

Advance Praise

“So satisfying to read a volume of new speculative fiction stories centered on women’s experience, women’s lives, women’s choices! You’ll find a pleasurable variety here: hard sf, fantasy, ghosts, vampires, horror, sweet lyricism and steel-edged noir — stories from well-known names, and stories from writers you’ve never encountered before. I guarantee that at least one story in this volume will make you punch the air in triumph, and another will work its way into your dreams, and not let go.”

—Elizabeth Lynn, World Fantasy Award Winner

“I’m absolutely blown away. Featuring so many authors who I love, this is a stunning anthology with many different approaches to the subject of bodily autonomy. Readers are going to be captivated by its range and variety. This anthology will be a breath of fresh air in the ongoing fight for the right of women to control and make decisions about their own bodies.”

—Chinelo Onwualu, author of “What The Dead Man Said”

“*Adventures in Bodily Autonomy* is a fresh and bold collection. In our current political climate, these stories and imaginings are desperately needed.”

—Myriam Gurba, author of *Mean*

**Adventures in
Bodily Autonomy**

**ADVENTURES IN
BODILY AUTONOMY**

**Exploring Reproductive Rights in Science
Fiction, Fantasy, & Horror**

**edited by
Raven Belasco**



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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Helena María Viramontes, selection from *Their Dogs Came With Them*, (Atria Books)

Sonya Taaffe, *As the Tide Came Flowing In*, from a chapbook of the same name (Nekyia Press)

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And thanks to you, the Reader, who has supported NARAL by buying this book. If you bought it secondhand, or got it as a gift, please pop up to their website and give what you can. If you can't do that, please pass the book onto someone else when you're done, or just have some conversations with people about reproductive justice and bodily autonomy. "Pay it forward."

This project would not have and will not succeed without all of you, all of us. Let's keep working together for the basic human right of bodily autonomy.

This is dedicated to every woman who has had to suffer the loss of her bodily autonomy, and to all who have helped in the struggle to achieve that right, and to keep that right.

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Preface

Greetings, Readers!

The book you are holding in your hands right now started back during the time when the Supreme Court was deciding *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. Everyone could sense that *Roe v. Wade* was going to be overturned, and during that whole time-period there was this terrible sense of dread hanging over me and every childbearing person I knew.

I wanted to give more than the small amount of money I could afford to donate. I wanted it really badly. Just giving a one-time donation wasn't going to help me with this huge ache inside me, needing to *do something*.

What finally came to me was that I knew enough writers who were feeling the same way as me; we all wanted to do more, give more. Being writers, most of us didn't have a bunch of money we could throw at the situation. But we did have words. We had a lot to say, and we could use that to raise more money together than any of us could give alone.

I'd never edited an anthology before, so I dove in with just passion and the optimism of damn-near total ignorance. I reached out to authors, and the ones you see listed in the table of contents were kind and generous and trusted me even though I was just a gal with a goal (and not much else). Then, a dream came true and Aqueduct Press said they would give this anthology a home. To bring it all together, NARAL was warm and welcoming when I reached out and asked them to believe in this project, too.

For over 50 years, NARAL Pro-Choice America has fought to protect and advance reproductive freedom at the federal and state levels—including access to abortion care, birth control, pregnancy and postpartum care, and paid family leave—for every body. NARAL has been at the forefront of this fight since its founding and is powered by 4 million members from every state and congressional district in the country, representing the 8 in 10 Americans who support legal abortion. Find out more at <https://www.prochoiceamerica.org/>

One hundred percent of the royalties of this book are being donated to NARAL Pro-Choice America to help them continue their vital fight for women's bodily autonomy and basic human rights. Aqueduct Press and I humbly thank our authors for donating their stories, making this anthology and fund-raising effort possible.

The release date of this book is important in the history of women's healthcare rights. On October 16, 1916, in Brooklyn, New York, Margaret Sanger opened the country's first birth control clinic. Just nine days later police shut down the clinic and Sanger served 30 days in prison. She spent her life founding and being involved with myriad birth control organizations, constantly searching for more affordable and effective contraceptives, helping to get funding for medical innovations—such as the birth control pill—and fighting to make family planning available to everyone. Unfortunately, many of the battles she fought and won we are having to refight today.

Raven Belasco

Introduction

Maggie Mayhem

It was chance and good fortune that brought me to the steps of the United States Supreme Court on Jan 22, 2003, where I looked out at a sea of thousands upon thousands of pro-life protestors filling the National Mall for as far as my 18-year-old eyes could see. It was the 30th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and abortion had been a settled matter for the entirety of my lifetime as a controversial feature of the status quo, but status quo nonetheless. Those who came there to affirm the right to abortion access as a part of healthcare were few and far between. What all the anti-abortion protestors held in common was an ability to imagine a future with a radically different landscape for reproductive healthcare. They did not take for granted that *Roe v. Wade* was an immutable part of the law. Not only did they far outnumber us there, they out-imagined the pro-choice majority and were willing to fight to make that imagination a reality. I felt afraid of this coordinated mass movement, and that fear made a lifelong activist out of me.

Two decades later and months shy of turning 50, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. This was a process that has been unfolding over time beginning from the moment that ruling was first delivered. The negative impact of the *Dobbs* decision cannot be overstated. Though my entry into abortion access activism was motivated by fear, my experiences as a sex, birth, and death worker fighting for abortion access created a foundation for hope. As a full spectrum doula (someone who provides

emotional and practical support for any possible outcome of a pregnancy) I have learned that the line between creation and destruction is just one of many false binaries. Just as reactionaries have mobilized to alienate us from our own bodies, so too have those fighting to secure a future where reproductive decisions are respected, not regulated. The future is not yet realized.

As people of conscience who believe in bodily autonomy and self-determination, it is incumbent upon us to commit to the task of imagining a new future for reproduction together. This task cannot be underestimated in its importance, and the framework of Reproductive Justice is vital to guiding this process and expanding upon what we believe is possible. Going beyond the rigid limitations of “choice” within the reproductive rights movement, the BIPOC scholar-activists of Sister Song conceptualized outside of the pro-choice/pro-life binary to pursue a vision that confronts the structural oppression that regulates reproduction. Reproductive Justice affirms our right to create and raise healthy families alongside our rights to prevent, decline, or eliminate the potential for pregnancy. It reminds us that we all have a right to primary pleasure, whether this is engaging in sex or refusing it. Reproductive Justice refuses to draw gendered lines around gestational capacity.

The role of stories and narratives as a necessary strategy for pursuing these rights has been highlighted by the Reproductive Justice movement. Storytelling has the power to drive connections within individuals, their communities, and the world that are not possible with abstract theory or policy briefs alone. Stories, not statistics, are what truly drive movements because they lead us to the reasons that motivate us to fight.

As we face the disorienting wake of the Dobbs decision with its regressive reanimation of the past and the uncertain future it presents, it is perhaps all the more necessary to step into the supernatural contexts of the stories in this anthology to radically reconsider our own social locations and question

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the elements of our self-determination. This anthology brings the principles of Reproductive Justice to light by striking at its central premise that not all choices are made from equal liberties or consequences. The characters here are faced with circumstances that compel them to identify and act in defense of the vision they have for their lives in unconventional settings that unburden readers of any thought-terminating expectations about the absolute meaning of sex, death, birth, breath, or blood.

In these pages you will companion a space traveler experiencing an unprecedented pregnancy on a mission to Mars, consider conflict between sisters about strange and mystical reproductive technologies, contemplate the role of death magic in sustaining life, and weigh the decision to exchange gestational capacity in favor of alternative and more everlasting bonds. A woman sizes up Las Vegas after the apocalypse as well as the as well as apparently the other remaining human and his notions for saving their species, and a time traveler reconciles with the past. Werewolves, vampires, witches, the Fae, and more all speak their piece from perspectives as alien and familiar as any one person you might ever meet. The collection has been curated to include established authors and icons such as Nisi Shawl, Elizabeth Bear, Annalee Newitz, and Cecilia Tan as well as powerful emerging voices.

I hope that you will enjoy reading these stories as much as I did and gain insight into how you will orient and find your own true north in the years to come as we labor collectively to make way for new possibilities and pursue the path to Reproductive Justice for all.

Queen of Dirt

Nisi Shawl

Brit lowered her wooden sword and sighed. She loved her students. But the girls kept hesitating, getting hung up on the moves, lagging behind. The three boys in the class of nine had stayed with her through the form, but when they thought she wasn't looking they whaled at the ground with their weapons like taiko drummers. Could they be any more clichéd?

Bees buzzed over flowers blossoming in scattered patches of sunlight. That was all right; none of the kids were allergic. And not all bees stung. From the pond beyond the trees a cool breeze blew, drying the light sweat coating her arms. "Everybody siddown." The rustle of the blue plastic tarp rose and fell as they obeyed. It stilled as they looked up at her, their faces so earnest. "You learnin fast," Brit told them. Not a lie. Little kids did learn fast. Way faster than adults, or even teenagers like herself. "But not countin Sunday we got five more days before the show. That all. An we ain't even come up with our routine." Sunday was unscheduled. A lot of kids and teachers went to church.

Tanzi raised her hand, though Brit hadn't asked the class a question. "Yeah?"

"Can we figure that part out in our wing meeting at the dorm tonight?"

Grey barely waited to be called on to object. "But we're sleepin in different wings."

"Okay, in the cafeteria at dinner. If we all sit at the same table —"

“Other teams could hear us!” Grey’s cousin Jazman was the most competitive kid in camp. “They’ll steal our ideas!”

“The cafeteria’s big,” Tanzi scoffed. “Let’s all sit by the window farthest from the serving line. You could hold it for us, right, Mizz Brit? Make the other teams stay away?”

“Sure.” Brit slid her blade into its beaded scabbard and pulled her watch out of her front pants pocket. “We got enough time to meditate. Anything you wanna ask me before we start?” On the first day of camp she’d told the kids she would answer anything.

The smallest girl peered up from underneath a rolled and knotted turquoise bandana. “Did you ever, you know, ever hurt somebody really bad? I mean like —”

“You mean have I ever kill anyone?” Brit had promised herself she would learn all her students’ names in the eleven days of Experience Outreach, even the ones in the big morning classes. She had most of them, and just about every kid on her afternoon concentration team. Was this Denighta? Denesta?

“I never kill no one.” At least, she’d never killed another human being.

“Now shut your eyes. Let your breath come an go slow — slower — slower — like shadows movin with the sun, like the turnin of the world...” The smell of peace, green grass and water, calmed her mind. She liked it out here with the kids. Quiet, compared to the city. Calm after her work clearing out nests of entities.

So far she’d been able to stay away from the abandoned bunkers up the hill, site of the park’s mysterious string of suicides. So far she’d ignored the feelings they gave her.

The hour before mealtime was unassigned. Brit led her team along the overgrown walkway to the dorm entrance where their chaperones waited. She assured the kids firmly that exploring the bunkers would take too long even if they left immediately. She barely had enough time herself to get

Queen of Dirt

back to her cabin, shower, and read a few pages of *Return to Nevèrÿon*. But she did manage to beat them to the kitchen building, joining Mr. Crofutt and the other six instructors on the porch outside five minutes before the line opened.

“How’s my little half-pint of cider half drunk up?”

Brit thought he was creepy when they first met: an old white guy, ponytail and flamboyant purple shirt marking him as a liberal like her mom and dad, trying no doubt to “relate to the youth”...but he’d helped her figure out her some important stuff. He’d never hit on her or done anything else inappropriate, either.

“I got them students eatin outta my hand. Specially my concentration team.”

“They think you’re cool because you’re just about their size.” Mr. Crofutt peered back to where the students were gathering along the porch’s fieldstone wall, more or less by the dorm wing. “Have you worked out your routine yet?”

“Tonight.” The line began to move. Brit took a plate of spaghetti and meatballs from behind a sneeze guard, and a bowl for the salad bar. “I’m spozed to make sure we have a table by ourself. You mind?”

Mr. Crofutt dropped behind as they entered the high-ceilinged dining room. “Not in the least. Want me to run interference with Lisa?”

“That be great, yeah.” Experience Outreach’s Language Arts teacher Lisa Plowden was fascinated with Brit’s assumed dialect. Her attention had started to feel like stalking.

Brit could talk Standard English whenever she wanted. She’d proved that in her job interview. First day she told her classes not to copy her; they promised, and her Ebonics ceased being an issue for everyone except Mrs. Plowden.

Mr. Crofutt headed off on his mission as Brit speed-walked to the room’s far corner on hers. She picked a window table with a close view of a row of fluttering, silver-leaved poplars.

Boys and girls came to the table separately and sat far apart. Sixth graders.

“You were right, Mizz Brit,” admitted Jazman. “The drummers only went to Battery Vicars and they still aren’t back! We never woulda made it in time.”



After dinner, though, Brit’s excuses for avoiding the bunkers ran out. Predictably, the boys wanted to base their team’s presentation on a war story. Tai Chi was a martial art, after all. Less predictably the girls did, too — if at least one of the two sides fighting were zombies. Much enthusiasm for Tanzi’s plan of blocking out their routine on the site of one of the abandoned gun emplacements. Brit would have looked weird vetoing it. Other instructors didn’t have the heebie-jeebies over visiting the bunkers, and Experience Outreach was supposed to be about connecting art with the environment.

Curfew wasn’t for another two-and-a-half hours, and the sky was plenty light at 6:30 on an end-of-June night. So as the sun drifted down toward the hazy horizon, touching with pale gilt the white clapboard sides of Fort Worden State Park’s museums, halls, and dormitories, Brit climbed the hill, surrounded by her charges. It was another idyllic moment. Kids were great. If only you didn’t have to have sex to get pregnant with them.

Over the gentle slope of the daisy-sprinkled lawn. Up the crumbling asphalt road where no vehicles were allowed. Brit’s heart jumped as a dark, humping shape scuttled behind an empty cabin — but it was only an otter. Onto the sunken timber steps, then the gravel drive circling the hill’s crown. Sweeping around to every obsolete battery the stupid soldiers had built.

That wasn’t fair. Brit knew it. Experience Outreach’s staff orientation had included a brief history of the Fort. Most of it was constructed so long ago air war was no more than a wild-

eyed sci-fi concept involving zeppelins and ornithopters. 1897. Nearly a century had passed.

They came to an open field and stopped a moment. Clouds had gathered overhead with typical Quimper Peninsula swiftness. Between them sunrays shot out to backlight a line of firs. Grey and Jazman argued about which way to go. Grey won. They followed the road's bend to the right. Toward Battery Tolles and the bad feelings.

Mr. Crofutt called Brit a "Visioner." He had found her a couple of years ago, running away from home, and helped her understand the weirdness of her life. Said she translated "non-physical entities" into "concrete, manipulable analogies." When Mr. Crofutt offered to recommend Brit for this gig teaching with him at the Experience Outreach camp, he had mentioned there was some sort of problem with entities on one area of the grounds. People kept killing themselves: soldiers, then a couple of local "troubled teens," then an annual average of one camper — usually retired RVers. Not an epidemic, but over the years it had added up to about twenty.

Brit ignored that and accepted the job because it was with kids, young black kids, kids like she used to be and wished she could someday have. Also, it made a nice excuse to spend less time with the rents and their impossible "realistic" expectations. Like how they wanted her to talk "proper" English the way she did in elementary and middle school. How they kept on expecting her to go on dates.

Besides, one little problem spot in the entire park hadn't seemed too much of a challenge. Hadn't she rid a whole city of an infestation of spiritual tent worms?

Under the firs' shadows it felt an hour later. And colder. Brit clasped her hands around her upper arms and zipped her hoodie. None of the kids acted like they noticed. They laughed and hit each other playfully with springy, green-needled

branches they picked up from the side of the road. “Hey!” she warned them. “None a that!”

“But Mi-izz Bri-i-i-it,” Tanzi pretend-whined. “You let us hit each other with the practice sticks. What’s so diff—”

Brit halted. “Stop right there.” A ragged wave of obedience. “Turn aroun an look at me while I talk to you.” All nine students turned to face her.

“They ain’t sticks. They swords. Ack like it. Believe it. You believe, your audience gonna believe too.” She and Mr. Crofutt had talked a local supplier into lending the wooden practice swords in exchange for a free ad in the performance night program.

“Also.” She stared as fiercely as she could. “How you movin in the form? Whatever routine we put together for Thursday? It gonna be slow, and directed. Purposeful. That’s what so different. Unnerstan?”

Every head nodded. “Go on then.” She started walking again and the kids, subdued, bunched up, went with her.

Soon the low bowl of Battery Tolles spread to the road’s right. A trail spun down its sides. Blank darkness filled the doorless entrances to the concrete shelters at its bottom. They reminded her of giant skulls. Dead eyes and open mouths gaping like the heads of half-buried trolls. Brit shook her head to empty it of that idea. If she thought too hard about trolls, there might be trolls for real. She wasn’t sure exactly how Visioning worked.

Grey and the other two boys headed up the stairway to the decommissioned gun carriage on the bunker’s roof. “What about if we attack from up here?” That was Byron according to the attendance sheet, but his friends called him Skinny.

“You can’t be a zombie, Skinny — only girls!” Tanzi yelled from the bowl’s floor. “And we have to hide down here. Right, Mizz Brit?”

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“Let’s vote.” Her favorite way to delegate. It was a landslide victory, six to three. The boys grumbled, but quickly got into the rehearsal, looking relaxed and innocent as they descended the battery’s steps, assuming exaggerated poses of horror and surprise as the girls staggered out of their dank lairs. Brit forgot her foreboding in the work of choreography. The feints and disarms and deliberate stumbles she helped them choose drew closely on the forms she’d taught, but there was a nod to MJ’s “Thriller,” too: “Stomp, stomp, stomp, rear! Stomp, stomp, stomp, rear!”

When Brit thought to check her watch it was fifteen minutes to the 9 o’clock curfew.

Delighta — one of the boys had settled that question by yelling at her when she accidentally flipped his precious ball cap into the blackberries — had been at Fort Worden last summer. She knew a shortcut.

From the trail’s head they walked a few feet back along the way they’d come, then took a narrow path that looked like it was going to bisect the main road’s circle. As the class discussed how to transfer their routine’s blocking to the theater — warrior boys on the stage, zombie girls rising from seats in the audience — Brit did her best to ignore her growing unease. Why did she have to notice this sort of feeling? Why couldn’t she be like everybody else? According to Mr. Crofutt, making entities visible and palpable was something she did to fight them. To win.

But why did she have to know evil entities even existed, let alone sense where they gathered? Why couldn’t she be like everybody else?

So dark, so early. Maybe the gathering storm was the cause. Looked like it would rain hard. Could even be some of the Northwest’s rare thunder and lightning. Ahead of her in the gloom little Delighta paused. “This part’s spooky!” she announced. “It’ll get so you can’t see.” Delighta glanced at the

student right behind her. “Maybe we should hold hands.” She grabbed Jazman’s. Both girls giggled.

And why not? They were only eleven, twelve years old, but kids had crushes all the time. Everyone did.

Everyone but Brit. Unless you counted Iyata, who was really just a friend. Really. Despite her mother and father’s delicate questions, and their reassurances that it was all right to be gay.

Brit didn’t know what she was. Not gay, though.

Delighta and Jazman took a sharp turn and she lost sight of them. For a moment only, she thought, but then she made the turn too and they stayed invisible. She heard their foot-steps continue, but they echoed oddly. Following the sound, Brit found out why: the two had entered a low tunnel. Short as Brit was she could touch the ceiling when she reached up with one hand. She let her arm fall to her side. “Hold on!”

“It doesn’t go far, Mizz Brit,” Delighta said. “We’re already out.”

“I’m tellin you stop! Now!” Her voice reverberated hollowly off the tunnel’s walls.

Then the reverberations ceased.

She pulled her sword. Wanted to. Tried to.

Nothing happened. She was frozen in place. Couldn’t move. Paralyzed.

No! Could she breathe? Yes — but when she gasped in a big gulp of air she felt something crinkle and tighten against her skin, a film of thick plastic like the tarp. Panic prickled over her and she puffed out hard and fast. The tightness eased. Brit experimented. Slow, shallow breaths kept the plasticky film from snugging in on her. She had to control her fear.

What else? She could roll her eyes, blink. “Can I talk?” she asked herself. The words sounded flat and dead, but she heard them.

She flexed her toes, the muscles of her calves, thighs, butt, stomach. She already knew her hands wouldn’t obey her, but

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her fingertips twitched. Her mouth opened wide though her head wouldn't nod. Nostrils flared. Eyebrows raised, forehead wrinkled.

So partially paralyzed only.

Why? How?

How long?

Best guess, this had to do with whatever entities hung around here. Was this how they drove the suicides to take their lives? Or was it something else? Maybe if she could figure out what they'd done she'd be able to free herself.

By when?

She was hungry. She had to pee. The air suddenly smelled stale — was she breathing the same stuff over and over? She'd suffocate! She'd — Slow down. Slow. Down.

She should meditate, the way she'd shown the kids — the kids! What were they doing? What had happened to them? Complete darkness filled Brit's eyes, even when she opened them wide. That was magic of some kind, the work of this new crop of entities, but evening had been settling in fast, and it must be night by now. How would her students find their way? They'd gotten out of the tunnel ahead of her. Were they wasting time looking for Brit first? Eventually they'd get back and tell the chaperones, who would organize a fruitless search — What was going on?

Again she took deliberate control of herself. In. Slow. Out. Slow. Gradually she wiped from her mind the useless chafing about her students. Nothing she could do to help them except get out of here. They'd shown no signs earlier of being disturbed by the entities. They'd show up at the dorms without her, and things would proceed according to established policies. Pointlessly. Though maybe Mr. Crofutt would have some idea what kind of trouble Brit was in. He knew about entities and how to fight them.

Meanwhile, what could she do? Without access to the sword at her side or any other weapons — except her mind. Her memory.

Minus the usual immediate sensory distractions, Brit's mental movie of what had gone on before her paralysis reeled past in lucid detail: the giggles of the girls holding hands ahead of her, the gritty sweep of the tunnel's wet cement ceiling against her upheld hand, the slight mound of dirt beneath her feet... Wait. That was new. She'd felt the low mound at the time, but till now it hadn't registered.

Brit reviewed the sequence over and over in her head. Nothing else stood out and she finally got tired of thinking about it.

And no one had found her yet. Hours must have gone by.

A textbook on the sociology of interrogation she snuck out of her mom and dad's library had a chapter about sensory deprivation as a torture technique. Supposedly it worked pretty well. Supposedly it produced horrible hallucinations. Over the course of days, she reminded herself.

So what was that crawling sensation on the top of her head?

Not real! Not not not! It felt heavy, wet, warm, runny, dripping down to her eyes so she had to shut them as it poured faster and faster over her nose and cheeks and if she opened her mouth to scream she'd taste it but she couldn't help it couldn't — "Help! Help me! Hel —"

Sweetness?

She choked, spat reflexively only to get the spit right back in her face, saliva dribbling off her chin mixed with the —

She told herself it was not blood. Not vomit. Forced herself to lick out her tongue and try another taste, try to analyze it.

Like nectar. Spicier, though. Perfume.

It was good. She sampled it again. Yes. A bit of an acid edge, which only made it easier to eat more.

The feeling of having to pee went away.

Queen of Dirt

Realizing that brought her crashing back down to scaredness. She had swallowed some random emission of an entity. She didn't know what the stuff represented, what it did. She didn't even know what the entities themselves were like — they'd be something she was familiar with, but what? What had she shaped them into — Visioned?

Another cascade of liquid flowed over her, sticky and smooth as when her grandmother filled jars with her homemade —

Jelly. Royal jelly. She'd read a description of its flavor that matched. And her prison fit.

The entities were manifesting as bees. And trying to make Brit into their queen.

She couldn't wipe the jelly off. She let it dry on her skin, blinking hard so her eyelids wouldn't stick shut. Lips pressed firmly together; no way was she consuming more, no matter how hungry and thirsty she got.

Why bees? Because she actually knew a lot about them, that was why. She'd researched them last quarter for a Poetry of Biology paper. She understood the differences between solitary and eusocial species, and between primitive and evolved eusocial swarms. Not all bees stung. Not all produced honey. Some lived in hives provided by humans, some in dead trees.

Some nested in holes in the ground marked by low entrance mounds, lining them with secretions that hardened into natural polyesters.

Apparently facts about various kinds of bees had mushed together in Brit's unconscious mind to create these entities' manifestation. The way she'd made the ones in town into giant invisible tent worms. These were giant invisible bees.

Very nice. Now how did that get her out of here?

Maybe she could just be rescued? Left to his own devices Mr. Crofutt should be able to track her down — Locating was his superpower, the way shaping entities by Visioning them was hers. As long as she didn't breathe too deep or fast the air

would probably last. Probably. The entities seemed to want her to live. Plus if they could pour royal jelly into her cell it probably wasn't completely sealed up. Probably.

Her face began tingling. Softly at first, then harder, like the vibrating of a million tiny alarm clocks. Her neck and shoulders got in on the act too. Her upper arms and chest. Everywhere the jelly had touched her.

Hadn't her mom said something about how women used to rub bee jelly on themselves for beauty? How they absorbed its activating proteins directly into their tissues —

"Hnnnngg! Mmmmmvvvv!" Brit shrieked with her mouth shut. Did she still have a mouth? "Hmmmmnng!" Panting through her nose, she felt the cell's plastic lining shrink tight like a too-small rubber glove. "MmmmmMMMMMMMM!" Thrashing around only made it worse. Made it impossible to move. Soon all she could do was shiver and shudder and sob. Without daring to open her lips. Tears ran from her closed eyes; mucus threatened to stop up her nose.

She would choke on it and die, choke on her own snot. She would die here, buried underground. Nobody would ever see her again.

Unless she got it together. Unless she immediately quit freaking. Unless she surrendered and opened up her mouth. Of course she had one. The substance might trickle in. But how else to get air? She breathed in. Out. In. Out. Slower. Slower.

She felt the plastic wrapping her relax. For the second time. The buzzing tingle kept going, though, got worse —

Screw the tingle. She might lose her shit again unless she iggered it. She'd think straight while she could. Until her brain turned into a bee's — No. That was not an all right idea to have in her head.

The entities wanted to change her. Maybe because she had changed the entities? She never knew what she was doing — or she hadn't anyway with the tent worms, the only entities she'd

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dealt with so far. What happened had only made sense afterwards, when Mr. Crofutt explained it.

So. If worms ate leaves and the worm entities ate the leaves of people's dreams, what did bee entities eat? Some nectar analog. Something harmless, most likely, since bees didn't hurt flowers.

They hurt people they stung. If they stung.

Did these entities hurt people? Yes. Or made them hurt themselves. Especially people who were allergic.

Most bees died after stinging once. Not queens. If the entities transformed her as she suspected they were trying to do, she would be capable of triggering mass waves of suicides.

Though the main function of a queen bee was to breed.

That started her struggling again. She yelled and tensed her muscles and pushed at whatever kept her pinned in place. Got nowhere but she didn't care she would rather die than lay six million eggs, six million fertilized —

A glob of royal jelly covered her face. She sneezed and coughed her nose and throat clear. And gulped some down. Had to. More kept coming. It puddled around her ankles and crept up her calves, climbed over her knees, drenched the bottoms of her shorts, making her legs buzz madly. Halted just below her crotch.

For the moment.

Based on her research, Brit expected that soon the cell would be filled completely. Then...then she would drown. Or worse.

But she was supposed to win. That was what her Visioning superpower was for. Entities real enough to touch were real enough to kill.

How did you kill bees? Tent worms you crushed or smoked to death, and she'd figured out how to poison the worm entities using cigars.

Beekeepers used smoke to soothe their swarms to sleep. If she had her cigars with her here...they'd probably be useless. She couldn't light them if she couldn't move.

Anyway, she didn't want the bee entities to fall asleep. Maybe she didn't even want them dead. Not right now. Right now all she wanted was to get herself out.

But how?

The quiet of Brit's underground cell had slowly shredded apart. Whispers, squeals, and bursts of piping cries built up in the velvety silence, from ones and twos to a steady thrum of sound. The music of the hive. Almost she could make out individual voices. They felt like they came from very close. Almost she could see the members' individual dance steps, see them bow and shake their tail ends, neon gold on black. Almost she could understand their instructions.

Any queen had to go on at least one flight, to mate. Eventually they would let her out for it.

She didn't want to wait that long.

Another torrent of jelly. Viscous and faintly fragrant, the growing pool lapped up to her navel, her nipples, her armpits. Everywhere it touched came painfully awake, like circulation returning to crushed arteries. Then there was another break in the deluge. It had to be the last.

What did Brit have to fight with? Her memories had helped some, helped her identify what shape she'd given the entities. What else was she made of? According to an old hippy album song of her mom's she used to play when she was little:

“Earth, water, fire, and air,
Met together in a garden fair...”

Earth was all around her, holding her in. Earth was part of what was wrong. Water she'd never had much use for. Air was scanty, most of it far away — but fire — fire! Fire could burn her out of any jail. If she could strike a flame — didn't sparks

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fly up from flint and steel? But all she smelled outside her cell was plain old dirt.

Except the dirt was not exactly plain. It was charged with energy — lines of fire! Like lightning — which leapt to heaven from the earth. Could she call the fire to come through her?

Brit searched for the energy's pathways. She heard them? Felt them? Knowledge of the fire's routes came in by her ears, but not as sounds. More like pressure. As if someone were reeling in a bunch of knotted scarves, squeezing them in through holes in her head. Scarves stretching out around her miles and miles and miles and miles.

The feed rate of the bumping knots sped up to match the buzzing pain. The buzzing pain got brighter, brighter!

Power! Glory! Blazing up, onto her feet, into her veins, her nerves, her brain, along her hair, the fire, the flame was burning hotter! Higher! Whiter! Channeling itself into her, burning faster! Hotter! Higher! Burning higher! Bursting through her skull up to the sky!

KRRRAAAKKKKK! BABOOOMMM! Thunder tumbled out of the clouds. Rain fell with it. The jelly thinned, washing away as Brit clambered out of her lidless cell and stood laughing and free in the wild night. She could move! Wind whipped the brief storm away. She could spin in and out of it and twirl around and she could run all she wanted — beneath her flying Spiras the road's gravel glittered wetly in the light of the emerging crescent moon.

Mr. Crofutt and the two East Wing chaperones met her on the stairs leading to the road behind the dorms. They'd been looking for her for an hour, finally deciding she must have hit her head and been knocked out in an inexplicable collapse no one had yet found any trace of. She let them take her to Mr. Crofutt's van. He drove her to Urgent Care and didn't ask any questions she couldn't answer. He didn't ask any questions at all.

The drugs they gave her at the clinic slowed the buzzing way down but didn't stop it. Brit told Mr. Crofutt as much as she knew about what she'd been through. He said he'd sleep on what she said, figure out what it meant in the morning.



Brit tuned out the ever-present humming in her bones and focused on how things looked: pastel green walls, polished wooden floors, dim hanging lamps, and padded stacking chairs laid out in sixteen rows of eight each. No curtains hung before JFK's primitive stage — or anywhere else in the theater building. How things sounded: the babble of eighty-five Experience Outreach students echoed off hardness on every side, bounced back and forth and became so confused she couldn't make sense of what anyone was saying. Not even her parents shouting politely inches from her face. Something about how difficult it was to come all this way on a weeknight ordinarily, but the holiday tomorrow helped. Brit nodded, her eyes darting side to side, seeking escape.

Oh no. Here came Mrs. Plowden. Grinning insincerely, Brit introduced her to Mr. and Ms. Williams, aka her dad and mom. Kids began taking their seats, which cut the noise enough that even with her head turned away she could hear her parents being complimented on their extremely articulate speech.

Please. Half the reason she talked the way she did was so she didn't have to hear this sort of "compliment."

The other half was to piss off the rents, which usually worked well enough. Though they'd surprised her by showing up tonight. Okay, she'd surprise them, too.

Someone flipped the lights on and off a few times fast. In front of the stage Mr. Crofutt cupped his hands to his mouth and called "Out!"

"Reach!" responded the crowd of students. A couple more calls and responses and pretty much all the ambient chatter died away. Except Brit's mother's. "—her whole life! We're

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proud of how different our daughter has been —” In the sudden silence Ms. Williams stopped midsentence.

Proud? Of Brit? First time she'd heard of that. She hurried to the seat in the staff section where she'd left her sword.

This afternoon the staff had met and decided on the order of show. The opening number was an all-camp rendition of a modified Balinese monkey chant led by the Movement Arts team, who remained onstage afterward and segued into what they called their Tidepool Dance. Then the Visual Art Team's slides played while the Percussion Team (the drummers' official name) set up; after Percussion came Martial Arts to end the first half.

The artillery-mimicking boom of the taikos nearly drowned out that buzzing hum. Not quite so painful anymore now Brit was getting used to it.

The Martial Arts team's girls had spaced themselves strategically among the unsuspecting audience members. Yesterday — far too late — Tanzi had asked her to help their “side” of the mock battle but Brit declined. She stuck to her teacher role.

She mounted three of the stairs to the stage and looked back at Mr. Crofutt, who'd gone to stand by the light switch. The building's shades, lowered for the slides, had been left that way, as she'd specified. So when she raised her sword and swept it down in the signal they'd agreed on, total darkness descended.

And then not quite total. The braided strand of roses and stargazer lilies she wore around her neck began to glow. At first softly. The vases of iris placed where footlights would normally sit filled with shimmering color and overflowed. The shadowy forms of Grey and Skinny and Slaydell shuffled hesitantly into that spectral light. No dialogue, but the boys moved scared, weapons at the ready.

From their chosen spots the girls stole forward, glitter-dusted faces beautifully ghastly in the shine of the white gardenias Brit

had pinned into their hair. They stumbled through the steps she'd lifted from "drunken" Zui quan forms. She called translations of the steps' names in cadence: "Swaying Hips! Pour the Wine! Spill the Soup! Tripping on the Trailing Hem!" The zombie girls crept and leapt and crawled around and above her, wooden swords carried in deceptively slack hands. They surrounded the hapless warriors and attacked! The boys yelled the names of their defenses as they fought. Though valiant they were outnumbered two-to-one. Of course the zombies defeated them.

Good guys didn't always win. Something every kind of artist had to learn.

The boys stopped writhing around and the girls sat back on their haunches, showing their faces. Their mouths and chins were covered in a paste of mashed red petals: dahlias, peonies, glads — whatever Brit had been able to buy at the Port Townsend farmers' market. Blazing smears of blood red streaked their cheeks. They lifted crimson hands to gleam like torches in the hushed dimness.

The audience began applauding prematurely.

Grey sat up jerkily, as if he was strobing. Brit hadn't been able to convince any of the boys to paint their faces with crushed flowers, but she got them to carry bags of bee pollen from the food co-op — expensive, but when they'd rubbed it on their sweaty faces under cover of the girls' feeding frenzy it became possible for her to provide their skin with a nice yellow-green luminosity.

The freshly undead got unsteadily up, and now all nine Martial Arts team members did the MJ moves in unison, complete with crotch grabs. And it was over, and the audience was on their feet, hooting, cheering, and whistling while they clapped, loud and hard and long.

A show-stopper, exactly as Brit had expected. She slipped out of the handicap access door stage right as the house lights

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turned up for intermission. Milky clouds covered the sky, reflecting back the town's and the park's streetlights, but Brit no longer needed them to see the lay of the land. It swelled and dipped before her, curving fire lapped by the wine of the sea.

The volume of the audience's murmuring increased for a few seconds as the door behind her opened and quickly shut. She turned to face her ally, Mr. Crofutt. "So anointing them with flowers and nectar and pollen like that made them yours?" he asked. "Your kids?"

"As much mine as the women's they was born to." New queen, new hive. New rules. New reproductive techniques, not involving sex.

"And they won't die? Won't kill themselves?"

"Prolly not." Brit frowned. "You say them suicides was like allergic reactions to the entities. Rare."

"Better keep an eye on them anyway."

"Yeah." Or a sensory organ of some sort. She closed her eyes and checked just to make sure. Everyone was fine.