trump presented whole-cloth inventions as “facts,” or “changed his story,” would, like exposure of his many demonstrations of misogyny and scorn for law, be enough to damn him. No such thing. The mainstream media responded by heaping scorn on supporters for their indifference to facts.

After the election, the mainstream media became obsessed with Trump’s attack on “Truth” and all the issues surrounding the expression “fake news.” Two of the books I read in 2018 reflect

the mainstream media’s panicked response to the Trump presidency’s insistence that it had a right to decide what was “true” and that any challenge to their “facts” was dishonest partisanship. Both books insist that “truth” is the foundation of our democratic institutions, and that “truth” is now under unique attack. Shortly after the election, Orwell’s 1984 hit the bestseller charts, *The New York Times* became the posterchild for the mainstream media’s role in maintaining “truth,” and numerous books defending “truth” got underway. I was bemused to see *The New York Times* being held up as the great defender of truth. No historian who cared about “truth” would base an historical account of events on that newspaper’s coverage of them, except to glean how they were being spun at the time.¹² But now, suddenly, after years of uncritically repeating untruths spoken by politicians and government officials, newspapers and cable news shows have become the great champion of Truth. What is wrong with this picture?

“News” has never been a synonym for “truth” (or even “facts”). I can still remember how, the day of the Oklahoma City bombing, one of the network evening news reports opened with the announcement that Islamic terrorists had carried out that terrorist attack. (Timothy McVeigh, inspired by the white supremacist *Turner Diaries*, was in fact responsible.) Even when “facts” (i.e., details that have been “fact-checked,” which *The New Yorker* has long been famous for doing) form the basis of a report, speech, or public statement, the result is not necessarily “objective truth.” “Facts” are points of data assembled into a picture to represent reality. A fact is true, but it isn’t, in isolation from other facts, “the truth.” Whole-cloth fabrications or misunderstandings of evidence are often presented as “facts” by all of the systems of “justice” deployed by the US, as well as by corporations and government officials, with such frequency and with such clear indifference to “truth” that we did not need

¹² To take just one example, one of *The New York Times*’ star reporters helped fabricate evidence George W. Bush used to justify the US’s destruction of Iraq.

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Clarification (cont. from p. 5)

Our epistemological commons is up for grabs, folks. We just have to stop assuming that when people who were previously on opposite sides of the political spectrum are singing the same hymn, we have no choice but to sing along with them.

L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of the Marq'ssan Cycle, *Love's Body*, *Dancing in Time*, and *Never at Home*. Her latest novel, *Chercher La Femme*, was published in 2018.

Foucault to teach us about the politicization of knowledge. (Both books addressing the assault on truth that I read this year blamed the postmodernists for leading us astray.)

Over the course of 2018 I gradually came realize that truth, "objective" or otherwise, is no more in danger than it ever has been. While I prefer the DNC's representation of reality to Trump's, and while the DNC employs more verifiable "facts" in its representation than does Trump (whose supposed "facts" can change from hour to hour), I still find it wrong, wrong, wrong because of all the facts that it omits. More interesting to me is that the right wing's penchant for invention (and anyone my age knows that the only rival, before Trump, to Ronald Reagan's habit of invention was George W. Bush) has finally gone too far to be assimilated into the mainstream media's mechanism for determining its own objectivity. Bruno Latour argues that Trump supporters have gone off the map, that Trump is an "out of this world attractor." Trump's habitual disregard of inconvenient facts is so lavish and is accompanied by such constant attacks on the mainstream media (unlike, say, Paul Ryan's habitual disregard of them) that

the mechanism of splitting the difference has become impossible.

I began by saying that I was feeling hopeful precisely because Brexit, the rise of authoritarian leaders in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, and the election of Trump have not yet resulted in an epistemic shift in the US. Such a shift would, I think, already have happened had the mainstream media *not* found Trump's representation of reality a step too far in maintaining its balancing act. Instead, a system that previously did its best to assume that the view from nowhere (i.e., a privileged white view that dispenses with facts too inconvenient to be part of any mainstream version of reality) was actually objectively True has developed a crack. This in turn presents us with an opportunity to introduce some of those inconvenient facts into public discourse.

Our epistemological commons is up for grabs, folks. We just have to stop assuming that when people who were previously on opposite sides of the political spectrum are singing the same hymn, we have no choice but to sing along with them. Me, I'd be happy to kick that hymn book into the fire and learn a new tune with some gutsy, liberating lyrics.

Astrolabe

by Raquel Castro, translated by Lawrence Schimel

in memory of Jean Ray

The ship needs to be ready to leave: all sailors on deck, sails at the ready, lads poised to raise the anchor. Sometimes days and days go by of being in readiness like that, alert; sometimes, the crew despairs and gets drunk or gets distracted or falls asleep or kills the captain, as a result of which the opportunity for the journey is forever lost. But that is as important as choosing each sailor well and keeping the alcohol well-hidden, to bring out only when it's truly needed. That's why it's also necessary to have perfectly understood each of the instructions and to have made each calculation with precision: otherwise, one might err

by a few hours or a few weeks (or even years!) with the obvious consequences.

I studied countless old books, navigational maps, and the ship's logs of retired or deceased captains before I was quite sure. My researches had made me think that I could never make the trip in this lifetime: I needed a measuring instrument that not just anyone might attain. Without revealing my intentions, I spoke of it with the oldest men of the port, but none of them had seen what I described to them. Meanwhile, anxiety began to gnaw at me from within: according to my calculations there were only a few weeks left in which to have everything ready.



I was about to concede defeat when I was visited by a woman who looked as if she had once been very beautiful: she reminded me of a dried flower, the kind that lovers press between the pages of a book. Before I could react, she sat down in front of me, at the tavern. Before I could say anything, she placed a wooden box on the table. It looked ancient.

"I heard you're looking for this. I think we can come to an agreement," she said. I was surprised that her voice was much younger than she was. It was as if the pressed flower in the book still retained its perfumed scent.

"Don't get distracted, we haven't much time," she insisted, with that voice which was at the same time sharp and sweet. Perhaps I blushed: I'm not used to women talking to me, and even less to their giving me orders. So, with an effort, I recovered my composure and picked up the box between my hands. The lid bore an engraving spoken of in many secret books: a ship sailing on an ocean, a single star above the ship and, on the horizon, the silhouette of what could be a palace.

No one had seen that emblem in a thousand years.

"It's from Nastulus?" I asked.

She nodded her head.

"But...how?"

"My husband used it to find what you're looking for."

"Did you steal it from your husband?" I asked, suddenly nervous and mistrusting.

"My husband, bless his memory, returned with a treasure and was betrayed on his way home. They threw him overboard, and his foreman kept what wasn't his to keep. Now he has died as well, and it's time for the treasure to return to the True House of Wisdom of al-Mamun."

"You're going to give me a treasure to bring with me? You're going to trust me, without even knowing me?"

"Yes and no. My price is this: I am going with you."

I avoided speaking immediately. It's the best way to not say something that one might later repent having spoken. Instead, I opened the box and marveled at the perfection of the astrolabe.

More than a thousand years rested in my hands. I felt like weeping.

"In addition, I have his calculations and his maps. I can be very useful," she insisted, almost an entreaty. I nodded: my desire spoke for me.

We spent the next days refining all the details. The most difficult part is not finding provisions nor enlisting men who are more or less loyal. What can be maddening to anyone is sitting in the keel to wait, looking at the sky for the precise instant at which that slippery star appears, the star that only crosses the celestial sphere once every seventy years or more, and never on any regular cycle.

"As soon as you see the star you must use the astrolabe and, at the same time, order our departure. If we dally more than a few minutes, everything will be in vain," she repeated to me.

It happened suddenly: brighter than any other star, there it was, in the middle of the sky, as if that had always been its place. I gave the order for departure at the same moment I held the astrolabe in my hands and began my calculations. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the woman, standing on the deck. I forced myself to speak, just to make conversation.

"What is the treasure?" was the only thing I could ask.

"I am," she answered with a smile.

I glanced away from the astrolabe for a moment and stared right at her: illuminated by the rays of that star, caressed by the wind, she was now young again, lovelier than anything I had ever seen before on land or sea.

I asked myself what she would look like at the end of the journey.

And we set sail.

Raquel Castro is an award-winning Mexican author for both children and adults. She won the Premio Aguilar in 2012 for her YA horror novel *Ojos Llenos de Sombras* (*Eyes Full of Shadows*) and recently co-edited an anthology of Mexican zombie stories with Rafael Villegas, *Festín de Muertos* (*Feast of the Dead*).

Lawrence Schimel is a bilingual (Spanish/English) author and literary translator based in Madrid. Recent genre book translations include *Monteverde: Memoirs of an Interstellar Linguist* by Spanish writer Lola Robles, *Memory* by Argentine writer Teresa P. Mira de Echeverría, and *The Wild Book* by Mexican writer Juan Villoro.





“i delight in what i fear”

Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

reviewed by Andy Duncan

This was the book of which Dorothy Parker wrote, “This novel brings back all my faith in terror and death. I can say no higher of it.”

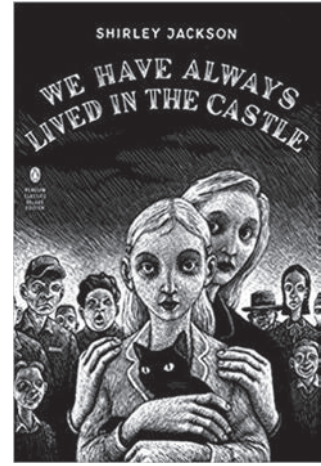
Here are the two best arguments I can make for reading Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, if you haven’t already. Argument the First: This was the book of which Dorothy Parker wrote, “This novel brings back all my faith in terror and death. I can say no higher of it.”

Argument the Second is the novel’s first paragraph, which I present here in its entirety. I recommend that you read it aloud.

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death cap mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.

On most days, this is my favorite opening paragraph of any novel. On the other days, it takes second place behind the opening paragraph of Jackson’s previous novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*—but as *Hill House* is a more famous book, let us return to that close, shadowy parlor where young Mary Katherine has so politely introduced herself, and told us so many things that turn out to be not quite true.

While Mary Katherine is her legal name, the name by which the outside world knows her (“Good morning, Mary Katherine,” a café owner will tell her on page three, in the novel’s first quoted dialogue), she has a truer name at home. Her adored and adoring sister Constance has a pet name for her: Merricat.



The calendar shows Merricat to be eighteen, yes, but as this opening paragraph demonstrates, she sounds both younger, a precocious child trained to mimic the speech of adults on formal occasions, but also older, vastly older, perhaps as the result of reading too many dusty tomes about the fifteenth-century ancestor of all subsequent British monarchs—but perhaps as the result of other experiences, too.

We learn later that while Constance is the only housemate (indeed, the only person) who matters to Merricat, they share their house with a third relative, the mad and disabled Uncle Julian, whom Merricat doesn’t mention until page two, in an aside: “Someone had to go to the library, and the grocery; Constance never went past her own garden, and Uncle Julian could not.” He comes up again on page three, though the café owner seems to view him as He Who Must Not Be Named:

“And Constance Blackwood, is she well?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“And how is he?”

“As well as can be expected. Black coffee, please.”

Back to that first paragraph, and our narrator’s first startling confession. One wonders how many readers, encountering that delicious detail about the two middle fingers, have been prompted to examine their own hands, and wonder about their own potential for lycanthropy. But the pious resignation Mer-

Grandmother Magma



ricat claims to feel at her estate in life (“I have had to be content with what I had”) is not true, either, because we soon learn that far from being passive, she is actively and tirelessly working transgressive magic to protect herself and her sister—for example, memorizing words of power that must never be spoken, and stashing objects around the property, Boo Radley-like, to construct a sort of fence, “a powerful taut web which never loosened, but held fast to guard us.”

And the paragraph’s stunner of a final sentence, which falls like a coffin lid, is not only inaccurate but deeply misleading. “Everyone else in my family is dead,” however disquieting, papers over the horror of what really happened to the four absent Blackwoods: They were murdered at the dinner table six years earlier, having spooned poisoned sugar over their blackberries. (That they were *blackberries*, not *blueberries*, is one of countless examples of Jackson’s meticulous attention to detail.) Constance was accused of the crime yet, somehow, acquitted (one of Jackson’s several cheerfully elided plot points); like Lizzie Borden, she failed to please the townsfolk by leaving town but retreated behind Blackwood walls, never to emerge, and leaving Merricat, the household emissary, to bear the brunt of the townsfolk’s lingering hostility.

Ruth Franklin’s brilliant 2016 biography of Jackson vividly reconstructs the long, agonized writing of *Castle*. She started with little more than the title, and the inspiration of the famously unsolved 1876 Charles Bravo poisoning case, aka the *Murder at the Priory*. Initially the plot, something like Clouzot’s 1955 movie *Diabolique*, involved two sisters plotting to murder a boorish husband: “i want something highly suspicious / but possibly natural,” she wrote a friend, “like mushrooms but i don’t really know one end of a mushroom from another.”

Having ground out only two chapters, Jackson abandoned the draft in September 1960: “i have spent eight months trying to make a novel out of that thing and almost convincing myself i could, and it is an absolute relief to be able to

look at it and say there isn’t any novel there.” But she returned to the idea in 1961, ironically during a long, miserable bout of colitis, the symptoms of which mimicked mushroom poisoning.

By now, her family was involved in the writing. Jackson arranged and re-arranged her husband and children around the dining table, until she was sure she had orchestrated the fatal Blackwood dinner party just right, and she passed each draft chapter to a new sounding board—her 12-year-old daughter Sarah, herself a chronic inventor of household charms and spells. Family friends later would see much of Sarah in the character of Merricat, but Jackson herself seems to have found the book somewhat autobiographical. “i delight in what i fear,” she wrote in an unsent letter, perhaps to herself. “then *castle* is not about two women murdering a man. it is about my being afraid and afraid to say so.”

Afraid, that is, of being trapped, like Constance and Merricat; like Eleanor and the other victims of Hill House; like Mrs. Hutchison at the end of “The Lottery,” whose last words are, “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right.” As Franklin points out, *Castle* is the culmination of Jackson’s career-long portrayal of “the kinds of psychic damage to which women are especially prone,” her “preoccupation with the roles that women play at home and the forces that conspire to keep them there.”

“It can be no accident,” Franklin writes, “that in many of these works, a house—the woman’s domain—functions as a kind of protagonist, with traditional homemaking occupations such as cooking or gardening playing a crucial role in the narrative. ... In *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), her late masterpieces, a house becomes both a prison and a site of disaster.”

For Jackson, this dread of being swallowed whole by domesticity was no merely theoretical fear. Published on September 21,¹ 1962, *Castle* received the best reviews of her career. An immediate best seller, it even earned her a fan letter

Jackson herself seems to have found the book somewhat autobiographical. “i delight in what i fear,” she wrote in an unsent letter, perhaps to herself.

As Franklin points out, Castle is the culmination of Jackson’s career-long portrayal of “the kinds of psychic damage to which women are especially prone,” her “preoccupation with the roles that women play at home and the forces that conspire to keep them there.”

1 My birthday, as it happens.



Grandmother Magma (cont. from p. 9)

...the book never
succumbs; it triumphs;
it is filled with delight
as well as fear. It is
exuberantly witty, and
sometimes laugh-out-loud
funny

from Isaac Bashevis Singer, who praised the book's ambiguity: "I am, like you, against too much motivation. The less the better." Yet, at the apex of her fame, the walls of agoraphobia closed around her. Jackson became a prisoner of her own house in North Bennington, Vermont, too anxious to go to the post office or the grocery store, suffering a panic attack whenever the phone rang. One of her previous books, marketed as humor, had been titled *Raising Demons*, a puckish reference to her ill-behaved children; *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* raises her *actual* demons.

Yet the book never succumbs; it triumphs; it is filled with delight as well as fear. It is exuberantly witty, and sometimes laugh-out-loud funny in a darkly absurd, Edward Gorey way—as when the local firefighters, called in to save the Blackwood mansion, set about destroying it instead. Much of the effect is down

to Merricat's beguiling voice, one of the most astonishing high-wire acts in fiction. She lingers in the mind and in the ear long after the book is closed, and like all truly unreliable narrators, she is utterly convincing. The last scene of the novel is set in the Blackwood kitchen (which has, of course, survived the fire), where Merricat and Constance chat agreeably about all the usual things: spiders, child abuse, cannibalism. Then Merricat bursts out with the final words of the novel:

"Oh, Constance," I said, "we are so happy."

I, for one, believe her.

Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Viking, 1962. Penguin, 1984. 214 pp. \$9.95.
Franklin, Ruth. *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*. Liveright/W.W. Norton, 2016.

Andy Duncan's criticism has appeared in *Children's Literature Review*, *Foundation*, and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, but he's better known for his short fiction, which has won a Nebula Award, a Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and three World Fantasy Awards. In November 2018, Small Beer published his latest, *An Agent of Utopia: New and Selected Stories*.

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Ursula Whitcher is a mathematician, editor, and role-playing game enthusiast. Her poetry may be found in *VoiceCatcher*, *The Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, *The College Math Journal*, and *Goblin Fruit*.

chosen

by Ursula Whitcher

hey, brother, i met someone new. i think
she's going to save the world. no,

really. the bones of her face are sharp
like the sea-cliff you climbed.

she pulls ferns from her pockets uncrushed,
a hedgehog, the hilt of a sword.

sometimes she leaps in the air
for no reason at all. she's thinking

about the fate of the world. people bring her
lost children, unspillable ale. sometimes

she walks into a wall and keeps walking,
face pressed halfway into stone.



Miss Ambivalence

by Gwynne Garfinkle

Guys, are you tired of girls
who make themselves too available?
Clingy, predictable women
who answer your texts
in a timely fashion?
Want a woman who'll stick around
just long enough for your liking,
but not so long that you get bored?
Try Miss Ambivalence!
She's programmed to give you
the thrill of the chase
and keep you guessing.
Available in a variety of styles.
(Note: We will issue a credit
to customers who leased Miss Ambivalence
before we fixed the so-called "doorstop bug,"
which made her keep one foot literally
outside a door at all times.
We are not liable for damage to property,
including, but not limited to, doors,
doorframes, and doorknobs,
nor are we responsible for any medical expenses
incurred while trying to pry Miss A.
in or out of a doorway. We apologize
for any inconvenience.)
Try Miss Ambivalence! She's guaranteed
to keep you on your toes.

you've entered the twilight zone

by Gwynne Garfinkle

in which the story you've always
worn like a cloak
is picked apart and unraveled
stripping you naked
the idyllic alcohol haze
of your youth
(a night of laughter
with a buddy, loud music
a girl on a bed)
burns off in the too-clear
hangover light of day
and everyone can see her face
and everyone can hear
her screaming

Gwynne Garfinkle lives in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Uncanny*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apex*, *Lackington's*, and *Not One of Us*. Her new collection of short fiction and poetry, *People Change*, is available from Aqueduct Press.





Short Fiction Reviews

by Karen Burnham

Spacefaring has often been compared to seafaring, but in my reading in 2018 I have seen water used as a means of escape—from abuse, from illness, from society—in a way that spacefaring stories were not.

“De Mother Jumpers,” by Celeste Rita Baker, *Strange Horizons* (October 15, 2018), edited by Jane Crowley and Kate Dollarhyde

“Memento Mori,” by Tiah Marie Beaument, *Omenana* (#12), edited by Mazi Nwonwu and Chinelo Onwualu

“A Siren’s Cry Is a Song of Sorrow,” by Stina Leicht, *Apex Magazine* (September 2018), edited by Jason Sizemore

Water: ocean, lake, and river. Deeply elemental, necessary for life, but also unpredictable and fatal. Spacefaring has often been compared to seafaring, but in my reading in 2018 I have seen water used as a means of escape—from abuse, from illness, from society—in a way that spacefaring stories were not. I’d like to discuss three stories that stood out in the way they use water as a refuge from and contrast to terrestrial life, and highlight how even that retreat is under threat.

“Memento Mori” is my favorite in issue #12 of *Omenana*, a magazine for “speculative fiction from across Africa and the African Diaspora” (with stories available free online). Tiah Marie Beaument sets her story in South Africa, in a “special place, where two great oceans meet.” The unnamed protagonist is a woman living with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a genetic disorder of the connecting tissues of the body. As she experiences it: “...the chronic condition that caused her body to constantly ache, had taught her this: pain worsened if you fought it. The only way to live with it was to ride its wave with acceptance.” This survival skill makes her an invaluable assistant to Death, personified in this world, with whom she quietly becomes more intimate as the story progresses.

Their relationship brings real charm to the tale. Death never speaks (occasionally producing notes on parchment) but enjoys cooking for her, and he feels as awkward as any friend does, watching someone struggle and trying to work out when to help and when to stay out of the way. He orders a service dog for her, and the trainer and pet supply delivery folks arrive and depart and are never quite sure where they were or why they went there. What the woman contributes becomes clear in the evening: at night she becomes a kind of mermaid, and in

her sympathy for pain she can find souls that have become lost from their still-breathing bodies (such as Alzheimer’s patients) and have sought refuge in ocean currents. She collects these hard-to-find souls for Death. In contrast with her terrestrial existence with its wheelchair and splints on every finger, when she transforms: “The sea’s gentle caress soothed her irritable skin while its bulk supported her weight, easing the ache in her joints.”

That contrast between the comfort of the water and pain on land is also seen in Stina Leicht’s story “A Siren’s Cry Is a Song of Sorrow.” The story is a 7,600-word howl of pain, focused entirely on the shame and violence that girls and women endure at the hands of men. Jill, the protagonist, and her slightly younger sister Alex, are abused from childhood by their father. They are raised Catholic in Houston in the near past (roughly the 1960s or ’70s), and their church reinforces the idea that women are shameful, that God doesn’t care about girls the way He cares about men. Despite the harassment of boys at pools, they both find swimming to be a respite: “The first time I submerged myself beneath the water a feeling of peace surrounded me. Unlike my mother, I had no fear of drowning. I adored diving into that comforting silence.”

As girls they imagine turning into fish to escape forever, and eventually they find stories about mermaids: “Most of the myths portrayed mermaids as evil (*sluts*) seductresses, but the illustrations told a different story—like Mary, the truth was in their faces. I could see serenity in their eyes, in the way they held themselves—their grace and beauty. The confidence of their naked breasts. I coveted their fierce fearlessness. Men who touched them, threatened them, and called them names didn’t end well. Their attackers drowned or went mad.”



Jill reads Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and tears it out of the storybook before her sister Alex can read it, and instead makes up a lovely story that ends happily. When they are pre-teens, Alex contacts "Sister Zara's House of Psychics." Alex hopes they can literally be turned into mermaids. They talk to one of the "psychics," Helena, who figures out what's been happening to them and tries to do the right thing: get them to the police. She mentions that yes, mermaids are real, but that becoming mermaids is not the right answer for them and not something she would do for a child. Another psychic, Sula, also gets the story and later sends them each a potion and ritual that she says would allow them to transform and escape. Jill, disillusioned with magic and religion and fearing that the potion might be poisonous, dissuades her sister from going through with the plan.

As they grow older everything gets worse, until eventually Alex is abducted. They'd been stalked by a man for weeks, but everyone told them to just ignore him. He grabbed Alex but wasn't able to get Jill. Eventually Alex is found, dead, only steps away from a bayou where she might have been able to transform/escape. Jill finally tells her mother everything that's been happening and that, combined with Alex's death, causes everyone in the family to retreat into their own mental bunkers. Jill raids her college savings to reach out to Sula again (who also has been subsumed into some sort of unpleasant relationship with a boyfriend). At the end of the story it looks like Jill might finally be able to escape to the ocean and possibly posthumously save her sister as well. "I say goodbye to my voice, my legs, and that place between them—(my vulva, my vagina, my clitoris)—that place that boys and men are so obsessed with, the things that make me of use to them, and I say goodbye with relief."

Next I'd like to turn to a counterexample of sorts, a story where once welcoming waters become hostile. "De MotherJumpers" by Celeste Rita Baker

is a difficult story of an underwater society undergoing drastic changes. At the beginning, Junpee has a pretty good life on the seafloor. She has made a space for herself and her lover, "between de blue sea fan and de buried in de sand part of we sunkin ship home." (The creole language that Junpee uses to narrate the story will be familiar to those who know Caribbean author Baker's work—and if you haven't read her debut collection *Back, Belly, & Side: True Lies and False Tales* [2015], you're missing out.) Junpee is part of a community descended from a handful of people who survived jumping from slave ships three hundred and fifty years ago and transformed into sea people who can survive via an ocean mammalian strategy, surfacing to breathe as needed. In this long story we get details of their biology, the founding legend of the specific woman who jumped and survived to start their "pride," and how they love.

Junpee and ten of her friends have been thinking about splitting off to form their own pride. At first it seems like this is due only to Junpee's love of novelty, but as the story progresses we see that this is not a utopia that she would be foolishly abandoning. Some of her friends are sick with bone and ear illnesses that had once been rare and are now common. As her brother swims back and forth between other prides of sea people, he's bringing back things that the reader will recognize as plastic waste—six pack rings and plastic bottles—that might be useful but can also be harmful to the wildlife. She and her friends go out on a mission to bring back specific foods—different kinds of seaweed and shrimp—that are partly for Sosal's birthday party and partly medicinal for two young people who've fallen ill. On their way out to gather food they stop at an island reef that they've been eyeing, rebelliously lying out on the sand and working on standing up (they're born and spend their whole lives in the water). On the way back they have a tragic encounter with something that Junpee barely has words for: "I feel someting slick and warm, too

That contrast between the comfort of the water and pain on land is...seen in Stina Leicht's story "A Siren's Cry Is a Song of Sorrow." The story is a 7,600-word howl of pain, focused entirely on the shame and violence that girls and women endure at the hands of men.

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Cont. on p. 15





We Are the Reasons We're Broken

People Change, by Gwynne Garfinkle, Aqueduct Press, September 2018, 128 pp., \$12

reviewed by Arley Sorg

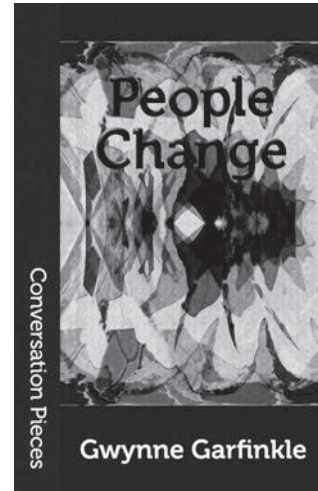
Most of the fiction (like much of the poetry) deals with relationships, especially power relationships, the power often exerted as direct control.

Garfinkle's collection *People Change* comprises six short stories and 32 poems, including the titular "People Change: A Love Story," a brief, three-part poem utilizing three films to examine irony and loss. So half the book is poetry. The problem is, I'm a terrible poet and an amateur (at best) reader of poetry. For this reason, I will share a few comments about the poetry, but will focus primarily on the fiction.

Nine poems in this collection are originals. The rest are drawn from the pages of *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Strange Horizons*, *Mithila Review*, *Apex Magazine*, and more. In other words, editors with far more experience than I, and with robust slush piles, have paid good money for them. It is clear that the field's opinions of these poems are quite high.

The forms of poetry appearing here vary in length and structure, though several utilize non-rhyming paired lines. "Dorothy's Prayer" experiments a bit more, drawing comparison to e e cummings, and a few such as "Ode to Dwight Frye" are closer in form to William Carlos Williams. Most of the poems draw upon popular (especially film) culture, such as "Gojira/Godzilla," "Linda Blair Pantoum," and "she's alive, alive." A few draw on myths, legends, and fairytales. Some touch on gender dynamics, relationships, or power and control. Standouts for me are "Ginnie and the Cooking Contest," a prose poem in a page-long paragraph, which is strangely captivating; and "family (a form somehow must)," which grabs the reader and gently unsettles them in the best way.

The fiction is consistently well-composed. Variations on character and structure demonstrate skill in storytelling. The voice and plotting of each of the pieces are slightly different but remain strong. Themes stay true to the collection's title, being generally about transformations.



Most of the fiction (like much of the poetry) deals with relationships, especially power relationships, the power often exerted as direct control. All of the stories are solid; some are even impressive.

The collection opens with "In Lieu of a Thank You," a slightly disorienting and surprising story that calls to mind *Frankenstein's Monster* or *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Not only is it written in a voice reminiscent of black and white movies, but it is about a high-society woman, "Miss Grand. Miss Vanessa Grand," who is kidnapped from London and brought to a lab for experimentation. The narrative upends the expectations of character, drawing metaphors to the limitations placed on women via social expectations, while examining the definitions of monstrosity. It's a wonderful opener, being slyly intellectual while both engaging and very entertaining.

"The Paper Doll Golems," a twist on both golem tales and doll fiction, is the sole original story in the collection. A young girl named Ruthie brings two paper dolls to life in order to have friends. This is a deft tale about longing and loneliness, as well as familial dysfunction. It delves deep into the complex nature of monsters, as a child negotiates her need for companionship, the oppressive nature of her family, and her relationship with the powerless dolls she has made.

Cont. on p. 16



Dust Lanes (cont. from p. 13)

big and smooth to be a limb, too flat to be a shark. Is a manatee den, a big one, grown. I could feel de scratches and scars from other fights along de wing." At the end of the encounter six of her friends are dead, including Sosal, and the others are wounded. In a pride of less than fifty people, this is a stunning loss.

In the aftermath, when it is discovered that the group went to the island on their way to collect their food, everybody places the blame for the tragedy on Junpee (they wouldn't have been exactly in that area if it weren't for her exploring), and in her grief she internalizes that blame. As she's completely immersed in her sorrow and pain, her uncle and his friends, already established as creepy men who get worse when they're drunk, find her and gang rape her, saying that because she lost so many young people she'd better get pregnant and start replacing them. When her mother sees what happened to her and finds out who did it, she goes after them with a knife, and (while no more fatalities result), the community is effectively torn apart. At this point we also learn that the bone disorders and random trash are not happening in isolation:

Horrors new since me Mommy been alive. De bone disease, caused by de noise. De black oil dat does clog up we pores. De coral dem losing color, slowly dying out, and de coral is one a de hearts and lungs of we sea creatures, big and small does benefit from dem. De water hotter dan before and Mommy say it change, is more biting, more piercing, stinging to de eye and de skin. More a we getting skin sickness, more a we can't see far, can't hear well. More a we dying young or in distress. De cyclones coming

larger and more often. De fish and all leaving.

Junpee, who ironically had already been pregnant with her lover's child but hadn't yet wanted to say, ends the story still committed to leaving and trying to establish something new elsewhere, even after losing so many friends and having suffered so badly in the midst of her home pride. Yet because of what we, the readers, know about the world's situation, we have to wonder if there is anywhere for her to go, anywhere that could possibly be better, any space left for utopias.

Between these three stories we see intersections of disability, feminism, racism, and environmental justice. Any hope of escape from the systems of oppression under which we currently suffer won't mean much if we bring those same systems—patriarchy, slavery, abuse, pollution—into every corner of the land, skies, space, and waters.

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

Between these three stories we see intersections of disability, feminism, racism, and environmental justice.



People Change
(cont. from p. 14)

The story is a subtler examination of the results of seemingly innocuous actions. Impressive here is the way Garfinkle seamlessly imbues the unreal with character and emotion, rendering them in some very strong moments....

“The Imaginary Friend” stands as somewhat similar in theme and concept to “The Paper Doll Golems”: a young girl (Gigi) creates an imaginary friend based on a character in a movie, a friend who is real, but whose reality is entirely dependent on and limited to the protagonist. The story is a subtler examination of the results of seemingly innocuous actions. Impressive here is the way Garfinkle seamlessly imbues the unreal with character and emotion, rendering them in some very strong moments; as well as sharing varied, touching portrayals of loneliness and being an outcast.

“Don’t Look Back” is a sort-of time travel tale built around excerpts from the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. A woman, specifically “never his Eurydice,” is enamored of the music of a musician who died, so she goes back in time—sacrificing the timeline she had already lived—to change her past with the musician. She wants to meet him sooner, and she wants to experience his music again, even more so than she had, saying, “I’ll change my life for him, even if it won’t change one second of his.” Not only is it a fascinating story, but it’s told with great dialogue and interactions. It captures and reveals the nature of relationships (especially gender dynamics) in clever ways, never heavy-handed or preachy, but still incredibly insightful.

“Man-Size” is easily my favorite of the bunch, which is saying quite a bit when all the stories are strong. Jill is a teen lesbian whose best friend Amy has fallen in love with a toxic guy named Ted. As Ted exerts more control over Amy, Jill realizes there is a connection between Amy’s declining health and Ted’s growing charisma. Amy has to battle her own insecurities to stand against Ted’s influence. Pop culture touchstones and excellent characterizations lend a realness to the narrative. Sure, this is obviously a look at the power dynamic of men and women. But it’s more than that. It’s a look at the ways in which we are complicit in our own destruction. Ultimately, it’s about dealing with the things that life has made us feel about ourselves. It’s poignant as hell and had me in tears.

The last story in the collection, “The Hedgehog and the Pine Cone,” is a cute fairy tale about two hedgehogs who are best friends. They play and tell each other stories and all is well. Until one of them inexplicably turns into a pine cone. The other undertakes a journey hoping to find a way to understand what’s happening, and hopefully, to make the pinecone a hedgehog again. The tale becomes both a tribute to stories themselves and a lovely piece on friendship.

L. Timmel Duchamp’s introduction describes Aqueduct’s Conversation Pieces series as feminist sf engaged in a grand conversation. Garfinkle enters that conversation with stories that are entertaining, engaging, and affecting. They make great points without sacrifice of story, and their insights are undeniable. Even better, so many of the people in these pages feel real and vibrant, brought to life through accomplished dialogue and interactions. These are stories that most readers can enjoy, consciously feminist or not. And if you pay attention, you might actually learn something.

Arley Sorg lives in Oakland, CA. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he’s an associate editor at *Locus Magazine* and does odd jobs for *Lightspeed Magazine*. He’s soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

© 16 *“Man-Size” is easily my favorite of the bunch, which is saying quite a bit when all the stories are strong.*

L. Timmel Duchamp’s introduction describes Aqueduct’s “Conversation Pieces” series as feminist sf engaged in a grand conversation. Garfinkle enters that conversation with stories that are entertaining, engaging, and affecting.





...When We Talk About Science Fiction

AfroSFv3, edited by Ivor W. Hartmann, StoryTime, December 2018, 189 pp., \$12.50

reviewed by Cynthia Ward



As I began reading *AfroSFv3*, the new space-themed volume in the anthology series of original science fiction by contemporary African writers, the perennial debate about the nature of the genre surged back to prominence. The question “What is science fiction?” initially sounds simple—after all, genre insiders and outsiders alike can immediately identify core topics, like the future, space travel, time travel, new technologies and societies, and alien worlds and lifeforms. But on reflection, the question proves slippery. If a story is set on Mars, but has impossible technology, is it science fiction? What if the story has possible technology, but also a supernatural element, or people who’ve been turned to ghost-like energy beings, or granted superhero powers? What if the story is set in the future, but the central concern is addiction, or the nature of reality, or a missing child? What definition of science fiction is embodied in *AfroSFv3*? In pursuit of the answer, I shall discuss the twelve stories individually.

The anthology opens strongly with “Njuzu,” a beautiful and insightful story by the Zimbabwean author T.L. Huchu (who also writes as Tendai Huchu). The setting, an alien planet in the near future, is core SF. The central character is an unnamed mother on Ceres: an Earth-born

Shona woman whose young son has apparently drowned where drowning shouldn’t be possible, given the asteroid’s minimal gravity. The central focus, however, isn’t the scientific mystery; it’s the mother’s response. Anesu’s enigmatic disappearance complicates her guilt-wracked grief; it strengthens her hatred of the alien world; it sparks skepticism for her ancestral faith, even as the beliefs of her husband, Tarisai (a woman with the spirit of a man), remain unshaken; and it worsens the couple’s marital difficulties and larger familial issues. According to a revelation given during the funeral rites, which mingle ancient practice and advanced technology, the lost boy “is alive and well in the company of the njuzu,” and may return; and his mother subsequently dreams of the eponymous water spirit. But she remains as agonizingly ambivalent as her son’s fate is at the conclusion.

Ambiguity also lies at the heart of another planet-spanning near-future story, South African author Cristy Zinn’s lovely “The Girl Who Stared at Mars.” The titular narrator, Amahle, is alienated in a number of significant ways. Physically, she’s on a light-sail ship fleeing a dying Earth. On the emotional front, her beloved step-father, Dumza, killed her mother and died soon thereafter—a family history that does nothing for Amahle’s relationships with her fellow colonists, which are already complicated by race. In addition, past interplanetary voyages and the underground Mars settlement have both pushed colonists to psychosis, suicide, and murder. In hopes of preventing further breakdowns, everyone aboard receives a personalized virtual reality. Amahle’s “sim” is the suburban garden of her childhood, with Mars always visible in the sky. The simulations aren’t designed to include replicas of other people, but as her stepfather begins visiting her and participating in insightful conversations, the nature

What definition of science fiction is embodied in AfroSFv3? In pursuit of the answer, I shall discuss the twelve stories individually.

The anthology opens strongly with “Njuzu,” a beautiful and insightful story by the Zimbabwean author T.L. Huchu....



Nonphysical and physical realities also figure in Gambian author Biram Mboob's powerful story, "The Luminal Frontier." ... Memory wipes itself, personalities double in existence, time itself is transcended—but, no matter which escape mechanism the mind may enact, the meaning of pain will not be evaded.

Faith is also critical to South African author Stephen Embleton's gripping "Journal of a DNA Pirate," although its central technology is the use of DNA as "the ultimate mass storage technology."

of reality becomes less certain—and Amahle isn't the only one having difficulty maintaining confidence in physical existence.

Differences among nonphysical and physical realities are not ambiguous in Nigerian writer Mazi Nwonwu's compassionate "Parental Control"; they're very clearly delineated. However, the problem is sixteen-year-old Dadzie Maduka's heavy reliance on virtual gaming. A taste for escapism isn't surprising, when you're the literal child of a "mec"—a despised android—and a man who not only lives on another continent, but has a wife who wants nothing to do with you. Still, the young man hopes for at least a détente with the couple, but a secret too long withheld may make addiction inevitable.

Nonphysical and physical realities also figure in Gambian author Biram Mboob's powerful story, "The Luminal Frontier." When a spaceship crew learns of police presence, they discover their memories will be wiped and their mysterious cargo will be ejected—into the Luminal. The Luminal is not merely the no-place outside of existence which existed before and coexists with physical reality, the no-place which makes faster-than-light travel possible. In the words of the crewman-narrator, who has already been mem-wiped once, and who hasn't left religion behind quite as thoroughly as he'd thought: "The Luminal is our eternal and infinite cathedral"—and for most of the crew, who belong to the Sun Cult, dumping anything in the Luminal is at least as sacrilegious as desecrating a physical cathedral. Then the crew discovers a second sin. The contraband cargo to be thrown out is people—slaves. It is a situation so horrifying, so intolerable, that mutiny is not the only possibility. Memory wipes itself, personalities double in existence, time itself is transcended—but, no matter which escape mechanism the mind may enact, the meaning of pain will not be evaded.

Another story in which belief plays a central role is "The EMO Hunter" by South African writer Mandisi Nkomo. Here, an Earth-centered new religion

(so immersive as to be toxic) defends our damaged planet, literally, with a private army. One of these Earth Mother Knights is Joshua, new father and power-suited paladin, whose unquestioning faith isn't quite shared by his wife, Miku. Miku's search for a more satisfying life, by means of a forbidden technology that is considerably more advanced than her husband's cyberpunk mecha, embroils Joshua in fast-paced double trouble, in an entertaining mix of domestic noir, Hitchcockian thriller, and comic-book-ish heroics.

Faith is also critical to South African author Stephen Embleton's gripping "Journal of a DNA Pirate," although its central technology is the use of DNA as "the ultimate mass storage technology." The Mars-dwelling titular revolutionary's belief is secular: unaltered genes must be preserved by any means necessary—means which include transmitting a radical new virus by touch.

Like "The EMO Hunter," Nigerian writer Wole Talabi's "Drift-Flux" is action-packed to a satisfyingly superheroic degree. Orshio and Lien-Adel are an odd-couple spaceship crew, enhanced with impressive genetic and other modifications to ease their dangerous duties. As the story opens (with a tip of the space helmet to the classic film *Alien*), the pair witness the explosion of a mining ship. Their suspicion of terrorist activity spikes as they're ordered to dock immediately at Ceres Station. They expect they'll be giving eyewitness accounts. Instead, they find themselves struggling to save Earth from literal obliteration.

The reader will find both *homage* and critique in Ugandan-American writer Gabriella Muwanga's heart-felt contribution, "The Far Side," which offers a reversal of what some SF fans consider the quintessential hard-SF story, and others consider a work of contrived cruelty or reprehensible design: "The Cold Equations" (1954) by Tom Godwin (1915-1980). In Godwin's story, a teenage stowaway must be fatally ejected from a starship, lest the vessel burn too much fuel to reach its destination and deliver life-saving medical supplies. In



Muwanga's story, a spaceship captain's asthmatic daughter is denied emigration from a doomed Earth due to her disability, and he stows her aboard his next flight. He plans her lunar relocation with enormous care, but even the most loving father and experienced captain cannot foresee every risk.

Another core science fiction scenario—utilized in everything from E.C. Tubb's Dumarest series to the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*—is the cryonic preservation of passengers or crew for the months- or centuries-long flight of a slower-than-light spaceship. But in Ugandan writer and filmmaker Dilman Dila's tense tale, "Safari Nyota: A Prologue," the status of people in cold sleep may prove ambiguous to the supervising android, as Otim-droid discovers when his operating system proves buggy and an accident triples the millennium of transit time.

The cosmic scale is spatial instead of temporal in British-Zimbabwean writer Masimba Musodza's impressive story. While "The Interplanetary Water Company" does not smash planets, some may be fondly reminded of the classic pulp SF author, Edmond "World-Wrecker" Hamilton, because the narrative is focused on a planet knocked far away from its three suns. Offworld interests make plans for the now-frozen and presumably depopulated world, but there are survivors with plans of their own.

Another classic SF scenario, popularized by the *Star Trek* media franchise, is the exploratory mission to other stars. Exploration has risks, and Malawian writer Andrew C. Dakalira's intrepid band of galactic explorers find themselves helpless prisoners of an alien race in his thought-provoking contribution, "Inhabitable." If they don't help their captors with the latter's war, the humans will be destroyed. But if they do, are their odds of survival any better?

The concluding story, "Ogotemmel's Song," by Senegalese-American writer Mame Bougouma Diene, jumps across space and time, achieving space-operatic scale as it examines a newer core concern of SF: the conflicts of multinational corporations metastasized to interplan-

etary war. Here, the devastation turns some Africans to gas. But they survive, as posthuman energy beings or "elementals" whose new abilities offer the last hope of human survival.

From interplanetary wars and virtual realities to radical genetic modifications and apocalyptic futures, the twelve stories in *AfroSFv3* all employ core SF elements. They do not necessarily center on these elements, and a few stories suggest the possibility of supernatural or divine influence, but all may logically be understood with a naturalistic or scientific interpretation. They're in accord with the definition of SF offered by *Analog Science Fiction Science Fact Magazine* (<http://www.analogsf.com/contact-us/writers-guidelines/>): "[S]cience fiction stories [are those] in which some aspect of future science or technology is so integral to the plot that, if that aspect were removed, the story would collapse." And, while a few stories are a bit stiff or underdeveloped, all have strong prose and insightful characterization, and all offer fresh perspectives on both classic SF themes and human nature. A few stories, like "Njuzu" and "The Girl Who Stared at Mars," would be as much at home in the more genre-fluid journals of literary fiction as in *Analog* or *Asimov's SF*, and I'd be unsurprised to find many of *AfroSFv3*'s stories in forthcoming year's best SF anthologies. Whether you're looking for a strong SF anthology or a selection of superior world literature, *AfroSFv3* will satisfy and expand you in equal measure.

Cynthia Ward has sold stories to *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Nightmare*, and elsewhere. She edited *Lost Trails: Forgotten Tales of the Weird West*, Volumes 1-2. With Nisi Shawl, she coauthored *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Aqueduct published her short novels, *The Adventure of the Incognita Countess* and *The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum*.

From interplanetary wars and virtual realities to radical genetic modifications and apocalyptic futures, the twelve stories in AfroSFv3 all employ core SF elements. They do not necessarily center on these elements, and a few stories suggest the possibility of supernatural or divine influence, but all may logically be understood with a naturalistic or scientific interpretation.

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Under the Sea

Tentacle, by Rita Indiana, And Other Stories, January 2019, 132 pp., \$13.95

reviewed by Nisi Shawl

Originally published in Spanish, most of Tentacle's text was ably translated into English by Achy Obejas, a Cuban American author living in California. However, the book's numerous invocations are rendered in their original liturgical Yoruba.

“What lies at the bottom of the ocean?” This is the question followers of the African diasporan deity Olokun are instructed to ask themselves: it’s our meditation, our koan. “Olokun” is the title of the first chapter of Rita Indiana’s Mobius-like novel *Tentacle*, and the book as a mystical whole offers a good answer to that question.

Tentacle’s story—a tale of traveling through time—begins in the not-too-distant future, on a plague-haunted, high-tech version of the Caribbean island Santo Domingo. Acilde, maid-servant to a Santeria priestess, reflects on how grateful she feels to have graduated to her new job: cleaning her boss’s house. This position is a step up from her former one of sucking the dicks of rich men who thought she was a boy, an illusion Acilde did her best to cultivate. But she’s not so grateful that she calls off a violent robbery of the priestess’s shrine—only ambivalent enough to wind up in possession of the santera’s most valuable object of worship: a live sea anemone, rare survivor of a recent ecological disaster.

Next we’re taken to a current day fake psychics’ call center, where frustrated artist Argenis works, and where he receives an invitation to a creative retreat on a private beach. His hosts’ cause is coral reef protection, a cause we know will be futile due to the coming disaster revealed in chapter one. Soon dreams of a distant past fill Argenis’s days and nights, overlapping with and influencing his reactions to the “present.” All three timelines come together satisfyingly in a conclusion whose momentum carries its readers beyond the book’s last pages.

Indiana is a Dominican musician and novelist, winner of the Association of Caribbean Writers Grand Prize. Originally published in Spanish, most of *Tentacle*’s text was ably translated into English by Achy Obejas, a Cuban American author living in California. However, the book’s numerous invocations are rendered in



their original liturgical Yoruba. This is appropriate as a reflection of common spiritual practice—many prayers and praise songs are difficult to render into English, and often they’re learned by rote. The author’s use of the meta-speech of science fictional tropes likewise receives no translation. Nor does it need any, as it will be perfectly intelligible to most in the *Cascadia Subduction Zone* community.

Fiction about time travel often leads to logistical questions as vexed as the one I began this review with. Is it possible to change the past? If so, how? Does interference with the past lead to branching realities? And are these realities infinite in number? *Tentacle*’s structure and voice revel in such paradox-driven quandaries.

In apparent homage to the Robert A. Heinlein classic “All You Zombies,” Acilde, after ingesting oral sex-reassignment medicine, assumes the name of Argenis’s father and impregnates his mother. A neat narrative sleight-of-mind, but it gave rise to my only sense of unease over this book. Newly male-bodied Acilde’s first female sexual partner is barely pubescent, and her consent is neither clearly given nor clearly refused. I found the scene too reminiscent of trans-as-predator stereotypes, stereotypes which have sometimes had fatal real-life consequences for the gender-nonconforming.

Fiction about time travel often leads to logistical questions as vexed as the one I began this review with. Is it possible to change the past?... Tentacle's structure and voice revel in such paradox-driven quandaries.



Other than that, though, the book's a pleasurable read—just challenging enough to furrow my forehead as it plunges along, depicting the deep past, the fraught present, and the probable future. Not everyone's thoroughly likeable, but even a cowardly dog-poisoner has his points when seen in multiply vectored views. The troubled domains of art galleries and grant applications, the seamy backside of presidential politics, the secrets of evangelical enclaves, all these are shown to be as mysterious as religion, as maze-like as *Tentacle's* achronological plot.

Tons of water crush the darkness. Oxygen is inimical to life on the bot-

tom of the ocean. Heat and nourishment come from below, and the only light to be seen is emitted by the chemical lures of monsters. Time and space collapse into one another there, opening and closing entrancing entrances to the realms of secrets, realms connected by intentions. According to *Tentacle*, what lies at the bottom of the ocean is a shifting series of doorways. Read this novel and step through them.

The troubled domains of art galleries and grant applications, the seamy backside of presidential politics, the secrets of evangelical enclaves, all these are shown to be as mysterious as religion, as maze-like as Tentacle's achronological plot.

Nisi Shawl's story collection *Filter House* co-won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award in 2009. She is coauthor of *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Her Belgian Congo steampunk novel *Everfair* is available from Tor.



Seashell study





Nightmares of Chiseled Glass

Alphaland, by Cristina Jurado, Nevsky Books, July 2018, 124 pp., \$10
reviewed by Kathleen Alcalá

After four comparisons, I had to admit that Cristina Jurado's style is all her own. This is definitely the stuff nightmares are made of....

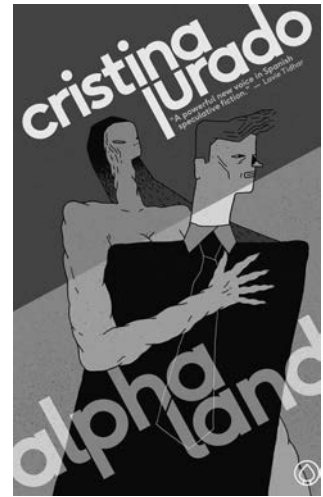
Alphaland, a short collection of stories by Spanish author Cristina Jurado, is not quite like anything I have read before. This is like Jorge Luis Borges, I thought as I began. No no, this is like H.P. Lovecraft, with all those invisible rats running up and down the walls. No, this imagery is straight from Picasso, all those mindless, burrowing phallic symbols. Wait. Is there a little Clarice Lispector in here, the wistfulness of an imaginary life not lived?

After four comparisons, I had to admit that Cristina Jurado's style is all her own. This is definitely the stuff nightmares are made of—from “Vanth,” where a childhood accident reaches fruition years later, to a metaphysical ending, the title story “Alphaland,” that could be set in one of these worlds, another terrible world of its own, or the most frightening possibility, our own world.

Jurado was born in Madrid and currently lives in Dubai. This is her first book in English, and four of the stories it contains were translated from the Spanish by James Womack; the others were either translated by the author, or written by her in English.

I find the stories in *Alphaland* disturbing in the way that *The Delta of Venus*, Anaïs Nin's erotic stories, creep me out: we are put into the heads of anonymous people who must act out certain scenarios that are both fearful and erotic, taking place in a space between waking and dreaming, free to go yet, at the same time, bound in place. As a reader, I feel the urge to intervene in the action, to stop the actors and say, “This is not how it has to be.” But, says our narrator, it does have to be this way.

According to Wired.com, Jurado is a writer, editor, and all-around champion of Spanish language science fiction. She is currently editor of the online magazine *Supersonic*, which features both English and Spanish fiction and non-fiction. She recently edited, with Leti-



cia Lara, the English edition of *Spanish Women of Wonder*, and her story “The Shepherd” was included in *The Best of Spanish Steampunk*. “Alphaland” appears in *Supersonic* #6. In September 2015, Cristina was guest editor for *Apex*'s special edition dedicated to international speculative fiction.

But let's get back to these creepy stories.

“He has tried, but without success, to push away the migraine that bites at his head, the ghost of a childhood bullet.” “Vanth” starts the collection off from a child's point of view, a boy forced to go hunting with his father and a group of ne'er do well men every Sunday. He resents them, knows he is there to act as an errand boy for his alcoholic father, whose hands shake so badly he cannot load his own gun. The subsequent accident leaves the boy with a permanent headache, yet he grows up to be a successful politician who uses anonymous sex for relief. Until he meets Vanth.

Jurado leads us on a circuitous route through this story, one cruel sentence after another: “This vagina is an abyss, a bottomless mine dug into her flesh.” Too late, the protagonist realizes that he has become the victim of a sort of cosmic succubus. “You open your mouth, I know not if it is to swallow me once and for all, or laugh at me, now that I am no more than a puppet, rotten on the inside.”

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Jurado starts the next story, “Inchworm,” with an authorial intrusion, telling us she was inspired to write this story by a David Bowie video for “Space Oddity” that she saw as a child. Bowie, in turn, was inspired by Danny Kaye singing the song, “Inchworm.” As in the first story, the protagonist is at the mercy of an enveloping womb, but this mechanical one intends to keep the astronaut, who has evaded a planned death, alive at all costs. He calls it Peggy, his mother’s name, because he cannot quite bear to call it “Mother” even as it anticipates his every need, his every want.

“Alice” is the protagonist of a story in which she has lost all memory of her prior life, apparently on purpose, and finds she must start anew in a strange city. Completely disoriented, she wakes to seek anything familiar. “...her left earlobe is greatly swollen, a clear indication of her high levels of happiness. The earlobe of the nurse is even more engorged....”

Everything about Alice may have been changed, apparently, even her gender. These transformations are described as “personal cleaning services,” and Alice is assured that they are quite common. Alice tugs at our heartstrings as she tries to regain her bearings, a stranger in a strange land without family or landmarks, until she begins behaving in ways that make us think she was shut out of her previous life for good reason.

The next two stories share the disturbing imagery of creatures being kept and raised as food by a malevolent being, and we cannot quite decide if we should identify with the carnivore or the mute creatures that must bow to its will. The first of these stories, “The Second Death of the Father,” pairs the nightmare images with increasing numbers of appearances by a father who was mostly absent during the protagonist’s childhood, but seems determined to insert himself into her life after his death. “Her father had been a very dark man, but now his double had the dull gold colour of wild beeswax.” Again, Jurado relentlessly draws us through these stories with sentences

seemingly chiseled out of glass, pleasingly evocative in their translated quality.

“The Shepherd” introduces a narrator with more free will, someone compelled to examine this beastly behavior and break the pattern, the way one hopes to break out of a nightmare and find the comforts of a safe and secure bedroom. Jurado plays with all sorts of stereotypes and imagery in this story, with vampires that are not quite vampires, creatures that fly and crawl and use magnetism in a very nineteenth-century way, yet seem to willingly conduct a futuristic, fascistic lifestyle. The scenes are familiar in an unfamiliar way, like stepping into an unused part of a relative’s house, only to find objects you have been told were destroyed long ago.

Finally, even the conceit of a safe bedroom is undermined in “Alphaland,” where the narrator, somewhat like the New Zealand author Janet Frame, really does spend much of her life in an insane asylum.

Ediciones Nevsky/Nevsky Books is based in Spain and the UK. It has published European speculative fiction in Spanish (Anna Starobinets, Nina Allan, Sofia Rhei, Karin Tidbeck) and is currently building a list in English translation of Spanish genre-bending writing. I look forward to more genre mash-ups that straddle the lines between languages and make more work available to all of us.

...Jurado relentlessly draws us through these stories with sentences seemingly chiseled out of glass, pleasingly evocative in their translated quality.

Kathleen Alcalá is the author of six books. She writes, teaches creative writing, and lives in the Northwest. More at www.kathleenalcala.com



The Dancing Clouds of Margaret Stermer-Cox

My artist story starts out as a familiar one. Like many of us, I have always wanted to be an artist. And drawing and painting were what I loved best.

However, the road to becoming an artist has been long. And that is because along the way, I took detours and alternate paths. In college, for example, I majored in zoology. Then, after my degree, I went off to join the Army. Twenty years later, I retired. And, finally, the time had come to focus on my dream of becoming an artist.

Let's go back to the beginning, though. What I think is special about my personal story is that I grew up in an artist's family. My father was a classically trained painter. Plus, Mom and Dad were interested in all the arts. So, from paintings to literature, dance to theater, opera to jazz, ours was a home with an art-friendly tradition. As such, my childhood environment helped shape my aesthetic sense. And, I bring this background to how I approach my work.

Fast forward, so to speak, to more recent history. In 2002, after retiring from the Army, I began working at my art. I am a "self-taught" artist. That is to say, I do not have formal training in an academy, atelier, or similar academic environment. Instead, I guide my own art education. Put another way, I learn from books and magazines, from classes given by local artists, and from practical experience.

The choice to work in watercolor started simply enough. When I retired, there was a watercolor class offered by the local community college. And, so, with nothing to lose and everything to gain, I enrolled and began to study. Fortunately, I liked working with watercolor and have used it ever since. It is a medium that continues to surprise and delight.

What you'll see, then, when looking at the work published here, is a sampling of my artistic journey.

At the start of this artistic path, my husband and I lived on the Washington coast. And, I wanted to create images that reflected our home environment, but were personal. That is, they expressed what I saw and felt about living by the sea.

I started playing with subjects like shells from the beach and the local lighthouse. I drew and painted from life, memory, and imagination. Soon enough, I had a series of lighthouse paintings, plus mermaids, seahorses, and sea dragons.

This same approach spilled over into our travels. Take, for example, when we spent time in Utah at some of the national parks. I wanted to create images that conveyed the stunning splendor of nature. And I needed the images to be a bit different and personal.

So, when we were at the Grand Staircase Escalante (Utah) and I saw weeds growing out of a man-made hole in a rock, I knew I had my subject! What struck me was the tenacity of the small plants as they reclaimed a rock that people had used then discarded. And, the weeds were beautiful. Thus, a series of leaf paintings was born. Some of the leaf paintings have a circle, a nod to the hole in the rock.

To summarize, I use life, memory, and imagination to create my artwork. Throughout my years of work, doing things my own personal way has been my hallmark. It is my desire to share with you my love of drawing and painting; color and light; and, perhaps, the humor and joy of life.

For more, please visit my portfolio at <https://dancingclouds.com/>.





Valley of the Hoodoos



Reclamation



Toward the Light



Sea Swirls



I Can't Hear You





Lighthouse, D9



She Reads Science Fiction



Pelican Quartet

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