

By the end of the 21st century, the Silver City, once known as Nottingham, has learned that change is the only constant. Whether its inhabitants were born there or arrived as refugees, all carry indelible memories of bewilderment and escape, of love, regret and transformation. Spinning through six decades of crisis and collapse, their stories ask: how do ordinary people fit into the great sweep of history?

This book accompanies the exhibition *Our Silver City, 2094*, presented at Nottingham Contemporary (November 2021–April 2022). Based on a methodology by Prem Krishnamurthy, the project was developed by the artists Céline Condorelli, Femke Herregraven and Grace Ndiritu.

Liz Jensen is a Copenhagen-based British novelist, whose acclaimed work spans science fiction, satire, historical fantasy and black comedy. She is a founder member of Extinction Rebellion's Writers Rebel.

Eline McGeorge, *Companion Species*, *Emergency Weave*, 2015, emergency blankets/space blankets, inkjet prints, canvas stretcher, 180 x 175 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate

OUR SILVER City 2094

Liz Jensen



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Nottingham Contemporary

Liz Jensen

We, the Predators

There are secret places on this planet where no familiar-looking creature has the nerve to set up home. Fathoms down in the murk of unmapped oceans, deeper than buried trauma and more tenacious than nightmare, the legions of the alien swarm and multiply.

Here, Siamese jellyfish sphincter their watery trajectories, trailing dual skeins of poison silk. Here thrive giant cannibal clams and rock anemones with throbbing, vulval throats. Here swim cartilaginous fish so pale and evilly-wrought that the smell of their flesh can drive a trawlerman to madness. Here lurks the striated gulper, the electric sponge, the spotted blatt-crab, the jag-finned ink-spurter. Here black smokers spew scalding gore from the pit of the Earth's oesophagus, their mineral-laden vortexes orbited by the monstrous and the meek: tube-worms, Vulcanoctopi and exo-stomached mega-mouths, bidding their

sweet time amid the narcotic snowfall of microscopic particles milled in gyres of bottle-caps, plastic bags, teething-rings, shards of chassis and gun-cartridges, bath-ducks and prosthetic limbs, tampon-applicators and vending-machine Valentines: the ghostly collateral of man's infinite ingenuity.

This is water's dust.

Follow it down. Down, down, and deeper down, as it floats silent past the burping pocks of the schist cliffs, past giant squid that thrash their suckered tentacles at stone-biters and blubber-heads, blind sting-rays and albino sharks, down, down, down — sparking a hundred million digestive experiments in lower life-forms on the way — to meet the ocean floor, where the finest of mud stretches as far as the mind's eye can see, quilting vast prairies of methane, each tiny, perfect molecule trapped in a filigreed cage of ice, awaiting the deep, irrevocable kiss of heat; an embrace that will tenderly unleash the clathrates' gaseous power, upon which — abracadabra! — the freed bubbles begin their frantic surge up, up, up,

toward the water's skin where, ignited by oxygen, they burst into prisms of fire and light whose heady exhalation radiates up to join the swirling mix in a wild dance of possibility.

Then the splitting of the white sheets, the calving of the iconic frozen ziggurats, the accelerating momentum, and — let's swoop down again — the roaring crash as frigid rubble thunders into the brine's embrace, disintegrating into a lugubrious sludge that melds with streaming currents: top-currents, undercurrents, deeper currents, layer upon layer expanding in noiseless might, washing across the vastness of geography, spilling up shorelines, choking flatlands, submerging islands and re-forming the fringes of continents in a flux of motion, force and redistribution.

The planet has undergone a thousand transformations, why not a thousand more? If ever there was a grand plan, then staying still was surely never part of it.

Brave are the land-dwellers and the air-breathers who live in this turbulent

age, helpless atoms in the great cascade of consequence. A million species are dying out, economies are crashing, weather patterns and ocean currents, tastes and moralities are transforming, but what's new? Homo Sapiens is still what it has been for a hundred thousand generations: the planet's most successful predatory mammal.

All is well.

Phase 1

Disasters that come out of the blue can cause feelings of vulnerability and lack of security; fears of future, unpredicted tragedies; and a sense of loss of control or the loss of the ability to protect yourself and your family. But disasters with warning are more complex, leading to guilt or self-blame for failure to heed the signs. The pre-disaster phase may be as short as hours, or even minutes, such as during a terrorist attack, or it may be as long as several months, such as during a hurricane season.

**— The U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services**

Testimony From the Nottingham Memory Club, 2033

Even before it broke, we'd been aware of a pressure build-up. When we scrolled through our feeds, we felt the vertigo of oncoming history. The Terrible Twenties were behind us. But something else, something more, was going to happen. It couldn't not.

We tried to ignore the feeling, but at night we were taken hostage by all the iterations of a worst-case future that our sleepless brains could conjure: a nuclear war between America and China, another killer heatwave, a new disease.

So when it happened, and was none of those things, we felt unmoored. What were we supposed to do with it, or with ourselves? We were ordinary people. We were selfhood consultants, pest controllers, influencers, blockchain developers, anxiety buddies, probation officers, portfolio curators, webinar facilitators, brewers of niche fermented drinks. We'd watched a thousand disaster movies, and streamed series about living in the jungle with or without celebrities. And YouTube was full of prepper vids: how to purify water in the wilderness, how to make your own gas mask, how to start a fire with a battery and gum-wrapper.

But this? We weren't equipped.

Testimony From Workers at the Hope Corporation, Inc., 2033

The day it first manifested was one of the few occasions when our division was meeting physically, so we had a bird's eye view of it from the fifteenth floor. Not that we could see it. Like the air that bore it, it was invisible to the naked eye. But we saw what it did.

Our meeting was in the Brainstorm Pod. The facilitator was mid-flow when one of the new recruits interrupted.

"Look at that!" she said, pointing.

Her name-tag said Amina, Immersive Innovations Creative. We'd stopped doing surnames: they were a waste of memory capacity. She was pointing outside. "Is it just me, or is something going on out there?"

To the rest of us, the view through the wall-length window was unchanged: cars, trams, pedestrians, the dark silhouette of the National Justice Museum, Nottingham Castle in the middle distance. Behind its squat towers glittered the river. In between, the clutter of that era: pop-up eateries, JCDecaux street furniture, phone masts, TO LET signs abseiling down scrapers.

"There!" said Amina. "Everywhere! Can't you see it? And over there, and here! The windows..." But she trailed off, suddenly doubting herself, and we all looked away, embarrassed on her behalf. It was an edgy time. All over the country, vampire corporations had taken over. A lot of us were having micro-breakdowns.

“Take five, folks?” suggested Zack, from Hearts and Minds. “Stretches. Re-caffeination. Breathwork.”

Over coffee, Mona from People said shyly that, actually, she thought she could see it too. It was subtle, she said. Like a dust-cloud quietly massing and settling on the buildings. Then Rick, Wealth Enhancement Services, claimed he could see it, and so could Deewa, Stakeholder Incentives. And then, one by one, the rest of us could too. It was a perception thing, like that optical illusion where you see either the side view of a wart-nosed witch or the three-quarter profile of an elegant young woman in a feathered hat.

Soon we were all busy zooming in and out, clicking, sharing, selfie-ing, and Googling pix of other weirded weather.

Energized by the diversion, we were all chatting animatedly when a flat, female electronic voice with an American accent **speaked out: *Attention. For security reasons all personnel are required to leave the building. The elevators are non-functional at this time. Please depart immediately by the stairs.***

Do not run. Repeat: do not run.

“Siri, what date was your lobotomy?” asked someone, and we laughed, still unalarmed: so far, the event was just a TikTok-able episode that checked the Fun Conundrum box and cut a moribund meeting short. On the stairs we were joined by staff from other floors, all sharing theories. The micro-break atmosphere intensified. By the time we reached **Ground, *Non-functional at this time* had become a little meme.**

But when we spilled into the street, and saw police cordons, and armoured vehicles arriving, bristling with troops in grey city camo gear, and guns, the vibe morphed.

We reached instinctively for our mobiles.

They wouldn’t be of use to us for much longer.

But that day, they felt like anchors.

Origin Stories, 2033

Some people said the new bacteria came from the universe. When they shared this, they dropped their voices to a reverent hush, as though confiding something mystical, deep and secret.

But it was hardly mystical. Or even deep. And there was no secret, because doesn't everything come from the universe? We all began as stardust. Minerals. Light. Water. A chemical reaction that led to galaxies and planets. Billions of years passed, and then here we were: modern people with 60,000 years of invention, art, war, disaster, exodus and prayer behind us.

The more earthbound preferred the thawing tundra theory. Huge craters had been appearing on the Yamal Peninsula in Siberia for at least two decades. Global heating had triggered vast pockets of methane, trapped for millennia in ice, to burst and greenhouse-

gas their way into the atmosphere. The tundra's skin was popping. By the late '20s, who hadn't seen images of the red-brown holes pocking the new breadbasket of Russia?

But the newest craters seethed with a new paleo bact, this theory went. The military moved in and locked the area down. Too late. It had mutated.

Others believed that insects spread it. It couldn't be stopped because what are insects but micro super-spreaders?

But what insects? There were hardly any left by then, apart from mosquitoes, spiders and the fruit-flies that came off our bananas. The beautiful heritage ones — butterflies, wasps, woodlice, beetles — were so rare that if you saw one, you made a wish.

It wasn't insects, said others. And it wasn't airborne — at least not to start with. It was manmade. An experiment gone wrong. Threshold, the corporation tasked with cleaning up the Great Pacific Gyre, had a thousand test-sites. One security breach was all it took.

Phase 2

No. Far worse, said the conspiracists.

It was planted by Doomers, who grew it in a lab. The pandemic was triggered by fanatics defending Gaia from infestation. Us being the infestation. Lock the fuckers up and throw away the key.

We'd all heard that version. But how could the Doomers spread the bact so fast, and so globally? Easier than you think, said the conspiracists. They planted it at airports. In the hand-gel. Boom.

No, said others. It's like any other act of God. It's the planet regulating itself. Eden will return, if we only let it. This heralds the Great Awakening. When we love the Earth again, she'll love us back.

We laughed, uneasily, at that one.

The impact phase entails a range of intense emotional reactions, which will depend on the nature of the catastrophe. Slow, low-threat disasters have psychological effects that are different from those of rapid, dangerous disasters. As a result, these reactions can range from shock to overt panic. Initial confusion and disbelief are typically followed by a focus on self-preservation and family protection. The impact phase is usually the shortest of the six phases of disaster.

**— The U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services**

Testimony From the Memory Club, Nottingham, 2033

Within a month, we were all armchair chemists and materials scientists. We'd heard of rubber decay, and the mould that affects cement. We knew that saltpetre devours stone, and that certain enzymes can digest non-organic matter. But this was different. The bact was both airborne and waterborne. It was hungry, and it was eating our modern, connected world alive. Slowly in some places. Fast in others.

Britain was an early hotspot. We speed-learned that plastics were a group of materials, either synthetic or naturally occurring, that can be moulded when soft. That plastics, unlike other small-molecule substances such as sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4), for which scientists can write specific formulas, have no specific formula. That plastics are made of polymeric macromolecules, so the repeating unit of the polymer is used as the formula. For instance, you have — $(-CH_2-CH(Cl)-)$ — for Polyvinyl chloride, also known as PVC. And so on. The list of plastic types was seemingly endless.

This meant each variant of plastic had its own weakness, and thanks to the exponential mutation process, every kind of plastic or plastified substance — including glass hybrids — would soon have its own bespoke killer. Modern windows, machine parts, clothing, containers, fibre-optics: the very infrastructure of the man-made world was under threat. Who knew that there was barely anything manufactured in this century that wasn't plastic-compromised or, in the new terminology, plastic-adjacent? It affected the water

supply. The grid. The internet. Who could have imagined the world wide web could ever fail?

But fail it did. In a matter of weeks, the bact was everywhere. Not a single country was left unmarked. All that held our lives together — the connective tissue of civilization itself — was collapsing. Nobody said this aloud at the time but we can say it here, in this safe space. There was beauty in that transformation. First came the magical frosting the microbe engendered in its first phase, evoking winters when every blade of grass was felted in dazzle and every frozen puddle sketched in white.

This was followed by the occlusion, disintegration and slow evaporation of objects that had seemed eternal. When we saw our windows, our screens, our Tupperware and vacuum cleaners turn ghostly and melt to dust, we remembered once being told that plastic couldn't be broken down: that every Lego brick would last millennia. But our son's ruined rocket-ship on the living room floor told another story, a story that made us ask ourselves: who knows

anything about anything any more? A man called Rod arrived at the Nottingham Crisis Centre. You could tell he'd endured something terrible. His eyes flickered like he was living a nightmare on a loop.

Rod had worked on a dairy farm at the edge of Sherwood. He asked us to picture a hundred thousand Friesian cows bellowing in agony. They were in their stalls, all plugged in for the second milking, but the suckers weren't sucking, and their udders were full. Rod and the farm manager started making calls, but by the time the extra workers had arrived and watched the demo about how to milk by hand, the creatures were screaming.

You can work a lifetime in the dairy industry and never hear that sound, said Rod. The screams — mournful and unearthly — carried across the fields, as far as the Tesco distribution centre, the shooting range and the school.

The head teacher, who was also at the Crisis Centre, said that as soon as she heard it, she called Emergency Services.

But she got the same message we all did, wherever we were and whatever the destruction unfolding before our eyes. Due to the high volume of emergencies at that time, despite our call mattering to them, all responder units were at full capacity. Please hang up and call back later.

By the next morning, the message had changed. There was a national crisis. We must stay at home and take sensible precautions to ensure our personal safety.

A week later, the message changed again. We must dress in protective clothing, pack a single item of hand-baggage, report to our local muster station, and await instructions.

Monsters used to be huge: snarling behemoths dripping blood from jagged teeth, or slouching aliens with tentacles and mouths that drooled slimy gunk. But what was a bact? Nothing, individually. But, en masse, a force. Our amygdalas got to work. Flooded with stress hormones, our seat-of-the-pants guesses became instant certainties. The thing was

on our clothes. In our digestive systems. In the very atmosphere we breathed. When word spread that it bred in our hair follicles, we didn't stop to question it. There was a rush on razors. Within hours, we'd shaved our scalps.

Like the zoonotic bacts, the Plastic Plague mutated. But it was only when it moved to oil that we really began to get the measure of it, and what it could go on to do. Something was running its course. We had an inkling of how that went. But it turned out the 2020s had just been the appetizer. The *amuse-geule*, as they said in French restaurants, when they existed.

In those weeks, while there was still news and screens to watch it on, we saw the network of lines that criss-crossed the globe snipped as conclusively as the umbilical cords that once tied us to our mothers. Ships went missing. There were daily pile-ups on the motorways. Planes dropped from the sky.

It was a black swan event, some said. A curveball. There was no preparing for it. But was that really true? We started wondering how life might be if we'd

Phase 3

lived more simply and had less to lose. In our last tweet, we expressed the wish that we belonged to a shy tribe deep in one of the last unthreatened jungles. In our farewell Facebook post, we wondered whether Mongolian nomads had even noticed there was a problem. On Instagram, we posted images of subsistence farmers in remote African villages and yogis on mountaintops with the caption, *Swap places, man?*

Looking back, it's clear we had a problem with perspective. It was too big and dangerous to take in. Metaphorically speaking, it was like watching an eclipse. You had to cut a small hole in a piece of card in order to see it without going blind. Also metaphorically speaking, we didn't have that piece of card.

It was a time of snap decisions. People were moving to other parts of the city, or going in search of someone or something they had lost. Or thought they had. You don't know what you've got till it's gone.

We were all a little crazy.

The heroic phase is characterized by a high level of activity with a low level of productivity. During this phase, there is a sense of altruism, and many community members exhibit adrenaline-induced rescue behaviour. As a result, risk assessment may be impaired. The heroic phase often passes quickly into phase 4.

**— The U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services**

Anonymous Testimony, Nottingham Memory Club, 2033

The military was everywhere: if you signed up as a volunteer evacuation officer you got a uniform and were promised bonus points. Soon, many of us were directing people towards the giant textile screens that appeared on the sides of container trucks on street corners, where a film about our future was running on a loop.

In the film about our future, we saw new versions of ourselves.

In the film about our future, we were the new saviours of the land.

In the film about our future we were muscled and bare-chested and felling a gigantic tree. We were wielding a scythe. We were sniffing tomatoes on the vine. We were on a pier, scraping the scales off a fish with a flashing knife. We were shelling beans while our children, laughing in the trees, tossed apples into wicker trugs. On gigantic, ordered farms we hand-milked a thousand grateful cows.

And from the loudspeakers came more soaring chords, and as the film about our future reached its climax, it asked us this: WILL YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE? Yes, we thought. We could and we would.

And our trepidation turned to hope.

We dressed in our best clothes. We dressed in our worst clothes. We dressed in five layers to save suitcase space and by the time we reached the evac bus we were ready to faint. We packed the cotton dress from Greece with spaghetti straps but forgot the bra that went with it. We packed that iffy jacket from Republic of the Wind. We packed the

vintage Nikes we ran the 2028 marathon in, at a wet-bulb of 32°C. We packed the million stupid little things we thought we'd find a use for: our poker set, our boxing gloves, our unread copy of *War and Peace*, a wisteria pod.

We left in hope. We left having posted warning signs to the looters we imagined plundering our stuff. We left in chaos on an empty stomach with the kids shrieking and a grandmother who couldn't find her insulin. We left newly single and elated — *anything can happen now* — after a frank discussion with our spouse. We left believing we were going to the seaside to hunt for mini-beasts in rockpools and eat ice cream. We left in despair. We left after doing a terrible thing to our beloved Jack Russell: *I held her head down until the bubbles stopped*. We left our rented shithole having written **CAPITALIST PARASITE in lipstick on the bathroom wall. We left without the push-chair and swaddled him instead — *let's pray he stays asleep* — but colic knows no rules.**

Volunteers in fluoro vests and military guys in camo gear bundled our cases

and rucksacks into the coach, yelling *one item of luggage per person, strictly one item guys*, and when it was time to go, they banged its flank as if slapping a horse into a canter. Through the jagged window-holes of other coaches, faces as rigid as our own stared back at us. It was only as our vehicles rolled through the swept arteries of a city shrieking with sirens that the definitiveness of the rupture hit us.

As we headed for the mega-farms, we thought about the bravery of those who'd chosen to remain.

But no, man, the hold-outs told us years later when we met on sun-farms, in communes, on harvest-ships, in cell-ag factories, on remote islands, in work-gangs, on canal-boats, in airships, on the road, or here in Nottingham. Look at all you endured after you left. If anyone had courage, it was you.

They told us how scared they'd been in the suddenly emptied city. How they kept doubting their decision. As the last barbecue embers died that night, and the skyline pulsed the faint and eerie green

that was the hallmark of those dying days of plastic, they became by turns melancholy, raucous and philosophical. In the deepening night, beneath the unexpected velvet blackness of the sky, their hearts faltered as they wondered: what is hope if not a parasite that feasts upon the spirit of its host?

But then a titanic firework erupted, jigsawing the Nottingham cityscape with light, and the mood shifted again. Then up whooshed another and another, until the sky crackled with a hundred bursts of colour, from Radford Park to Mapperley, from Wollaton to Bulwell, Lenton to Sneinton. Amid the *rat-rat-tat* of their explosions, the hold-outs roamed like free electrons, circling one another and inhaling the sulphur smell that would become conjoined, in their memory, with the sense of emergent, unprecedented liberties, theirs for the taking.

And when the last, lavish chrysanthemums blossomed above them and finally died away, some saw in their ghostly after-tracings a huge middle finger pointing heavenward, saying

Fuck you to all that had come before.

And they thought:

**We are nothing. We are anything.
We are us. We are you.
We are born. We are free.**

The Memory Club, 2033

Nottingham Museum was occupied by hold-outs who declined the government's invitation to leave the city. It is here that the trauma support group, the Memory Club, was formed.

The Memory Club helped us cope. We met in a group of 50–100 adults, which then broke into satellite groups according to whatever topics we most urgently wanted to discuss: Living with Grief, Embracing Change, Our Place in Deep Time, Telling the Kids, etc. We were courteous and gracious to one another. Micro-aggressivity and flirting were discouraged. We designed a well-being checklist, to identify those most in need of counselling. Those of us who had been in 12-step programmes brought our hard-won experience to the room. We reminisced and planned and mourned and philosophised and let off steam.

And we laughed. We remember it as a generous, safe space. A forum for healing.

We drew up the following protocol:

Everyone is welcome and nobody will be asked to leave unless under the influence of drugs, religious programming or alcohol.

Meetings will take place at sundown next to the buffalo skeleton in the Great Hall daily, or as emergency dictates.

There is no one true story. In giving our accounts to the Memory Club, we will convey the facts as they appeared to us, and tell the truth insofar as we understand the word "truth".

In the interests of courtesy, we will take all the personal accounts we hear at face value, no matter how outlandish we may privately deem them.

We will maintain our spirits. Nostalgia and regret are false friends. While mourning what we lost, we will strive to cherish what we found.

But not everyone appreciated the services we offered. A month after

the evacuation, a teen called Karima arrived in a torn school uniform with a rucksack full of Coke cans and energy bars, clutching her worthless mobile like a talisman. Her bald, veined head was criss-crossed with scars. She was looking for her family. She'd been in London when it happened, on a school trip. By the time she made it back to Nottingham, they'd gone.

She said her class had been eating their sandwiches in sight of the Shard, and she saw the building "pop" with her own eyes. The rest of us had seen the same thing on television, before television and the rest of the modern world — transport, communications, the net, the grid, the water supply, the pharmaceutical industry — were blown away as effectively as dust. But Karima was actually there. It gave her a certain kudos. She was a striking young person: tiny, but full of potential power, like those miniature warheads that fit inside a suitcase. What we remember most about her was her outspokenness, and the way she curled her lip and rolled her eyes whenever an adult spoke. Soon the other teens were in her thrall.

She joined a few Memory Club sessions, but they seemed not to satisfy her needs. Within days, she had rallied other teens, set up a separate dorm in the Animal Heritage Section and organised a Youth Group.

It soon emerged that the Youth Group thought the Memory Club sucked. They accused us older hold-outs of "wallowing in it", of "not understanding that the whole Universe has changed, and we're the ones who'll have to deal with it." When we put it to them, gently, that the plastic plague was hardly our fault, they said that we were the generation that had put humans in misalignment with the natural world, so yes, it fucking was. Inevitably, that upset us.

We considered asking Karima to go, but soon after this distressing confrontation she learned that her family were at Victory Megafarm, and got ready to leave. Fifteen of the other displaced teens decided to go with her. They buried their devices in a communal grave and held a sombre farewell ceremony involving incense and alcohol. The next day they were gone. Some of us

**were glad to see the back of them.
All the more so when we noticed that
the stuffed shark in the Animal Heritage
Section had been vandalized.**

**All its teeth were missing. Who would
do a thing like that?**

Phase 4

Phase Four, the honeymoon phase, is characterized by a dramatic shift in emotion. During this period, disaster assistance is readily available. Community bonding occurs. Optimism exists that everything will return to normal quickly. As a result, numerous opportunities are available for providers and organizations to establish and build rapport with affected people and groups, and for them to build relationships with stakeholders.

**— The U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services**

The Threshold Pledge, 2040

We'd like to give you two precious words.

We deliver.

Trust isn't a commodity you can buy. You have to earn it. At Threshold we don't talk about stakeholders or clients. We talk about global citizens. We talk about family.

At Threshold, we believe in social justice, climate justice, and the freedom of every human soul on this planet to strive for a better life. We don't make empty promises, because we know a promise means everything – until it's broken. So when we make a promise, we make a second promise: to keep it.

You won't hear many multinationals say what

we're saying – though we're happy to see they're starting to. Call it a positive feedback loop. What we say is this: At Threshold, trust is primary and profit is secondary.

So when we reflect on the exciting scale of our contribution to the world economy in this time of upheaval, we feel humbled. What we've shown is that you can change the paradigm and flourish financially as well as spiritually. We're proud to have been part of that momentous shift in consciousness.

We're not going to let this day pass without making a public pledge to the world's citizens. Or rather, to renew one. In the coming decade, we plan to break new records in all our spheres of operation. In making that happen, we promise that Threshold will build on the trust you've given us, in order to deliver a safe, secure and meaningful world for all.

We're proud to serve you.

Thank you. And may the spirit of Gaia bless all our lives.

Phase 5

The disillusionment phase is a stark contrast to the honeymoon phase.

During the disillusionment phase, communities and individuals realize the limits of disaster assistance. As optimism turns to discouragement and stress continues to take a toll, negative reactions, such as physical exhaustion or substance use, may begin to surface.

The increasing gap between need and assistance leads to feelings of abandonment.

The disillusionment phase can last months and even years. It is often extended by one or more trigger events, usually including the anniversary of the disaster.

**— The U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services**

Gwen, 2094

Once upon a time I studied anthropology.

When the cities emptied, I began to document the stories of the uprooted and displaced. This was easy. I was one of them.

When the plague forced the closure of entire cities, we went wherever the military regime and its contractors — Threshold, or GlobalOptic, or Fractal Corp — sent us. For me, that meant two years harvesting seaweed on an offshore refugee centre, in a city of shipping-container blocks. Then a year on a mega-farm in Ipswich, processing soy and flax and spot-checking animal protein in the cell pods. When the floods forced us out, I moved to a matriarch commune in Coventry for three years. I was lucky to be accepted. Then, when it was attacked by Fractal gangmasters, I was lucky again. Only three of us escaped.

For years, I kept notes. There will never be a record that tells everything. But 60 years on, I have a thousand interviews, observations and fragments. One day, someone might read them and get an idea of how history hurtled so fast we couldn't keep up with it. How we stopped making predictions because they were worthless. How we didn't know what was fact and what was rumour. How flux became the only constant. How we learned to manage our expectations. Or dispense with them.

Wherever I stopped, I asked people questions. I wanted to be someone they could tell their story to, anonymously or not, and trust me to carry their words with me to another place. My thought was that one day their stories of thriving, of catastrophe, of uprooting, and of sudden ecstasy would one day all live free again, under another sky.

A Brief History, 2033—70

The history books charting the era between 2033 and the late 2060s contradict one another. But most agree that the origins of the Earth Revolution of the 2040s and '50s lay in the pandemics, failed climate summits and resource wars of the 2020s and '30s. The plastic pandemic, which morphed into the oil pandemic, had put an end to industrial expansion and forced degrowth. But it could not stop the damage that was already baked in. In the late 2030s, ecocide and eco-genocide were globally acknowledged as crimes; some of the chief criminals were tried and jailed. But it was too little, too late. By the '40s, the effects of the Amazon's collapse as a carbon sink, thawing permafrost and the melting of the Greenland ice shelf had changed the face of the planet in the way science had predicted.

By this time, the Organic Web, referred to by many as the AlgaSphere, had emerged. And carbon was being drawn from the atmosphere by systems first developed in Iceland in the '20s. In 2042, in the wake of multiple zoonotic pandemics originating from factory farms, mammalian and bird protein was banned on mainland Britannia. Illegal meat production and smuggling was rife, but cloned meat was cheaper. Soon it was the main protein source and, by mid-century, 85% of the population consumed cell-ag products four times a week. Micro-labs were widespread, and most kitchens had their own cell-bank.

All continents signed the Earth Treaty and adopted the Earth Constitution in 2044. Earthism was similar in scale and impact to the Industrial Revolution or humankind's long-ago switch from nomadism to farming. It was administered by an algorithmic system known as the Project, but, controversially, the Project's survival blueprints were interpreted and applied differently from Sector to Sector.

Meanwhile, around the world, billions of refugees were still fleeing their ancestral lands to escape lethal floods and heatwaves. Some settled in the few countries that remained open to them. But most Sectors had closed their borders or imposed quotas and requirements so strict it was almost impossible to gain entry. Some smuggled their way in by sea or in airships and lived nomadically, as illegals. Most ended up in vast offshore refugee camps administered by the UN. Millions died in heatwaves and mega-droughts in the Indian subcontinent, across Africa and the Middle East. Some refugees became sea-gypsies, living on water-communities: vast, self-sufficient repurposed cruise ships or skeins of rafts.

Throughout the 2050s, the Gulf Stream had begun to slow, making winter – now known as the Flood Season – as harsh as the time referred to as the Little Ice Age centuries before. Oceanographers could no longer rely on the Stream's ancient patterns, nor could they predict where it was going. The currents, always notoriously hard to map, became more so when billions of

tonnes of melted icecap entered the equation.

The main cultural shift during the 2050s was the decline in organized religion in most Sectors. In Britannia, the old doctrines were no longer seen as applicable in a world so different from the patriarchal era in which the holy books were written. But people still yearned for more than what the eye could see, and what science could prove. The early 2050s saw increased interest in the entity which the pioneers of Earthism referred to as the Oversoul. A conception of the American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson two centuries previously, the Oversoul had expanded beyond anthropocentrism to assimilate animism and align more with the word “universe”. In many Sectors it was taken to mean a collective consciousness that encompassed the animal, the vegetable and the mineral on Earth. Many saw it extending to galaxies beyond our own.

By the end of the 2050s, the Oversoul had effectively replaced the old gods in many Sectors. It was a grassroots phenomenon, spreading the way

memes, jokes and conspiracy theories had before the fall of the First Web. It had the advantage of having no written doctrine, and — although there were shamans and self-styled teachers and priests who held ceremonies — the interpretation of the Oversoul was considered a private matter.

Angelo, 2081

Angelo is the name I use now. It feels less region-specific than my birth-name, Dimitri. Not that it matters to anyone where you come from anymore. Younger generations are less interested in cultural roots, and why should they be, when the wider world is such a blank? But when Elders in the Silver City ask me mine, I say “Mediterranean”. That seems to satisfy them: they can categorize me as a desert refugee, and when the sky glows red from Saharan dust, they can imagine me being grateful, homesick. There are many like me, who have reinvented themselves. Or been forced to.

In my new life, I draw maps. I offer my services to all who need it, in exchange for the usual things: food, sexual intimacy, household goods, a lift on a boat, a how-to lesson, the loan of a bicycle, medicine, repair-work, a piece of art. The beauty of my work is that maps always need updating. Cartography

pleases me. I have always had an eye. Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote: “Everybody, soon or late, sits down to a banquet of consequences.” In 2051, I went to London with my camera to record a banquet.

I travelled by airship. It was a dangerous journey but I took the risk, knowing I might never leave. I arrived in the city with a stash of anti-infectives, churning with apprehension and excitement. I had to sign the Patriot Pledge on entry. My boss, Ashok, who was based on a repurposed cruise ship in the Indian Ocean, paid for my paperwork and Earthpass. What kept me going during those months of photographing flooded London was the same thing as always. Curiosity.

Like most people I’d seen images of the former metropolis’s flooded heart, its main arteries transformed into a system of rivers and canals; the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral; the defiant spire of Big Ben; the pocked roof of the O2 arena; the skeletal remains of Wembley Stadium. In March, the deluges of the Wet Season turned more low-lying

districts into muddy lakes, reworking the cityscape into a glistening panorama, more liquid than solid. It was beautiful from a distance. Close up, there was beauty too, but of a hideous kind. An invasive lichen had taken over. It fed on cement, turning it a delicate grey-green that spread outward in frilled ridges, forming concentric circles like giant polka dots. The images I took of the spotted buildings were striking but I stopped sending them to Ashok after he told me: "New Nature's not selling right now, man. Give us poignancy, give us beauty, give us hope."

By April, most city-dwellers had left in the new wave of mass evacuations but, typically enough (and here I have my criticisms), the Earth Project, with its militantly laissez-faire attitude to certain aspects of personal choice, didn't insist. Anyone could stay who wanted to.

Enough outlying districts remained above water-level to accommodate any risk-takers who decided to stay — though hunger and waterpox were becoming rife. By the time I arrived, London was largely submerged beneath what was

now partly seawater from the estuary. The higher scrapers of the City remained visible above the waters, streaked with mineral deposits and awash with filth and flotsam.

Money was no object to Ashok. The agency paid for my small apartment near Hampstead Heath. Within a month I felt like a native.

I worked hard. Most days I'd hire a water taxi to roam the territory, from the outer reaches of the Thames swamps to the miasmatic wastelands of the East End, in search of images: crisis and refugee centres, misty panoramas, miserable citizens queuing for supplies.

"This is history, man," Ashok reminded me in one of his more florid pronouncements, when he ghosted in. At 70, he was sounding more and more like an elder statesman from some bygone era. Being a hologram suited him: even in a tiny version, he oozed charisma. "Do these events justice, Dimitri, and this assignment will be the making of you, my friend. One iconic image. That's all it takes. Go find it."

Keen to justify his faith in my talent, I tried to capture the drowning city as I saw it. I admired the inhabitants' stoicism. Their ability to re-construct their waterlogged lives and simply get on with the business of survival. I took images of Londoners wrapped in ingenious forms of waterproofing, huddled on makeshift rafts and dinghies, queuing at food-banks, trading in markets, tending meagre crops on balconies, or staring out from the empty windows of wind-blown scrapers, lost in thought. As waterpox hit epidemic proportions, you learned to steer clear of anyone who coughed or showed signs of feverishness.

On the AlgaSphere there was talk of a "new callousness" at large in the drowning cities: Miami, Guangzhou, New York, Mumbai, Kolkata, Shanghai, Amsterdam and the rest. For proof, the social commentators pointed to the way the victims of waterpox were shunned. How orphaned children were left to fend for themselves. Some put it down to the trauma of living with the threat of disease and drowning. Life, they argued, was simply becoming cheap: you see it

the world over, in every Sector under the sun. But from where I was standing, they missed the point.

Certainly, evidence of mortality on such a scale caused a subtle shift in one's attitude. But it wasn't callousness. It was more a kind of dislocation, a distancing from reality, of the same kind you once saw in the young rich, immersed in their headsets, living alternative lives in other, better worlds. In fact, I saw it as a benign phenomenon: the mind's way of coping with the unbearable. I noticed it in myself. I cared about people less, but my aesthetic appreciation of them was becoming keener. And my head was cooler. Could this be an evolutionary development?

As I crisscrossed the city by water taxi, recording drowning vistas and bedraggled, starving families, I kept my eye out for the image that might encapsulate the essence of the catastrophe. But it eluded me. In my spare hours, I'd go for long walks on the heath which had so far been spared the flood. I often visited Kenwood House, where I'd struck up a tentative

acquaintance with the caretaker, Eben, a skilled craftsman who showed the typical restraint of the Sector. One day I found him studying some diagrams from the Sphere.

"I'm building my own boat," he said. "So when the time comes, I'll be ready."

He showed me where he'd hidden it, deep in a cluster of kudzu opposite the Dutch refugee camp near the rim of the Heath. I was impressed: a sturdy skeleton of pinewood covered with the bamboo slats used for roof cover in the poorer Sectors. Eben had camouflaged it cleverly with branches. While he was telling me about the varnish he planned to use, I became aware of a young boy standing on the balcony of a tower block on the Dutch camp, watching us and waving. The sun shone on his blond mop of hair. He looked to be about ten.

"Out of the frying pan into the fire, those poor Hollanders," said Eben. "So many little ones out there alone. It breaks your heart."

His sentimentality surprised me:

I'd taken him for a detached observer like myself. We watched the child for a moment, his blondness a little faraway beacon. Then Eben coughed. **"Just a touch of fever," he said, as I drew back. "Nothing to worry about." There was, though, and we both knew it.**

I left quickly after that.

The following week, two catastrophes happened in synch: the water level rose again — sharply — and a satellite came down, knocking out the Sphere. My link to Base was cut — for now, at least. I missed Ashok. His worldly sense of ease, his faith in what he called the **"glorious mission"** of the Project. He was cynical, but I think he really believed in it: his generation tended to suffer from the grandiose delusion that were it not for the radical choices and sacrifices they made when they were young, humankind would be even further down the plughole.

London was now more unsafe than ever: waterpox had taken hold in most districts and was said to be mutating. But then again, many things were **"said**

to be" this or that. What information could be trusted? Nobody knew. Rumours, conspiracy theories, and strange sects spawned like fungus.

Then, just as you began to see bodies floating openly on the waters, came the inevitable announcement, loudspeaked from micro-helicopters that buzzed like mosquito swarms across the city: London was now a classified quarantine zone. Leaving it without a permit would constitute a serious crime.

My heart, that idiotic muscle, clenched into a fist. I had never been so scared. The Project — the world's great number-cruncher — had done its sums. We were officially being abandoned to the waters, and the pox.

There was no civil disobedience, no rioting. What would have been the point? That kind of behaviour belonged to another age. People were too exhausted to put up a fight. Wherever you looked you saw fatigue, listlessness and the evidence of chronic damp: dim eyes, fungal skin eruptions. "Sink or swim," you heard people muttering as

they scanned the waterlogged horizon. It had become a bitter mantra of the times.

It was then I decided I must escape the drowning city — or perish. The quarantine zone was enforced, so there was a risk of being caught — but I doubted the enforcers would be shooting to kill at this stage. And even if they were, it was worth the risk. I packed my supplies.

On my way to the heath, everyone I saw was masked. Some carried sticks.

When I reached Kenwood House, I put my ear to Eben's side-door and listened. His coughing was pitiful: a hoarse, racking sound. Waterpox is a horrible illness and I felt sorry that Eben was dying. But I felt relief, too: it eliminated the need for any violence, and made my mission easier.

I headed for his hidden boat. As I skirted the wide lagoon where the cemetery used to be, something caught my eye in the distant flats: a movement and a flash of silver. It was the little Dutch boy, his pale hair catching the light like a little

button mushroom. He must have spotted me too, because he waved — a wide, almost cartoon gesture. I waved back.

The morning sun was just a weak blob of light as I hauled Eben's boat out from its hiding place. I'd worked out my best option: to circle the Dutch refugee settlement before heading south, where the zone controls were at their weakest. I'd charted the route. Within a few hours, I anticipated, I'd spot the flag-mast of the Croydon IKEA complex, the gateway to drier land and freedom. The sun was up now, bathing everything in a coral haze. The floating hyacinth, suddenly in blossom, made it seem like mauve snowflakes had fallen overnight and settled on the water. Struck by their beauty, I took some shots. As I dipped my oars gently in and out of the swirling brown water, I smiled at the thought of my next contact with old Ashok.

"Still alive, bud?" He'd say. "You're indestructible, man. You should sell your cells to science. They should clone your genes for the Human Mission."

I was nearing the camp when I heard a

splash so faint, I wouldn't have noticed and turned to look, had it not sent a flurry of parakeets spiralling up from the treetops. "Help!" a little voice called out. As I rowed closer, I saw it was the Dutch boy.

"Take me with you," he sputtered across the water. "Let me in your boat!" He must have spotted me and jumped into the water, hoping to be saved. A desperate young lad!

He continued to flail about, gulping and splashing, his little limbs unruly and chaotic. Could he even swim? I began to think not. His head ducked, then popped up again like a cork, the blond hair flattened against his scalp. He spat water, floundering. "Please help me!" In his accent, I detected a Disney Channel twang.

I watched with interest. Whatever traumas he'd lived through, his survival instinct was undamaged. I wondered if he'd make it as far as my boat. I knew that if he did, I wouldn't prevent him from struggling on board. Indeed, I saw how I might even stop rowing and give

him a helping hand, so impressive was his fighting spirit: like a wild animal on an ancient nature documentary. He had stopped calling out by now, probably not wanting to waste his precious energy and breath. His little face, sprinkled with freckles, was pale with strain. A few words of encouragement, it struck me, would surely not go amiss. I really was rooting for him.

“Sink or swim!” I urged him.

I had a feeling he would do neither in a half-hearted way; that if he swam he would do it well, and that if he sank he would do it with grace. But as I pondered the aesthetics of the scene — the clean expanse of morning water, tinged with pink from the reflected sky, the paleness of the little face sliding downwards beneath the water’s skin — something stirred in me and my heart tilted.

Wasn’t this the image Ashok had been urging me to deliver him? The perfect piece of human tragedy that was also perfect art? The shot I had dreamed of? I smiled. When you owe something to

yourself, you don’t hesitate.

Now, whenever I look at the image I still carry in my pocket — the image that became known to billions as *Little Boy Lost* — I do battle with an emotion I struggle to name. But if I had to, I’d identify anger and betrayal. What happened to me was unjust. And it damaged not just my own reputation but the reputation of photography itself. Why did people go on to attack me on the AlgaSphere even though it was their passion for *Little Boy Lost* that had made me famous in the first place?

The snuff shot of the century, they began to call it.

Why were they so ready to apply the adjective “heartless” before my name, and talk about my “ruthlessness and inhumanity”? Only old Ashok, who had made a fortune from the image, stood by me in public. The “iconic image of an era” thing. But in private, he agreed I would do best to change my name and lie low.

How easy it is to be an armchair moralist

if one has never spent time seeing life as it is really lived. How simple, to shoot the messenger! But convictions, as we all know, are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.

It's an undisputed fact that the floods and the accompanying plagues of that micro-era affected its survivors in an unprecedented way. But when they say that the disasters turned us into monsters, they malign us. For what it's worth, my opinion is this: we were as human and as flawed as we had always been.

When I had finished telling Gwen my story, I pulled out the photo. She looked at it and flinched.

"So it was you who took it," she said. "I always wondered what happened to that man."

"Well now you know."

There was a long, long silence. I was riled, but I still wanted her approval. "Do you think less of me?" I asked, finally. "Because of one photograph?"

She looked at me. "I'm an anthropologist," she said. "It's not my role to judge."

Cherifa and Nadech, 2066

Oh, the grief of losing what she's only just begun to love: the tight ball that sat inside her, hard as a fist. Youssef loved stroking her belly, and calling their baby by the name it would have: Djim for a boy, Djimadjim for a girl. No Djim now. No Djimadjim.

After the nurse has bagged up the clot and left, a fever rampages through her for two days. The village is a day's truck-drive from Ndjamena, but she can't call Youssef to tell him she's lost the baby because the regional network shut down the moment the village announced a sudden quarantine. She came for a two-day visit, to inspect the school. Now she's stuck.

How often has she heard that something can't be explained for "security

reasons"? What are those reasons? Insurgency, usually. There have been rumours of anti-Project rebels planning a takeover. But they can hardly be blamed for this — or can they, the same way eco-terrorists were held responsible for the Plague? All Cherifa knows from the nurse is that the sickness, T-215, is highly transmissible.

"Do I have it? Is that why I lost the baby?" she'd asked. But the nurse claimed not to know. "The authorities are investigating," was all she'd say.

It's late morning now. By the time the nurse comes back to check on her and deliver food, Cherifa is churning with misery, rage and regret. She should never have come to this place.

"Take one a day," says the nurse, handing her a small medicine packet. Cherifa inspects it. Antibiotics are useless. And these are a decade old. An insult.

"A placebo? No thanks."

The nurse puts a hand on her arm, and

lowers her voice. "Look, I can tell you this much. You are not the only one here who has lost a baby."

A cold ribbon runs down Cherifa's spine. "What are the other symptoms?"

"None, yet. Sudden miscarriage is the only one so far. But thanks to the quarantine, it will not spread."

"How many other women have miscarried in this village?" The nurse looks away.

"How many?"

"Every single woman who was pregnant. There are eight of you. One was seven months gone. Right now she is fighting for her life."

This takes a moment to sink in.

"What must I do?" Cherifa asks. She knows it's a stupid question and the nurse knows it too, because she gives her the look that village people give city people. There's contempt in it.

"Mr Koussi tells me you came here to inspect the school. You trained as a teacher?"

"Yes."

"So Mr Koussi wants you to teach until the quarantine is lifted. The school needs staff." Koussi, the headmaster. Also the mayor. Also the man they call the King. Cherifa disliked him on sight. The poor schooling here is his doing. It's all there, in her report. He won't help her.

"How — I can't just —"

"I must go," says the nurse. "Yours is not the worst case." Without glancing back, she steps out into the fierce sun-fry and is gone.

Hours later, Cherifa eats plantain and drinks some soy milk, then emerges blinking into the ebb of the day. The sky is mottled: mackerel, orange, violet. The sun is sinking, lengthening the shadows of the goats that nuzzle for scraps of corn while the village kids scuffle around a football. The work-day is starting. Too hot for anyone to work in daytime

anymore. A man with a stepladder lifts a fuel cell out of the innards of a lorry as gently as if it were a sleeping child.

Slowly, she walks to the corner of the furthest maize field to try for a connection. She has seen others go there with their comms. But still no bars. It's hopeless. Youssef is used to network failures — who isn't? — but he'll be worried. With every hour that passes, the more she dreads breaking the news to him.

There are 58 kids in the geography class, ranging in age from eight to 15. She inflates the calf-skin globe with its brightly-coloured Regions and Sub-Regions, Sectors and Sub-Sectors. She lets the kids toss it about the room to one another for a while.

"Now I'm going to throw it, and whoever catches it has to answer a question."

She flings the ball out, and a hundred hands reach to grab it. A tall girl clutches it. "OK, Hortense, show me our Region."

The child points to the swathe of light blue bisected by the Equator. "Good, and our Sector?" She points to a division inland. "Sub-Sector?" Hortense hesitates. "Look for the lake." Finding it, the girl traces a line north-east and points to a squarish block of brown. The water vanished years ago. When Youssef was a biology student, he was part of the team providing the agricultural data that helped calibrate the region's administrative divisions. A decade ago now, but it feels like yesterday. They'd welcomed the changes. Applauded the Project's goal of saving mankind from itself, welcomed the naming and shaming of those who brought the planet to its knees. She remembers the hushed avowals of humbleness and the mea culpas of those once-powerful men. A dizzying time. It feels like a hallucination now, a mass hysterical dream.

Cherifa tells the children: "When I was growing up the place we live was not called Sector 6 Sub-Sector 27, but something else. Before the Project took over, it was administered by people. Individuals working together in something called a government."

“The region was called Sub-Saharan Africa and it contained many sectors called countries. This area was in a country called — does anyone know?”

Nadech — the little alga-plague orphan who always shadows her on playground duty but rarely speaks — puts up her hand. “Chad.” She looks both defiant and proud.

“Correct, Nadech. Excellent. Our sector was called Chad.”

Cherifa spreads out one of the old maps she found in a cupboard marked Resources and pins it to the wall. She points to the old world’s frontiers, its subtly different configurations of land and sea: the places that once had names like Sudan, Niger, Mali, Gambia, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, DRC, Côte d’Ivoire, Congo, Benin, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau. She tries to convey how all the shorelines and borders that once existed have changed.

“After the Project went worldwide, the land that was workable was divided up. Each Sector on each continent has

its own targets, commitments, rules and restrictions.”

She turns to the blackboard and begins a list. “The division of Sectors was decided by — copy these into your notebooks. One: water supply. Two: soil capacity. Three: climate.”

She explains how all these elements were factored into the Project’s prioritisation system and constantly adjusted according to the threat of shortage. Of water being piped with strict fairness. Of everyone being equal under the sun.

“Within this system, our families can survive and thrive,” she tells the children.

But the plague-orphan Nadech is scowling. Nadech’s family did not survive and thrive.

After that, Nadech shadows her more. But whenever she tries to engage her in conversation, she takes off.

At last, a network connection. As soon

as the bars show on her comm, Cherifa checks the maize field. She hears a rustle in the leaves, and stops. It's dark. Too dark to see if it's a person, or just a field-rat. Taking a deep breath, she calls Youssef. She cries, and soon he's crying too. When he has stopped she asks, "So have you heard of this illness that's hit the village, T-37?"

"No. Let me look it up." She hears him clicking. "There's nothing," he says.

"Why not?"

He doesn't answer for a long time. "It could mean that the village is a test-site."

She swallows. "OK."

"Threshold contractors are paying remote communities to test drugs. The Sector administrators sign up. It can be lucrative."

Koussi. The King.

She remembers the tin flask of water waiting in the guest hut when she arrived. A thoughtful little gift for the visiting

school inspector. She flushes with rage.

Fewer mouths, less hunger. A Project mantra.

You can't fault the system's thinking, she thinks with bitterness. Its algorithms are doing what they were designed to do: saving human lives.

Youssef sighs. "We can't afford to think in the old ways."

What a cliché. "Well I can, now that our family's part of their experiment," she snaps. There's a long silence. When her husband speaks again, it's almost in a whisper.

"Cherifa. It's a drug that did this. So the quarantine's a smokescreen. Can you get out?"

Fear hatches inside her. *They're watching me. She won't say it aloud. But she can feel it. That rustle she heard. Someone's eyes are on her.*

On the way back, she sees Nadech running along the dirt track, kicking up dust.

Next day, she finds the girl in the playground by the fence, poking sticks through it with her only friend, Hubert. Nadech flinches as she approaches. Sensing trouble, Hubert peels off.

Cherifa tells the girl, "You've been following me. Who told you to?" Nadech's eyes flicker in the direction of Koussi's office. Of course. Most of the kids here would do anything for a little extra food. The girl looks at her defiantly.

"I heard you talking to your husband. You're going to leave. You're going to break the quarantine. They can punish you."

Cherifa takes a long, deep breath. "Have you told Koussi?"

The girl gives her a long, assessing look. "No. Not yet."

It takes Cherifa a moment to understand. "OK Nadech," she says finally. "Let's do a deal."

"I know the way out," Nadech says.

"Hubert's father uses it to bring things in."

Fuel cells, Cherifa guesses. But can she trust this kid? Her quietness isn't the dreamy kind. It's the quietness of knowledge withheld. And even if they manage to leave undetected, what happens when they reach Boussa? She can't just abandon her there and travel back to Ndjamena alone. Or can she? The Chinese orphanages have a bad reputation. The other option sits uneasily with her.

"We'll leave tonight," says Cherifa. There's an old paper map in the Resources cupboard. If they can get as far as Boussa, they'll have a chance. The guards will only be patrolling a radius of half a mile. "Have you heard of a chameleon?" The girl shakes her head. "It was a kind of animal. They could change the colour of their skin to the colour of the landscape. The sand, or the city, or the jungle. That's us now. Chameleons. Invisible. If anyone asks, I'm your mother, and you're my daughter." Nadech nods.

They wait until nine. Nadech has a couple of flashlights and a mini fuel cell, and Cherifa doesn't ask who she stole them from. Cherifa has protein bars, dried tofu, small green bananas, a water-flask and purifying tablets. They take the back path out, and when they come to the irrigation ditch, drop on all fours and scramble along it. Nadech has told Cherifa the police patrol has four routes that both alternate and crisscross, but there are gaps. Nadech must know this from experience. Of course. Why would Hubert's father do the smuggling, when he could send two kids?

The moon guides them.

After an hour, Nadech signals that they can relax. Cherifa has memorised the route ahead, and it's clear Nadech knows it too, or the first part of it at least. If she knew all of it, might she have escaped on her own? No, she's canny. She needs an adult for protection. Cherifa tries not to think what the punishment might be for a school inspector breaking quarantine and kidnapping a child.

They walk in silence, sticking to the irrigation ditches that run parallel to the dirt road, a monotonous landscape broken only by the numbered fence divisions of the agriculture plots, shielded by high fences topped with barbed wire. Climate-ready strains of maize, soy, pineapple. At strategic intervals, unmanned gun-towers, the weapons nudging out of their sheaths. They'll fire automatically at anything that moves near the fences, so they keep a wide berth. The candid glug of irrigation hoses, the tang of nitrates in the still air. The sun's climbing higher in the sky: they'll have to stop by seven or they'll risk sun-fry.

The crops have petered out and they've reached an open desert area. It's earmarked for development: you can see from the wooden markers rising at intervals. A sun farm probably. The lone baobab ahead seems to hover on the horizon without ever getting closer, its crest sprinkled with chattering yellow birds, its shadow stark against the mud. Fallow land, at a guess. Nitrated out.

They see the dust of the jeeps before

**they hear the tick of the motors.
There's nowhere to hide.**

As soon as she sees the ragged uniforms and the guns of the insurgents Cherifa knows immediately, with the clarity of prophecy, that this is where hope ends.

For years afterwards, she would wonder what might have happened if she and Nadech hadn't been taken prisoner until the food ran out. If they hadn't found themselves on an endless truck-ride to "the city". If it had really been a city, rather than a refugee centre funded by the Sector Three government and run by the Project's contractors, Threshold.

It was there that she'd finally seen a map. They were over a thousand miles from her home in N'Djamena, with less hope than ever of getting back. When Cherifa finally managed to get through to Youssef's number, months later, the call was short.

"Did you talk to him, Maman?" asked Nadech after she'd handed back the comm to the official. Cherifa put her arm around the girl's shoulder, fighting

off tears. "What happened?" Cherifa looked away.

"Tell me what happened!" insisted the plague-orphan.

"A woman answered. She said she was his wife," said Cherifa stonily. "I can't go back. That life is over, *ma petite*. We're on our own."

Maxwell, 2069

Most days I'll bring Ma some ginger tea in bed and we'll drink it — two honeys — with the Truth Channel turned low, watching the sky-rats swoop down for beach-rubbish.

But Ma's not in bed that morning. And the Truth Channel's off, so I go out to the balcony. The sky's dark blue-grey. That means more thunder. The waves are crashing, and where the sky and the sea meet the tide-traps are bobbing and the wind-turbs are spinning to the max.

Then I look down and Ma's lying on the sand with one leg bent the wrong way and a sky-rat pecking at her eye. Five floors is a long way, if you're someone falling.

A man on the jetty yells *floatie alert!* and blows his whistle. Ma's not a floatie. Floaties are blown-up double-size and stinking and wet and they come in at

high tide from the raft-towns and they're mauve or grey. I run along the beach towards her.

But not fast enough though. When I get there they won't let me near.

"You've got to, she's my Ma!"

"All the more reason, chixie," says a lady with an armband that says Coastguard. "All the more reason."

I didn't know the mainland was so different. At the Crisis Centre it's chixburger for lunch and beverage options are water and soy milk. There's a girl here, Swissrae. Her eyes are red from crying for her dad. Outside there's no noise. No waves rumbling, no sea-rats, no snorts and humping squeals, no gurky smell on the wind, no turb whines up close.

The next day they've found my biodad's dad, my bio-granddad. While I am waiting for him to arrive, me and Swissrae watch an oldworld show

about animals that used to exist.

"What show was your dad into?"
I ask her.

"A Friend in Need. With Bud. Bud was supposed to help. But he didn't."

"My Ma watched Welcome to You with Mother Moon. She didn't help either. She made it worse."

The ArtShow comes on. There's a pic of a boy who once drowned in Sector Three. He's blonde and his eyes are wide open and blue and he's looking up through the water.

Aisha bursts in, smiling. **"Positive result for you Maxwell. Come with me."**

My bio-dad's bio-dad is a crupster. They found him from DNA.

He isn't like the crupsters on oral history Learnalong. He never talks about the time before the Project. When I ask him why he laughs and says, **"Much too recent."** He used to be a geologist. He has a rock collection and a fossil

trilobite with eyes on stalks. The house is a prefab and it's got a fuel cell in the basement, plus rooftop solar. When the wind's up, it creaks all over like it's wheezing.

"Tell me about your Ma, Maxwell."
We're eating lentil and eggplant soup.
"I'm sorry I never met her."

"Her name was Emmilou. Mother Moon killed her."

He looks up, sharp. **"Who's Mother Moon?"**

"A therapist on the Truth Channel. She has a show."

He shakes his head. **"I've never heard of it."**

"That channel's just for islanders. Exclusive." I go hot inside. "I told Ma to stop watching her. But she said it was facing reality." I do the Truth Channel voice. "Because the truth shall set you free."

Grandpa stops eating and looks at

me hard. Then he says, quiet: "Tell me more about this therapist, Maxwell."

"She has a show and a Space. You click on her face and she talks." I'm good at doing Mother Moon. *"Hello friend. Hard times. I know. But Mother Moon feels your pain, and she's opening up her big moon heart to you sweetheart. She's listening a thousand percent."*

Grandpa nods. "Go on."

"It's heroic souls like yours that go unsung in this world, performing the heroic acts of martyrdom that enable future generations to blossom and walk free. I hate her. She made Ma worse."

Grandpa looks angry and angsty. And old, old, old.

Two days later he says, "Maxwell, I've found others in your situation. Welfare island children who lost a relative suddenly. They're coming here tonight."

At the meeting there's me and Swissrae, both nearly 11, and Georgi who's 14 and Vivvie who's nine. When I tell them my Grandpa's home-schooling me and I'm

learning about science, they're jealous.

"Maxwell's told me about Mother Moon but I wonder, can you tell us all something about Bud, Swissrae?" goes Grandpa.

"When the monkey was on dad's back he talked to Bud about it after the show," says Swissrae and sticks her thumb back in her mouth.

Then Georgi blurts: "My dad's soulmate, Wise Eagle, he said his door was always open for Dad. Day or night."

"So these mentors or buddies or therapists or whatever we're going to call them, what's their job, exactly?" says Grandpa. "How would you all describe it?"

"Like a mentor," says Georgi. "A shit one."

"Mother Moon gave Ma strategies. About how to contribute," I say. "I couldn't stop her watching."

"My dad didn't have a strategy.

He had Plan A," says Vivvie. "She worked it out with Dr Holmes. He's his guardian angel. But he never got to do it coz he passed from swallowing 584 painbusters."

The grown-ups all look at each other and then Grandpa says, "Maxwell, go show the other sprogs my rock collection while we carry on in here. You can take the popcorn with you."

I show them the rocks and stones, and the fossil trilobite, and Georgi inspects Grandpa's gas canisters for blasting rockface, and then we go upstairs and flick popcorn at each other lying on the floor, still listening.

"They were talked into it!" says Swissrae's mum.

Vivvie's stepdad says it's the same can of worms as all those thousands of Zeroes and sub-Zeroes catching the same fatal bug last year. Who's co-ordinating this. That's what he'd like to know.

"Incentivised suicide," says Grandpa. "From what my grandson says, Mother

Moon's agenda seems to be to persuade her followers it's an act of self-sacrifice. The ultimate in responsible parenting."

"Well you can't say it's not efficient," says Swissrae's mum.

"I want to kill Mother Moon," I tell Georgi when I hear that.

Georgi looks up, sharp. "So do I. I want to kill them all."

"So do I," says Vivvie. Swissrae does too.

"I could fix that gas canister up and make a bomb," says Georgi. "If you kill someone before you're 14, you're not responsible for murder. I'm too old. But you could do it. I tape a switch to it. You set the timer. Then clear out and wait."

The others laugh. But I don't. He means it. We look at each other.

And because it's so easy, you do what Georgi said. You put the trilobite in your pocket for luck and take the E-train and the ferry and then you walk over

to the Folk Centre and there's Mother Moon coming out of the rally with all the Zeroes screaming how much they love her, but they're not allowed into the lobby which is where you're waiting. And you follow her and there's Security but Georgi's right, no-one notices a little kid so you share the lift with Mother Moon up to the fifth floor but when she gets to her door she turns round.

"Hmmm. You've been following me, chixie. Were you wanting something?"

"Me and Ma were at the show. It's her birthday and she wants a signed photo coz she's your biggest fan."

"How cute! Well come in, chixie. Let's find your some merchandising."

The room's huge and there's pix of her lit up on one wall, like on Ma's screen, saying *Welcome to YOU*, and a box of bamboo moons with her face on, that you can hang from your ceiling like Ma did.

"Sit down chixie. What can I offer you? Coke? An energy?"

While she's looking in the fridge I drop the rucksack on the floor, flick on the timer, and slide it behind the sofa. I check my watch. I've got five minutes.

"I'm OK."

She shuts the fridge door. "Hmm. A polite kid would say *No, thank you, Mother Moon.*"

"Well ain't one of them."

Her smile changes. "OK. Let's level up, chixie. You said you wanted a photo for your mum but now I'm getting a different vibe. You know who I am. But who are you?"

"My ma's called Emmilou."

"Ah. Emmilou. Remind me."

"You know her. You talk every day."

"Ah. Well. I do and I don't," she smiles, with her face that's like pastry from a bake-in-a-mo bun kit. "You see, chixie, here's the thing. Emmilou may talk to me. But — little secret? You saw the

crowd here tonight. In my job, there isn't time for one-on-one, much as I'd like to. But I certainly love Emmilou, and care for her deeply. *Very* deeply. She knows that. Shame she wouldn't come and say hello."

"Coz she's not here." Then I say it for the first time, the thing I never said before. "She passed away. She died."

"I see." Her breathing changes. "And it's not her birthday either, right?" I nod yes. "And I guess we can forget about the signed pic too. Hmm. So you told Mother Moon a couple of untruths, chixie."

Her eyebrows frown into two ticks. Then she reaches for the alarm button on the wall and presses it like Georgi said she would.

"But big soz about your Ma. Losing a loved one's a hard blow, but we all go through it and somehow we come out stronger people in the end." Then ew, she leans down and hugs me. She's squelchy and she doesn't smell of booze and kill-yous like Ma, she stinks of perfume. "Oh chixie." Her voice buzzes

against my head. "Have a good cry with Mother Moon. Let it all out."

"Get off me!" I push her off.

She presses the alarm again.

"Listen, chixie. I don't appreciate the way you're behaving but I salute your determination in coming here. The big picture needs folk with your kind of drive, chixie. Brave little people full of spirit."

"I don't give a shit about the big picture. I just want —" My throat's a lump. "Poor love. I feel your agony, chixie. I really do. With all of my big Mother Moon heart. But I don't have the power to bring people back from the spirit world. They go there when it's their time."

My heart starts banging. I've got two minutes maybe but I don't dare check.

"Now it's natural to want to blame someone. But — little explanation? I don't choose my followers. They choose me. Folk are free agents, chixie, and

you can't prevent them doing what they want to do. Honest truth, the big picture can't afford people like your ma. She came to see that. If she did the brave thing, and it looks like she did, well she's earned my admiration and respect. And your gratitude too, if it's led to an upgrade. Are you living on the mainland now in a snug little prefab, chixie?"

I don't say anything. I can't coz my ideas are bumping about like wild freakmen. "Well if you are, you have your ma to thank for it. Steep learning curve today, mmm?" There's a siren outside and flashing lights. "Now are we going to let them put an official warning on your folk-chip? Or shall I just let you out quietly and forget about your little visit? Coz I'm generous that way, chixie."

My mouth's dried out. "I'll go. I'm done here, Mother Moon."

She lays her fat hand on my head and steers me to the door.

"Wise choice. You'll go far. Truly."

I take the lift down. I check my watch.

One minute. I walk out slowly, through the front door. My heart's still banging.

The troops are there, busy with walkie-talkies but Georgi was right, they don't notice me coz I'm just a random kid.

The seconds tick by. I'm right in the smallest corner of the big picture.

Ten nine eight.

And no-one's noticed me.

Seven six five four three two one.

But just wait till you hear the size of the noise when zero comes. Just listen when it all goes boom.

Angelo, 2092

In the mid-60s, in a Human Mission laboratory whose location I will not divulge, I saw hundreds of preserved foetuses. These pre-birth martyrs were like no humans I had ever seen, with camel-like humps on their upper backs. Their kidneys, I was told, had been enhanced to process salt water, their skin calibrated to withstand the sun. They had night-vision. Their facial features were a mix of every race on Earth. They were the results of experiments to breed a climate-resistant race of workers, able to withstand drought and burning heat, drink salt water.

In an annexe, there was another laboratory with a large aquarium, where tiny living babies swam around, breathing through gills. Their pale hands and feet were webbed. They looked magical, like fairies. The sight of them moved me deeply. None had survived

the first month in the tank, the scientists told me. But the next generation was promising.

It reminded me of a long-ago visit to the medical museum in Copenhagen, which housed an old collection of glass cabinets of babies. They floated in formaldehyde, the colour of ancient dolls. All had rare deformities: Siamese twins joined at the torso; a foetus whose legs merged into a tadpole's tail; a "cyclops" baby with a single eye that stared from the middle of its forehead like a blind torch. I thought of the vestigial eye we are all supposed to have, with which we can see visions, and impart wisdom, if only we know how to use it.

The thought came to me that this was how the ancient monster myths originated, centuries ago. Not from sailors returning from the edges of the known world with stories of krakens and men whose heads grew beneath their shoulders, but from midwives.

The Human Mission babies I saw in that laboratory were like the babies in the jars in Copenhagen, and like the

**creatures the cartographer-monks
drew at the edges of the known world.
Not aliens hatched from outer space,
but beings hatched from human flesh.**

**What I saw in that laboratory were
babies from the future. Pioneer citizens.**

Phase 6

The final reconstruction phase is characterized by an overall feeling of recovery. Individuals and communities begin to assume responsibility for rebuilding their lives.

**— The U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services**

Nadech, 2080

Time never made sense to Nadech. Not back in the camp, and not in the Silver City either. She compared it to an accordion, the first instrument she met in her new home. "It expands and contracts to force noises out," she said. "But sometimes there's a tune you recognise."

Cherifa, a school inspector who escaped from the village with her during a quarantine, became Nadech's mother during the ten years they spent at the vast camp in the part of Sector Eight that was once Rwanda. It was here that they slowly came to love each other.

"How would you describe her?" I asked Nadech.

She smiled. "*Maman?* That's easy. Fierce."

Cherifa had told Nadech that white people had once plundered the Sector

and taken slaves, and it was because of them that so many were dying now. So the idea of being smuggled into Europe alarmed Nadech. Why should they go there?

"It was dangerous, and the Sector had closed its doors. They didn't want us. But Cherifa said that it was their problem. They owed us life. It was rot in the camp, or leave. An airship came in the night. You picked a number from a sack and your number came up, you got to board."

Nadech's number was called. But Cherifa's wasn't.

"She told me I had to go, if I wanted to survive. I was only 18. I was scared. I wanted to stay. I knew if I left, I'd never see her again." She stopped and gathered herself. "Her strength killed me. She was sick by then and we knew she wouldn't live much longer. That was her argument. She was going to die but I could live. I knew that once I'd gone, she'd walk out into the sun-fry and end it. That's how she was."

Nadech was crying now so we paused.

She left in the airship. None of the refugees knew which Sector of Europe they'd be going to. The pilots didn't know either.

"There were smuggling-routes in the sky. They took whichever one they were given, at the last minute. The journey was terrible. It felt it would never end. I still see it in nightmares. We were hundreds, crowded in together. They gave us tranquillisers to help us sleep and stop us panicking. We took them."

When they landed, it was dark. They were told to scatter in different directions and not look back.

"What did you notice first?"

Nadech thought a moment. "How cool the air was. It smelled strange. Salt and rotting vegetables."

She headed north along a waterway, in a daze. When dawn broke she was struck by how green the grass was. On the riverbank, she met a dozen

other refugees, who'd come the month before, also by airship. They were all ages and skin-colours, and had sprogs. They told Nadech that the territory was an island, English the native language. They didn't know its size. The country had had several names. Some called it GB or Albion or Britannia. Some called it the Kingdom, because it was once run by overlords.

"I already spoke a little English, from the camp. They taught me more words. River was the first. Then prog. Then boo, which meant bamboo. They said I could join them. They were going to a forest called Sherwood. They had no weapons. So I went with them. I couldn't travel alone, and I never wanted to see a gun again."

It was Fire Season when they arrived, the dry brushwood at risk of catching. They worked as forest stewards and foragers, but in the Flood Season, Nadech moved from the forest to the city. She'd heard it would be warmer there. It wasn't.

"At first I thought I would die of

the cold. People wore boo-wool clothing. I bartered the shrooms I'd dried in the forest. I wore so many layers I didn't see my naked body for half a year. I never fully undressed."

She began working at Weatherspells. Here she met her husband Hoban, a local man.

"We had a spring wedding, with maypole-dancing and fireworks. I moved in with his pod in Colwick and we had a baby girl. My Djimadjim."

There was a long silence, as she remembered something private.

"Do you think of Cherifa?" I asked finally.

She smiled. "Of course. She's with me a lot. She visits."

Many people here reported being visited by spirits. And who was I to say they weren't? "What does Cherifa say?"

"She doesn't speak. She listens."

I asked gently: "So what do you say to her?"

Nadech looked away and whispered, almost to herself: "I thank her."

The Silver City

Historically, the city was famed for its textiles and for its woodlands which, according to ancient mythology, was once occupied by communists who redistributed wealth in the days of feudalism.

In 2068, Sherwood Forest burned for two months during the Fire Season. It has since regenerated, but some tree species never returned. The forest remains at risk every year between the months of May and September.

Up until the Great Flood and the Great Freeze of November 2071, the city was known as Nottingham. It was re-christened that year by those who stayed, locked in by ice.

When those who had fled elsewhere began returning to the city in the mid-2070s, they revived the textile industry with the help of new pigmentation

techniques inspired by the octopus. Around this time the Silver City's weather forecasters were developing their craft, finessing their sun, wind, water, and the minute but telling changes in flora and fauna. Their forecasts, known as tracings, soon became tradeable.

Gwen, 2094

I first heard about the city in 2078, from Jax, a visiting tracer. I was living in a commune near Birmingham at the time. A new hybrid beetle had devoured that season's major crop, flax: we'd failed to diversify our plantings, and we were paying the price. We were all on edge.

When Jax arrived he'd been on the road for 20 weeks, selling forecasts and expertise. He wrote us a detailed three-month outlook.

Jax was missing his home in the Silver City, but not his wife. Hence me. I attracted men like that. But he was young and good-looking and uncomplicated, and I needed some regen. We were all exhausted.

Jax had taken shrooms, so I wasn't sure how much of what he told me about the Silver City was fact and how much down to psilocybin. He reminisced about the

extravagant ceremonies at the Temple, and the floating buildings, and the ice-skating in the months of freeze. His first childhood memory was of the nearby forest burning down. "The skies were red, all day and all night, and filled with ash that stung your throat. When the green came back it was so thick you could taste it."

"What did it taste like?" I laughed.

"Chlorophyll," he said.

I laughed. He was making the city sound psychedelic, I told him. I pictured an eccentric, freewheeling place like Amsterdam in the '40s, before the waters claimed it. But he'd made me curious.

When I arrived there some years later, in springtime, I didn't seek Jax out, though I knew our paths would cross, and we'd nod and smile the way old lovers do. Instead, I visited the Temple to find the elders. I walked along gangplanks and shaded walkways, passing wooden buildings decked with vertical and horizontal crops, and dotted

with climbing flowers. Ivy clambered up the facades of crumbling Victorian houses. I was amazed they were still standing. The Temple, almost a century old, was shrouded in green, with vines and bindweed and wisteria twisting up its façade. Inside, more plants hung. There was a smell of rosemary and sage, along with a kind of incense that was new to me, called ambergris — a substance shed by whales.

Everywhere people were preparing for the spring solstice, arranging flowers in Bakelite vases and hanging scrolls on the walls: painting and poems written by children in delicate calligraphy. One, decorated with images of octopuses, said simply: *WHEN WE LOVED THE EARTH AGAIN, SHE LOVED US BACK.*

In the kitchen I met Karima, a gnarled woman with knuckles thickened by arthritis. She made us ginger tea and we sat in hanging boo chairs overlooking the canal, swinging gently. The jasmine was just coming into bloom, and the water was dotted with an unfamiliar purple flower: a form of cold-resistant water-hyacinth, Karima said, from the

heyday of hybridizing. She told me that the Silver City had many spirits and gods. But the faith of those who came to the Temple centred on what they called The Wild.

I told Karima about my oral history project.

“There are a lot of stories here,” she said. “Especially from the new arrivals. When there’s a full or close moon and a perigeon high tide, there’s always disaster somewhere.” I remembered Jax had held the same belief. “But there are inner disasters too. Those days shake people up.”

We drank our tea in silence for a moment. “Do you have an inner disaster of your own?”

“Who doesn’t?” She smiled wryly, and for a moment I saw the younger woman and the girl in her.

She told me she was a native of the city and had been a teenager when plastic died. She’d been on a school trip to London. She saw the famous Shard

collapse. "It popped," she said, shaking her head in puzzlement. "It actually popped."

She'd managed to make her way back home, hitching rides on the canals, but it took a month. When she got here, all her family were gone. For a while she camped in the museum, which is now the Glassworks. It was where the hold-outs were based. But she wasn't comfortable.

"I was young, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life mourning plastic and the internet." Karima reached inside her tunic and pulled out a bamboo-hair thong from which hung a curved white tooth. "This came from there."

I leaned over and studied it. "A predator?"

"A shark. A stuffed one. We knocked out its teeth and took one each, for luck."

I laughed. "Did it work?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "How would I know? I've had plenty of bad luck, but who's to say it wouldn't have been worse?"

"Did you find your family?"

"Yes. They were on a mega-farm. But it was forced labour. Have you ever threshed by hand?" I had. I shuddered at the memory.

Karima's family escaped to Hull, where in exchange for food coupons, they were forced to attend mass therapy rallies.

"Then after one performance, the therapist was assassinated in her hotel room. They couldn't find who did it, so everyone who'd attended the rally was treated as a suspect and sent to work on the *Lady Gaia*.

I'd heard of it. A re-purposed cruise ship with a bad reputation.

"What did you do there?"

"Cell-ag, mostly."

Some of the rumours must have been true, because Karima's face clouded as she told me that it was here that she had been separated from her family again — this time for good. She didn't say why,

and made it clear she wouldn't discuss what happened on the *Lady Gaia*. But in the end, she earned enough points on the ship to buy herself release, and then returned to Nottingham — by then re-christened the Silver City.

She married Thorn, the son of an Afghan refugee from the 2020s and a Chinese immigrant from the Third Wave, but he died young, of sepsis, after treading barefoot on a rusted can. They had no children, so Karima adopted a refugee boy called Maxwell.

"We had things in common," she said. But when I asked her what, again she wouldn't say, and again I knew better than to insist.

They stayed in the city all through the Freeze. Maxwell grew up and paired with a girl called Fion from the sprawling Ho clan, and now Karima had a baby grandson, Wolf.

"You must meet him. I think you'd get along."

When Karima offered to let me store

my notebooks down in the Temple's catacombs, I said yes. The large rucksack it filled was becoming too heavy for me to carry. But it weighed me down more than just physically. I wanted to gather more stories, but I wanted, for once, to hand them over for a while. I suppose this meant I trusted this place — or perhaps I simply trusted Karima. We became friends.

It was she who first showed me the city: the Colourworks, full of sunshine and reeking of chemical dye; the Weaving Rooms, where light-powered looms worked at high speed; the canals and flood-lakes, with waterfalls and water-wheels that supplied much of the city's energy, alongside recycled waste, geothermal, and flexible wind turbines. As in Birmingham, some people lived in houses as small family units but most belonged to communities of up to a hundred people known as clans or pods.

The marketplace teemed with an astonishing variety of people. Most striking were the descendants of the Southern Sector refugees who came to Britannia in the '50s. I'd come across

them in other places, too. Their webbed fingers and toes and working gills are a legacy of an intensive human genetic engineering programme in the '40s. Karima told me that in the '60s and '70s, the Sherwood Sector had opted for an open-door policy. "Which had nothing to do with generosity. We needed manpower to reconstruct after the Freeze."

One season became three, then ten, then more, and our walks became a fixture. We ate weed tofu and cinnamon buns from food-stalls, took picnics up to the Hemlock Stone, and cooked together in her home, part of an interconnected sprawl of buildings in Beeston. At the centre of her pod were Maxwell, Fion and their baby Wolf. Wolf's feet were webbed, and he had protuberances on his neck, but they were not fully-formed gills like his mother's, which pulsed gently as she spoke. At mealtimes he'd pick up whatever he could reach and squish it. He squished edible freshwater weed known elsewhere as frumi or pelsh. Her squished chunks of tofu, beetroot, potatoes, swede and carrots. He squished rice and maize. He squished

foraged greens. He squished celled beef and chicken and pork and venison and duck. He squished mushrooms.

More seasons passed, and I still hadn't moved on. As Wolf grew older, Karima and I took him on outings. Sometimes we'd go to Mapperley to watch the fulmars, white-fronted geese and the Arctic terns, or to Sherwood Forest, which was home to shy hybrids: fox-dogs, a bright green beetle known as a hunch-butt, and the russet bird they called the wallo. Those are some of my happiest memories.

Most of the choices we make are born of random circumstance. When I was young, people had an idea of what they wanted to achieve, and what they must do to make it happen. Nobody has a plan for life anymore. Life has a plan for them. We are dealt a hand.

One Fire Season, I, too, was dealt a hand. Maxwell, who worked in Make and Mend, had recruited me to a small team repairing the crumbling canal extension when a rope broke and an iron girder fell on us.

One woman was injured so badly that she took deadly nightshade. Maxwell suffered a skull injury and lay in a coma for three months. When he emerged — which no-one expected — he said his eyes felt different: everything seemed brighter. My right foot was crushed in the accident, and I came close to losing it. My days on the road were over. I'd be staying.

Angelo realized this long before I did. He told me, bluntly, as he helped me organize my notebooks in the Temple, that I wouldn't get far on crutches. That I should lower my expectations.

"Your collection needs a home. Stay." He, of all people, wanted me to stay. He must have been lonely.

But it wasn't with Angelo that I found kinship. It was with Karima, Maxwell, Fion and Wolf. Maxwell now suffered from vertigo, so he moved to the Colourworks, where he experimented with pigmentation and light. He'd told me his childhood story, privately. It was a tragic one. But something awoke in him there. The understanding of

colour was in its infancy, back then. But Maxwell was an experimenter, and soon became known as the most talented coloursmith in the city.

As I watched Wolf grow into a young man, and begin his apprenticeship at the Colourworks, I began to wonder what I had been walking away from all those years.

But perhaps I hadn't been walking away. Perhaps I'd been walking to.

Karima passed away quietly in the winter of 2091, during the harshest freeze the city had known. After that I became even closer to Maxwell, Fion and Wolf. We struggled sometimes, especially in the freezing winters, but we had some good years. Some very good years.

I've had a strange life. Who hasn't? But it's been a rich one. That's how I'd put it, if I had to sum it up. Which I do, now, suddenly. Rich and strange.

Gracie, 2094

I've been at Weatherspells a month, learning to trace. Feeling wind, watching rain, seeing what the sun does to plants, and when, and what changes when the weather does. Nadech and Djimadjim get the apprentices scanning bird-flight and cloud-formations, sniffing and tasting the soil, noting the water colour in the canal and the river, checking what the worms and squirrels are up to, feeling the seaweed ribbons for dampness. Slimy means rain's coming — you can tell how much, what kind, and where from. In Freezetime, we track the ridges the wind makes in the snow. When it's moonless, you can navigate by reading them. We learned which berries to cut in half to test for sweetness. What date to test the mole-hills for autumn. How to check the acid of the earth from ant-eggs. How to read swallow-flight and worm-casts.

Crack of dawn, I go out with my bag of

weather-stones to post the early casts on the Weather Circles. I put a summary on the blackboards too. I didn't grow up doing calligraphy like the others did. But I write clear. There's six Weather Circles and blackboards round the city — at Beeston, Holme Pierrepont, Colwick, Wollaton, Morton and Fiskerton.

That's how I meet him. He's there one day on the bank at Fiskerton, knotting flax-rope on the deck of a small boo boat. His tunic's covered in blue and red and yellow-green splashes of dye. The sky's orange-pink, shrieking with rooks and gulls. He says *howcha* and I say *howcha* back. He's my age, maybe.

I've laid out the stones, and while I'm writing on the chalk-board — *winds NNE, 90 percent chance of heavy rain, Flood Warning 8, and so on* — I can see him watching me. Not staring exactly, but eyeing me sideways while he works. My chalk snaps, and half of it rolls off down the pathway. There's choke-weed and ragwort growing in the cracks. He stops his rope, jumps off the boat, picks it up and hands it to me.

His eyes are chestnut. He smiles. I ain't felt much like smiling lately but I smile back, and we stand there for a bit, chatting and picking berries. Our tongues turn blue from the juice as we talk. His bare feet are webbed. He's curious about me, but I'm careful what I say.

"I ain't seen you before, he says. I woulda noticed you."

"Flatterer," I say.

"You got a name?" I tell him Gracie. "Well my name's Wolf," he says. "Born on Wolf Day."

That's a thing here. Every day of the year has a name from the Wild, like they used to do for saints. I've met a Crab, a Beetle, a Seagull, a Fox.

"So what's your story?" he wants to know. "I can tell you ain't from here." I don't like talking about the past, so I just say I'll tell him sometime, when I know him better.

He looks at the sun. It's eleven.

"I've got to go sit with a friend now."

"Sit with?"

"Sit with." Wolf looks at me long and hard, like I'm a bird's egg he's weighing with his mind. "I know we only just met. But do you want to come?"

He told me she's a crupster and she's old and sick but he didn't tell me how old and how sick. You can smell death on her, under the incense and sage-smoke. In a small outhouse with a boo tricycle outside, she lies on a straw mattress with a tin bucket on the floor beside it, a skeleton, her face turned away.

I get chicken-skin. "I should go," I whisper to Wolf. "She don't know me." "But I want her to," says Wolf. And a look passes between us. I'll never forget that look. It means something. I don't know what yet.

We sit with her, silent, close enough to feel the heat off each other. Then a small noise comes out of her, a kind of sigh.

Chicken-skin again. This is my first

death-bed and I don't like it. She says, "Wolf." Her teeth ain't broke like most crupsters.

Wolf tells her, "This is Gracie," but he don't say we only just met. I can feel my blood fizzing. I don't move. Wolf takes my hand and squeezes it tight, like he's saying *stay*.

There's a clatter at the door and Nadech and Djimadjim burst in, panting from running. They look panicked. I don't know how Nadech and Djimadjim know the crupster lady, or Wolf. If they're surprised to see me, they don't show it.

"I felt her leaving us," says Nadech. "Am I too late?" I never seen that look on her face before. A lost sprog look. "Gwen, are you still with us?"

"It's OK," says the crupster. "I'm here."

Then a man arrives. I ain't seen him before. He's Wolf's Pa. His hair's shaved on one side, where there's a scar. He nods and says "Hello, I'm Maxwell," then sits on the floor next to Nadech.

Gwen passes in her sleep ten minutes after, with Nadech and Maxwell holding her hands, and Wolf and Djimadjim holding her feet. It's peaceful. Maybe death-beds ain't so bad.

Some elders come to take her body to the Temple and prepare it for the Transformation. Maxwell and Nadech and Djimadjim go with them.

I still ain't finished my casting, but Wolf says he'll come along, he could do with the company. Silver City Radio must've put out the news about Gwen because at Beeston Lock a heavy-faced crupster with a black armband on his jacket comes up and gives Wolf a hug. He pulls out another armband from his pocket. Wolf says, "Thank you, Angelo", and slides it on his bicep.

After I'm done Weather-Circling, Wolf and I sit on a log under an ash tree and watch the water-guys winch dark purple mourning flags up the poles along the canal. The sun's bright and the sky's dark: rainbow weather. The flags — the thinnest, lightest silk — billow out, turning from dark to pale and back

again with each gust, sometimes with patches of white or red appearing, sometimes green.

Wolf slides his hand in mine, and there's a long stretch of quiet. Something big whooshes up between us, that I don't have a name for.

Gwen's Transformation is two days later. Light winds from the south-east. Outlook fair. Three-quarter moon. She left some wishes. She wanted her body burned by the Hemlock Stone. After, she wanted us all to write a memory from our life, and put it in a bottle. Then we had to throw it in the Trent to float out to sea. Gwen knew she was dying: she spent three weeks with her oral histories down in the catacombs, rolling them up and putting them bottles, all different colour glass, with wax stoppers. Hundreds of them.

Me and Wolf join the procession to the Hemlock Stone, where they're playing music on drums and flutes and accordions and fiddles. The pyre is huge. It's Wolf who lights it.

While Gwen burns, the fireworks start shooting up and we do the Death Dance as they crackle and spark above us, and in the middle of it Wolf pulls me aside and kisses me.

When the flames start dying down, we go to the river. Some of us read some of our memories aloud first, but most of us just go through them in private, before stoppering them and throwing them in with a flower or a leaf. Maxwell takes a long time with his. He stands all alone, apart from the crowd, taking deep breaths. Then he flings his bottle in, as far as it can go. He's crying.

While Wolf and his Ma go to comfort him, Angelo starts reading his — something about London — but he can't go on. Instead, he passes round a photo of a boy underwater, and says he's sorry. He don't tell us what he's sorry about but some of the oldest crupsters look at him sharp.

That's when I understand: we all done bad things. We all done things that don't sit well, that keep us awake at night. When I've thrown my bottle of

memories in, I stand up straight and feel a weight lift off me. The wind picks up and I stand with Wolf and Nadech and Djimadjim and Maxwell and Angelo and all the others on the riverbank under the billowing flags, with the terns circling in the sun-setting sky, and the rustle of boo and the smell of oak and pine and burned sage, and my blood zings through me, so strong and fierce I can feel every artery and vein.

Moments like that, when the dark clouds part and another world shows its face, you know you can make peace with whatever comes ahead.

And if that ain't a good and beautiful and shining thing I don't know what is.

We, the Wild

In the soil and in the mineral dark beneath the Earth's crust, in the muddy ooze of lakes and riverbeds, in the churn of oceans and in the blue of upper air, the creatures of earth, soil and sky spawn and hatch and swarm and scream, throb and bite and mate. They send out tendrils; they writhe and blossom; they swell with sap and explode with spores and weave cocoons; they breed and decompose. Some are aware of their mortality but most sense only that they can be devoured.

Organic existence has always been in flux, so why should our species be exempt from its mightiest revolutions?

We too, can be devoured. Once predators, Homo Sapiens is now prey again. To wolves, to big cats freed from zoos, to hybrids in the forest. We spent so many centuries toiling in the factories of our selfhood that we forgot

**what we slowly came to know again,
as the Great Awakening dawned: that
we are creatures. That we are nature.
That we are water and rock and sunrise
and lightning and the wind that hurtles
through the choke-berries and the
sudden rain that startles the snow-hares
and the sunlight on a beetle's green-blue
carapace. We are starlight, the throb
of resin in the pine tree, the cry of the
curlew, the stir of energy in pods, the
rustle of night-creatures, the flash of a
jumping fish, the whisper of mycelium,
the pulse of jellyfish and the silent
swoop of bats.**

**We live with our new frailty as we live
with our own wildness, and with the
other ways we die: in the womb or from
old age; from accidents or poisoning;
from fires and floods and from diseases
that could once be cured; sometimes,
from heartache.**

**But even in grief, our blood hums with
the perpetual vibrations of the many
dimensions beyond this one, sacred as
dreamtime, and unmapped by science.
It is within this hard-won knowing,
in the space between extinction and**

**resurrection, darkness and blinding
light, that we struggle and flourish, eat
and love and mate and pray, knowing
that when it's time to go, our atoms will
disperse in air, water, soil and sunlight.**

**So follow us up, up, up beyond the
treetops and through the shifting
thermals, up through cloud-vapour
and beyond the reach of human sound.
Swoop with us further, higher, faster, as
we move silent and disembodied above
the Silver City with its ancient castle, its
shimmering waterways, its turning wind-
blades, its bright flags, and the dense
green canopy of its surrounding forest,
until we merge with all that came before
us and all that will come afterwards in
the great spiral of earthly time —**

And transform again.

LIZ JENSEN's eight novels span several genres including speculative, suspense and science fiction, and include the psychological thriller *The Ninth Life of Louis Drax* and the eco-thrillers *The Rapture* and *The Uninvited*. Her work has been adapted for radio and screen, nominated for several awards, and been widely translated. She is a founder of Extinction Rebellion's literary affiliate, Writers Rebel, and lives in Copenhagen.

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Exhibition team:

Olivia Aherne, Kiera Blakey, Prem Krishnamurthy, Sam Thorne, Hannah Wallis and Nicole Yip

**Young people's programme curated by:
Wingshan Smith**

Femke Herregraven: sound production by Jim Brouwer and Benny Nilsen. Celine Condorelli: composed by Hannah Catherine Jones, sound production by Jim Brouwer.

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