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T I M E **T R A V E L** **R E C E N T T R I P S**

EDITED BY PAULA GURAN

TIME TRAVEL: RECENT TRIPS

PAULA GURAN

*For Ann VanderMeer—
with special thanks for pointing out a couple of these.*



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ISBN: 978-1-60701-439-3 (ebook)
ISBN: 978-1-60701-434-8 (trade paperback)

PRIME BOOKS
Germantown, MD
www.prime-books.com

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TIME TRAVEL ORIENTATION

Paula Guran

Welcome to the twenty-first century, chrononaut! The stories collected herein were all originally published within the last decade (2005–2014 CE) and reflect what early-twenty-first-century short-form fictioneers imagine (or perhaps know/knew/will know) concerning time travel.

Despite my claim on the back cover, I'm not really sure humankind has always been fascinated with the idea of time travel. The desire to go backward to an earlier era or forward to a future date—or even travel to an alternate timeline—probably requires that one (at least initially) consider time as more or less linear.

Although the subject is currently debated among Egyptologists, there is a school of thought positing that ancient Egyptians considered time as measurable for mundane reasons, but, cosmically, as cyclical, unquantifiable, and not tied to space at all. Ancient Greek philosophers had varying views on time: Antiphon the Sophist wrote, in the fifth century BCE: “Time is not a reality (*hypostasis*), but a concept (*noêma*) or a measure (*metron*).” Parmenides of Elea, who lived around the same time, considered existence as timeless; motion and change were illusions—what our senses told us were false.

The Buddha (c. 563 BCE or c. 480 BCE–c. 483 BCE or c. 400 BCE) said, “Life is ever changing, moment to moment. The only constant is change.” Thus, since reality is fluid, possibility is unpredictable, and the past nonexistent—“now” is all there is.

Even in historical Western science and philosophy there are different points of view—the “realist” perspective or “Newtonian time,” and the “relational theory” to which Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) adhered:

[Sir Isaac] Newton . . . did not regard space and time as genuine substances . . . but rather as real entities with their own manner of existence . . . To paraphrase: Absolute, true, and mathematical time, from its own nature, passes equably without relation to anything external, and thus without reference to any change or way of measuring of time (e.g., the hour, day, month, or year). [Rynasiewicz, Robert: Johns Hopkins University (12 August 2004). “Newton’s Views on Space, Time, and Motion,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University.]

Leibniz postulated: “. . . space and time are internal or intrinsic features of the complete concepts of things, not extrinsic . . . Leibniz’s view has two major implications. First, there is no absolute location in either space or time; location is always the situation of an object or event relative to other objects and events. Second, space and time are not in themselves real (that is, not substances). Space and time are, rather, ideal. Space and time are just metaphysically illegitimate ways of perceiving certain virtual relations between substances. They are phenomena or, strictly speaking, illusions (although they are illusions that are well-founded upon the internal properties of substances) . . . [Burnham, Douglas: Staffordshire University (2006). “Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) Metaphysics–7. Space, Time, and Indiscernibles.” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.]

Still—I suspect individual human imaginations have always considered going “back” to the past

for one reason or another and yearned to take a peek at what “the future” holds.

[Editorial Note: All dates from this point on stated as CE.]

As a fictional theme, time travel is a concept that has existed in English-language literature at least since 1843 when Charles Dickens’s character, Scrooge, traveled back and forth in time (was it all a dream?) in *A Christmas Carol*. In one of Edgar Allan Poe’s early (and lesser) works of short fiction, “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” (1844), a character named Bedloe can inexplicably recount being at a battle in India in 1780. Although not a dream, the time travel is ambiguously explained: perhaps “galvanic shock” or mesmerism or even reincarnation is the answer.

Edward Page Mitchell’s story, “The Clock That Went Backward”—more easily defined as a true time-travel tale—was published in 1881. But the concept gained a firm grip on popular imagination with H. G. Wells’s novella *The Time Machine* in 1895. (It was inspired by his earlier—1888—short story, “The Chronic Argonauts.”)

Just a decade later, in 1905, Albert Einstein published his theory of special relativity . . . and time travel (of a sort) suddenly seemed, if not probable, at least possible. The “time-dilation” effect of special relativity (now proven) is most easily and commonly explained with a tiny fiction: There is a pair of twins. One stays on Earth, the other—traveling at close to the speed of light—takes a trip into outer space and back that lasts ten years as far as the Earth-bound twin is concerned. But for the space voyaging twin, very little time has passed at all. The stay-at-home twin has aged a decade while the traveler leaped ten years into the future and does not age.

And, as we now know but don’t really notice, we are all traveling into the future at different infinitesimally small (but real) rates. The universe is structured so that we have to be traveling into the future all the time.

Visiting the past, or coming back from the future—well, that’s a different matter. But now, we can now at least consider the possibility, thanks to scientists who—starting in the mid 1980s—have theorized the possibility of “traversable wormholes” in general relativity. Since then, many highly theoretical ways to warp space and time have been proposed . . . and challenged . . . paradoxes noted . . . and countered.

Meanwhile, science has both inspired and been ignored by fiction writers and filmmakers who have never stopped imagining time travel. Nor, evidently, has it lost its allure for the public.

Long a plot point for myriad television episodes and a few series over the years, the concept of time travel was integral to the recent series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008–2009) and *The Fringe* (2008–2013). *Doctor Who*’s time- and space-traveling “Time Lord” and his vehicle, the Tardis (1963–current), are cultural icons.

Time travel has also remained an entertaining, if not always in-depth, consideration in films. Among the recent: *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), *Men in Black II* (2003), *The Robinsons* (animated, 2007), *The Time Traveler’s Wife* (2009), *Star Trek* (2009), *Frequently Asked Questions About Time Travel* (2009, UK-only), *Looper* (2012), *About Time* (2013), *Time Travel Love* (short, 2014) and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014).

Nor has the (probably) most popular (and possibly the best) time-travel movie been forgotten. The now-venerable film *Back to the Future*, released in 1985, will debut as a stage musical in London’s West End in 2015, the thirtieth anniversary of the film’s release.

Time travel has remained a theme, if not exactly a staple, of novels. Only two novels—Stephen King’s *11/22/63* (Scribner, 2011) and Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife* (actually published in 2003, but the 2009 movie has kept it on bestseller lists)—have reached huge reading audiences.

The outstanding *Blackout* and *All Clear* (one novel in two volumes; Spectra, 2010) by Connie

Willis won the Nebula, Hugo, and Locus Awards. The duology—part of Willis’s fiction involving a mid-twenty-first century time traveler from Oxford, England—has reached a more than respectable readership, but not sold the hundreds of thousand copies King and Niffenegger have.

The same can be said for Charles Yu’s *How to Live Safely in a Science-Fictional Universe* (Pantheon, 2010).

The Shining Girls by Lauren Beukes (Umuzi, South Africa; HarperCollins, United Kingdom; Mulholland Books, US; 2013)—which received both high praise and some mixed reviews—has gained considerable readership, but has not yet made a major impact.

The late Kage Baker’s historical time-travel science fiction stories and novels of “The Company” (first novel: *In the Garden of Iden*, Harcourt, 1997) have continued into this decade, most notably with the novel *The Empress of Mars* (Tor, 2009), collections *Gods and Pawns* (Tor 2007), *The Best of Kage Baker* (Subterranean, 2012), and—with the assistance of her Baker’s sister, Kathleen Bartholomew—*In the Company of Thieves* (Tachyon, 2013). Novella *The Women of Nell Gwynne’s* (Subterranean, 2009) won the Nebula and Locus Awards, and was nominated for Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. Baker’s work has, so-far, achieved at least a cult-level popularity.

Other notable time-travel novels of the period include: *The Plot to Save Socrates* (Tor, 2007) and its sequel, *Unburning Alexandria* (JoSara MeDia, 2013), by Paul Levinson; *Man in the Empty Suit* by Sean Ferrell (Soho Press, 2013); *The Beautiful Land* by Alan Averill (Ace, 2013) and *Child of a Hidden Sea* by A. M. Dellamonica (Tor, 2014).

Time travel is also a popular theme in the romance genre, but the chronological is considerably outweighed by the carnal (or merely starry-eyed) in these plots, so I shan’t delve into them here.

Plotwise, the same is often true with recent young adult titles, but some emphasize adventure and/or intrigue more than romance. A few bestselling titles from the last few years in this latter category include *Revolution* by Jennifer Donnelly (Random House Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2010), *The Here and Now* by Ann Brashares (Delacorte, 2014), *The Glass Sentence* by S.E. Grove (Viking Juvenile, 2014), and—for even younger readers (8-12 years)—the Newbery Award-winning *When you Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead (Yearling, 2009).

As for the short form—time travel fiction in the current era offers vast variety and a wealth of choices, as I hope this volume helps substantiate. Solid theoretical physics underlies some stories, others eschew the scientific for either the fantastic or the ambiguous-or-only assumed science. Nor is the theme always taken completely seriously. Motivation for chronological wanderings or observations are just as diverse. Thus, in these eighteen stories, you will find the need to acknowledge history combining with political complexity and mixing with theoretical physics . . . an ancestor’s heroics inspiring one chrononaut while recording history itself fascinating another . . . only the details of properly dressing time travelers is considered in one story . . . vacations are taken to observe dinosaurs and repair relationships . . . experimental trips taken . . . viewing the past is a struggle to save the world . . . time travel is controlled by bureaucracy . . . love makes a man go back and try to alter the history . . . history is merely recorded . . . a scientific breakthrough is used to learn of a personal past and glimpse one’s own future . . . art is saved from destruction . . . the past is sometimes changed and the future altered, or not . . . time travel is one of the many layers of rip-snorting, action-packed, retro-Mars adventure . . . and much, much more.

So enjoy your many journeys, but don’t lose track of when you are.

Paula Guram
Bastille Day 2013

WITH FATE CONSPIRE

Vandana Singh

I saw him in a dream, the dead man. He was dreaming too, and I couldn't tell if I was in his dream or he in mine. He was floating over a delta, watching a web of rivulets running this way and that, the whole stream rushing to a destination I couldn't see.

I woke up with the haunted feeling that I had been used to in my youth. I haven't felt like that in a long time. The feeling of being possessed, inhabited, although lightly, as though a homeless person was sleeping in the courtyard of my consciousness. The dead man wasn't any trouble; he was just sharing the space in my mind, not really caring who I was. But this returning of my old ability, as unexpected as it was, startled me out of the apathy in which I had been living my life. I wanted to find him, this dead man.

I think it is because of the Machine that these old feelings are being resurrected. It takes up an entire room, although the only part of it I see is the thing that looks like a durbeen, a telescope. The Machine looks into the past, which is why I've been thinking about my own girlhood. If I could spy on myself as I ran up and down the crowded streets and alleys of Park Circus! But the scientists who work the Machine tell me that the scope can't look into the recent past. They never tell me the *why* of anything even when I ask—they smile and say, "Don't bother about things like that, Gargi-di! What you are doing is great, a great contribution." To my captors—they think they are my benefactors but truly, they are my captors—to them, I am something very special, because of my ability with the scope; but because I am not like them, they don't really see me as I am.

An illiterate woman, bred in the back streets and alleyways of Old Kolkata, of no more importance than a cockroach—what saved me from being stamped out by the great, indifferent foot of the mighty is this . . . ability. The Machine gives sight to a select few, and it doesn't care if you are rich or poor, man or woman.

I wonder if they guess I'm lying to them?

They've set the scope at a particular moment of history: the spring of 1856, and a particular place Metiabruz in Kolkata. I am supposed to spy on an exiled ruler of that time, to see what he does every morning, out on the terrace, and to record what he says. He is a large, sad, weepy man. He is the Nawab of Awadh, ousted from his beloved home by the conquering British. He is a poet.

They tell me he wrote the song "Babul Mora," which to me is the most interesting and important thing about him, because I learned that song as a girl. The song is about a woman leaving, looking back at her childhood home, and it makes me cry sometimes even though my childhood wasn't idyllic. And yet there are things I remember, incongruous things like a great field of rice and water gleaming between the new shoots, and a bagula, hunched and dignified like an old priest, standing knee deep in water, waiting for fish. I remember the smell of the sea, many miles away, borne on the wind. My mother's village, Siridanga.

How I began to lie to my captors was sheer chance. There was something wrong with the Machine. I don't understand how it works, of course, but the scientists were having trouble setting the date. The girl called Nondini kept cursing and muttering about spacetime fuzziness. The fact that they could not look through the scope to verify what they were doing, not having the kind of brain suitable for it, meant that I had to keep looking to check whether they had got back to Wajid Ali Shah in the Kolkata of 1856.

I'll never forget when I first saw the woman. I knew it was the wrong place and time, but, instead

of telling my captors, I kept quiet. She was looking up toward me (my viewpoint must have been near the ceiling). ~~She was not young, but she was respectable, you could see that. A housewife squatting on her haunches in a big, old-fashioned kitchen, stacking dirty dishes.~~ I don't know why she looked up at that moment but it struck me at once: the furtive expression on her face. A sensitive face, with beautiful eyes, a woman who, I could tell, was a warm-hearted motherly type—so why did she look like that, as though she had a dirty secret? The scope doesn't stay connected to the past for more than a few blinks of the eye, so that was all I had: a glimpse.

Nondini nudged me, asking “Gargi-di, is that the right place and time?” Without thinking, I said yes.

That is how it begins: the story of my deception. That simple “yes” began the unraveling of everything.

The institute is a great glass monstrosity that towers above the ground somewhere in New Parktown, which I am told is many miles south of Kolkata. Only the part we're on is not flooded. All around my building are other such buildings, so that when I look out of the window I see only reflections—of my building and the others and my own face, a small, dark oval. At first it drove me crazy, being trapped not only by the building but also by these tricks of light.

And my captors were trapped too, but they seemed unmindful of the fact. They had grown accustomed. I resolved in my first week that I would not become accustomed. No, I didn't regret leaving behind my mean little life, with all its difficulties and constraints, but I was under no illusions. I had exchanged one prison for another.

In any life, I think, there are apparently unimportant moments that turn out to matter the most. For me as a girl it was those glimpses of my mother's village, poor as it was. I don't remember the bad things. I remember the sky, the view of paddy fields from my grandfather's hut on a hillock, and the tame pigeon who cooed and postured on a wooden post in the muddy little courtyard. I think it was here I must have drawn my first real breath. There was an older cousin I don't recall very well, except as a voice, a guide through this exhilarating new world, where I realized that food grew on trees, that birds and animals had their own tongues, their languages, their stories. The world exploded into wonders during those brief visits. But always they were just small breaks in my life as one more poor child in the great city. Or so I thought. What I now think is that those moments gave me a taste for something I've never had—a kind of freedom, a soaring.

I want to be able to share this with the dead man who haunts my dreams. I want him, whoever he is wherever he is, to have what I had so briefly. The great open spaces, the chance to run through the fields and listen to the birds tell their stories. He might wake up from being dead then, might think of other things besides deltas.

He sits in my consciousness so lightly, I wonder if he even exists, whether he is an imagining rather than a haunting. But I recognize the feeling of a haunting like that, even though it has been years since I experienced the last one.

The most important haunting of my life was when I was, maybe, fourteen. We didn't know our birthdays, so I can't be sure. But I remember that an old man crept into my mind, a tired old man. Lila Wajid Ali Shah more than a hundred years ago, this man was a poet. But there the similarity ended because he had been ground down by poverty; his respectability was all he had left. When I saw him in my mind he was sitting under an awning. There was a lot of noise nearby, the kind of hullabaloo that a vegetable market generates. I sensed immediately that he was miserable, and this was confirmed later when I met him. All my hauntings have been of people who are hurt, or grieving, or otherwise in distress.

He wasn't a mullah, Rahman Khan, but the street kids all called him Maula, so I did too. I think he accepted it with deprecation. He was a kind man. He would sit under a tree at the edge of the road with an old typewriter, waiting for people to come to him for typing letters and important documents and so on. He only had a few customers. Most of the time he would stare into the distance with rheumy eyes, seeing not the noisy market but some other vista, and he would recite poetry. I found time from my little jobs in the fruit market to sit by him and sometimes I would bring him a stolen pear or mango. He was the one who taught me to appreciate language, the meanings of words. He told me about poets he loved, Wajid Ali Shah and Khayyam and Rumi, and our own Rabindranath and Nazrul and the poets of the humbler folk, the baul and the maajhis. Once I asked him to teach me how to read and write. He had me practice letters in Hindi and Bengali on discarded sheets of typing paper, but the need to fill our stomachs prevented me from giving time to the task, and I soon forgot what I'd learned. In any case at that age I didn't realize its importance—it was no more than a passing fancy. But he did improve my Hindi, which I had picked up from my father, and taught me some Urdu, and a handful of songs, including "Babul Mora."

Babul Mora, he would sing in his thin, cracked voice. *Naihar chuuto hi jaaye*.

It is a woman's song, a woman leaving her childhood home with her newlywed husband, looking back from the cart for the last time. *Father mine, my home slips away from me*. Although my father died before I was grown, the song still brings tears to my eyes.

The old man gave me my fancy way of speaking. People laugh at me sometimes when I use nice words, nicely, when a few plain ones would do. What good is fancy speech to a woman who grew up poor and illiterate? But I don't care. When I talk in that way I feel as though I am touching the essence of the world. I got that from Maula. All my life I have tried to give away what I received but my one child died soon after birth and nobody else wanted what I had. Poetry. A vision of freedom. Rice fields, birds, the distant blue line of the sea. Siridanga.

Later, after my father died, I started to work in people's houses with my mother. Clean and cook, and go to another house, clean and cook. Some of the people were nice but others yelled at us and were suspicious of us. I remember one fat lady who smelled strongly of flowers and sweat, who got angry because I touched the curtains.

The curtains were blue and white and had lace on them, and I had never seen anything as delicate and beautiful. I reached my hand out and touched them and she yelled at me. I was just a child, and whatever she said, my hands weren't dirty. I tried to defend myself but my mother herself shut me up. She didn't want to lose her job. I remember being so angry I thought I would catch fire from inside. I think all those houses must be under water now. There will be fish nibbling at the fine lace drawing room curtains. Slime on the walls, the carpets rotted. All our cleaning for nothing!

I have to find the dead man. I have to get out of here somehow.

The scientist called Nondini sees me as a real person, I think, not just as someone with a special ability who is otherwise nothing special. She has sympathy for me partly because there is a relative of hers who might still be in a refugee camp, and she has been going from one to the other to try to find her. The camps are mostly full of slum-dwellers because when the river overflowed and the sea came over the land, it drowned everything except for the skyscrapers. All the people who lived in slums or low buildings, who didn't have relatives with intact homes, had to go to the camps. I was in the big one, Sahapur, where they actually tried to help people find jobs, and tested them for all kinds of practical skills, because we were—most of us—laborers, domestic help, that sort of thing. And they gave us medical tests also. That's how I got my job, my large clean room with a big-screen TV, and all the food I want—after they found out I had the kind of brain the Machine can use.

But I can't go back to the camp to see my friends. Many of them had left before me anyway,

farmed out to corporations where they could be useful with medical tests and get free medicines also. Ashima had cancer and she got to go to one of those places, but there is no way I can find out what happened to her. I imagine her somewhere like this place, with everything free and all the mishti-doi she can eat. I hope she's all right. Kabir had a limp from birth but he's only eighteen, so maybe they can fix it. When she has time, Nondini lets me talk about them. Otherwise I feel as though nothing from that time was real, that I never had a mother and father, or a husband who left me after our son died. As if my friends never existed. It drives me crazy sometimes to return to my room after working in the same building, and to find nothing but the same programs on the TV. At first I was so excited about all the luxury but now I get bored and fretful to the point where I am scared of my impulses. Especially when the night market comes and sets up on the streets below, every week. I can't see the market from my high window, but I can see the lights dancing on the windows of the building on the other side of the square. I can smell fish frying and hear people talking, yelling out prices, and I hear singing. It is the singing that makes my blood wild. The first time they had a group of maajhis come, nearly broke the window glass, I so wanted to jump out. They know how to sing to the soul.

Maajhi, O Maajhi
My beloved waits
On the other shore . . .

I think the scientists are out at the market all night, because when they come in the next day, on Monday, their eyes are red, and they are bad-tempered, and there is something far away about them, though they've been in another world. It could just be the rice beer, of course.

My captors won't let me out for some months, until they are sure I've "settled down." I can't even go to another floor of this building.

There have been cases of people from the refugee camps escaping from their jobs, trying to go back to their old lives, their old friends, as though those things existed any more. So there are rules that you have to be on probation before you are granted citizenship of the city, which then allows you to go freely everywhere. Of course "everywhere" is mostly under water, for what it's worth. Meanwhile Nondini lets me have this recorder that I'm speaking into, so I won't get too lonely. So I can hear my own voice played back. What a strange one she is!

Nondini is small and slight, with eyes that slant up just a little at the corners. She has worked hard all her life to study history. I never knew there was so much history in the world until my job began! She keeps giving me videos about the past—not just Wajid Ali Shah but also further back, to the time when the British were here, and before that when Kolkata was just a little village on the Hugli river. It is nearly impossible to believe that there was a time when the alleyways and marketplaces and shantytowns and skyscrapers didn't exist—there were forests and fields, and the slow windings of the river, and wild animals. I wish I could see that. But they—the scientists—aren't interested in that period.

What they *do* want to know is whether there were poems or songs of Wajid Ali Shah that were unrecorded. They want me to catch him at a moment when he would recite something new that had been forgotten over the centuries. What I don't understand is, Why all this fuss about old poetry? I like poetry more than most people, but it isn't what you'd do in the middle of a great flood. When I challenge the scientists some of them look embarrassed, like Brijesh; and Unnikrishnan shakes his head. Their leader, Dr. Mitra, she just looks impatient, and Nondini says "poetry can save the world." I may be uneducated but I am not stupid. They're hiding something from me.

The housewife—the woman for whom I have abandoned Wajid Ali Shah—interests me. Her name is

Rassundari—I know, because someone in her household called her name. Most of the time they call her ~~Rasu or Sundari, or daughter-in-law, or sister-in-law, etcetera,~~ but this time some visitor called her full name, carefully and formally. I wish I could talk to her. It would be nice to talk to someone who is like me. How stupid that sounds! This woman clearly comes from a rich rural family—a big joint family it is, all under the same roof. She is nothing like me. But I feel she could talk to me as an ordinary woman, which is what I am.

I wish I could see the outside of her house. They are rich landowners, so it must be beautiful outside. I wonder if it is like my mother's village. Odd that although I have hardly spent any time in Siridanga, I long for it now as though I had been born there.

The first time after I found Rassundari, Nondini asked me if I'd discovered anything new about Wajid Ali Shah. I felt a bit sorry for her because I was deceiving her, so I said, out of my head, without thinking:

“I think he's writing a new song.”

The scope doesn't give you a clear enough view to read writing in a book, even if I could read. But Wajid Ali Shah loves gatherings of poets and musicians, where he sings or recites his own works. So Nondini asked me:

“Did he say anything out loud?”

Again without thinking I said, maybe because I was tired, and lonely, and missing my friends:

“Yes, but only one line: *'If there was someone for such as me . . .'*” I had spoken out of the isolation I had been feeling, and out of irritation, because I wanted to get back to my housewife. I would have taken my lie back at once if I could. Nondini's eyes lit up.

“That is new! I must record that!” And in the next room there was a flurry of activity.

So began my secret career as a poet.

Rassundari works really hard. One day I watched her nearly all day, and she was in the kitchen almost the whole time. Cooking, cleaning, supervising a boy who comes to clean the dishes. The people of the house seem to eat all the time. She always waits for them to finish before she eats, but that day she didn't get a chance at all. A guest came at the last minute after everyone had eaten lunch, so she cooked for him, and after that one of the small children was fussing so she took him on her lap and tried to eat her rice, which was on a plate on the floor in front of her, but she had taken just one mouthful when he urinated all over her and her food. The look on her face! There was such anguish, but after a moment she began to laugh. She comforted the child and took him away to clean up, and came back and cleaned the kitchen, and by that time it was evening and time to cook the evening meal. I felt so bad for her! I have known hunger sometimes as a girl, and I could not have imagined that a person who was the daughter-in-law of such a big house could go hungry too. She never seems to get angry about it—I don't understand that, because I can be quick to anger myself. But maybe it is because everyone in the house is nice to her. I can only see the kitchen of course, but whenever people come in to eat or just to talk with her, they treat her well—even her mother-in-law speaks kindly to her.

Her older son is a charming little boy, who comes and sits near her when he is practicing his lessons. He is learning the alphabet.

She makes him repeat everything to her several times. Seeing him revives the dull pain in my head that never goes away. I wonder what my child would have looked like, had he survived. He only lived two days. But those are old sorrows.

I want to know why Rassundari looks, sometimes, like she has a guilty secret.

The dead man has started talking to me in my dreams. He thinks I am someone called Kajori, who

must have been a lover. He cries for me, thinking I'm her. He weeps with agony, calls to me to come to his arms, sleep in his bed. I have to say that while I am not the kind of woman who would jump into the arms of just any man, let alone one who is dead, his longing awakes the loneliness in me. I remember what it was like to love a man, even though my husband turned out to be a cowardly bastard. In between his sobs the dead man mutters things that perhaps only this Kajori understands.

Floating over the silver webbing of the delta, he babbles about space and time.

"Time!" he tells me. "Look, look at that rivulet. Look at this one."

It seems to me that he thinks the delta is made by a river of time, not water. He says time has thickness—and it doesn't flow in one straight line—it meanders. It splits up into little branches, some of which join up again. He calls this *fine structure*. I have never thought about this before, but the idea makes sense. The dead man shows me history, the sweep of it, the rise and fall of kings and dynasties, how the branches intersect and move on, and how some of the rivulets dry up and die. He tells me how the weight of events and possibilities determines how the rivulets of time flow.

"I must save the world," he says at the end, just before he starts to cry.

I know Rassundari's secret now.

She was sitting in the kitchen alone, after everyone had eaten. She squatted among the pots and pans, scouring them, looking around her warily like a thief in her own house. She dipped a wet finger into the ash pile and wrote on the thali the letter her son had been practicing in the afternoon, *kah*. She wrote it big, which is how I could see it. She said it aloud, that's how I know what letter it was.

She erased it, wrote it again. The triangular shape of the first loop, the down-curve of the next stroke, like a bird bending to drink. Yes, and the line of the roof from which the character was suspended, like wet socks on a clothesline. She shivered with pleasure. Then someone called her name, and she hastily scrubbed the letter away.

How strange this is! There she is, in an age when a woman, a respectable upper-caste woman, isn't supposed to be able to read, so she has to learn on the sly, like a criminal. Here I am, in an age when women can be scientists like Nondini, yet I can't read. What I learned from the Maula, I forgot. I can't recognize familiar shop signs and so on from their shapes, not the sounds the shapes are supposed to represent, and anyway machines tell you everything. Nondini tells me that now very few people need to read because of mobiles, and because information can be shown and spoken by machines.

After watching Rassundari write for the first time, that desire woke in me, to learn how to read. My captors would not have denied me materials if I'd asked them, but I thought it would be much more interesting to learn from a woman dead for maybe hundreds of years. This is possible because the Machine now stays stuck in the set time and place for hours instead of minutes. Earlier it would keep disconnecting after five or ten minutes and you would have to wait until it came back. Its new steadiness makes the scientists very happy.

So now when I am at the scope, my captors leave me to myself. As Rassundari writes, I copy the letters on a sheet of paper and whisper the sounds under my breath.

The scientists annoy me after each session with their questions, and sometimes when I feel wicked I tell them that Wajid Ali Shah is going through a dry spell. Other times I make up lines that he supposedly spoke to his gathering of fellow poets. I tell them these are bits and fragments and pieces of longer works.

*If there was someone for such as me
Would that cause great inconvenience for you, O universe?
Would the stars go out and fall from the sky?*

I am enjoying this, even though my poetry is that of a beginner, crude, and direct. Wajid Ali Shah also wrote in the commoner's tongue, which makes my deception possible. I also suspect that these scientists don't know enough about poetry to tell the difference.

My dear teacher, the Maula, would talk for hours about rhyme and lilt, and the difference between a ghazal and a rubayi. I didn't understand half of what he said but I learned enough to know that there is a way of talking about poetry if you are learned in the subject. And the scientists don't seem to read like that. They just exclaim and repeat my lines, and wonder whether this is a fragment, or a complete poem.

One day I want to write my poetry in my own hand.

Imagine me, Gargi, doing all this! A person of no importance and look where life has got me!

I now know who Kajori is.

I didn't know that was her first name. Even the older scientists call her Dr. Mitra. She's a tall, thin woman, the boss of the others, and she always looks busy and harassed. Sometimes she smiles, and her smile is twisted. I took a dislike to her at first because she always looked through me, as though I wasn't there. Now I still dislike her but I'm sorry for her. And angry with her. The dead man, her lover, she must have sent him away, trapped him in that place where he floats above the delta of the river of time. It's my dream he comes into, not hers. I can hardly bear his agony, his weeping, the way he calls out for her. I wonder why she has abandoned him.

I think he's in this building. The first time this thought occurred to me I couldn't stop shaking. It made sense. All my hauntings have been people physically close to me.

They won't let me leave this floor. I can leave my room now, but the doors to the stairs are locked and the lifts don't work after everyone leaves. But I will find a way. I'm tired of being confined like this.

I realize now that although I was raised poor and illiterate, I was then at least free to move about, breathe the air, to dream of my mother's home. Siridanga! I want to go back there and see it before I die. I know that the sea has entered the cities and drowned the land, but Siridanga was on a rise overlooking the paddy fields.

My grandparents' hut was on the hillock. Could it still be there? The night market makes me feel restless. The reflections of the lights dance on the windowpanes of the opposite building, as though they are writing something. All this learning to read is making me crazy, because I see letters where they don't exist. In the reflections. In people's hand gestures. And even more strangely, I see some kind of writing in the flow of time, in the dreams the dead man brings me. Those are written in a script I cannot read.

I "discovered" a whole verse of Wajid Ali Shah's poem today, after hours at the scope. There was so much excitement in the analysis room that the scientists let me go to my quarters early. I pleaded a headache but they hardly noticed. So I slipped out, into the elevator, and went up, and down, and got off on floors and walked around. I felt like a mad person, a thief, a free bird. It was ridiculous what an effect this small freedom had!

But after a while I began to get frightened. There was nobody else on the other floors as far as I could tell. The rooms were silent, dark behind doors with glass slits. I know that the scientists live somewhere here, maybe in the other buildings. Nondini tells me we are in a cluster of buildings near the sea that were built to withstand the flood. From her hints and from the TV I know that the world is ending. It's not just here. Everywhere cities are flooded or consumed by fire. Everything is dying. I have never been able to quite believe this before, perhaps because of my peculiar situation, which prevents me from seeing things for myself. But ultimately the silence and darkness of the rest of the

building brought it home to me, and I felt as if I were drowning in sadness.

Then I sensed a pull, a current—a shout in my mind. It was him, the dead man. *Kajori!* he called again and again, and I found myself climbing to the floor above, to a closed door in the dark corridor.

I tried the handle, felt the smooth, paneled wood, but of course it was locked. With my ear against the door I could feel the hum of machinery, and there was a soft flow of air from beneath the door.

I called back to him in my mind.

I can't get in, I said. Talk to me!

His voice in my mind was full of static, so I couldn't understand everything. Even when I heard the words, they didn't make sense. I think he was muttering to himself, or to Kajori.

“ . . . rivulets of time . . . two time-streams come together . . . ah . . . in a loop . . . if only . . . shift the flow, shift the flow . . . another future . . . must lock to past coordinate, establish resonance . . . new tomorrow . . . ”

The chowkidar who is supposed to guard the elevator caught me on my way downstairs. He is a lazy, sullen fellow who never misses an opportunity to throw his weight around. I am more than a match for him though. He reported me, of course, to Nondini and Unnikrishnan, but I argued my case well. I simply said I was restless and wanted to see if there was a nice view from the other floors.

What could they say to that?

I tried to make sense of the dead man's gibberish all day. At night he came into my dreams as usual. I let him talk, prompting him with questions when something didn't make sense. I had to be clever to conceal my ignorance, since he thought I was Kajori, but the poor fellow is so emotionally overwrought that he is unlikely to be suspicious. But when he started weeping in his loneliness, I couldn't bear it. I thought: I will distract him with poetry.

I told him about the poem I am writing. It turns out he likes poetry. The poem he and Kajori love the best is an English translation of something by Omar Khayyam.

“Remember it, Kajori?” he said to me. He recited it in English, which I don't understand, and then in Bangla—“Oh love, if you and I could, with fate conspire,” he said, taking me with a jolt back to my girlhood: me sitting by the Maula in the mad confusion of the market, the two of us seeing nothing but poetry, mango juice running down our chins. Oh yes, I remember, I said to my dead man. Then it was my turn. I told him about what I was writing and he got really interested. Suggested words, gave me ideas. So two lines of “Wajid Ali Shah's poem” came to me.

*Clouds are borne on the wind
The river winds toward home*

It was only the next day that I started to connect things in my mind. I think I know what the project is really about.

These people are not scientists, they are jadugars. Or maybe that's what scientists are, magicians who try to pass themselves off as ordinary people.

See, the dead man's idea is that time is like a river delta; lots of thin streams and fat streams, flowing from past to present, but fanning out. History and time control each other, so that if some future place is deeply affected by some past history, those two time streams will connect. When that happens it diverts time from the future place and shifts the flow in each channel so that the river as a whole might change its course.

They're trying to change the future.

I am stunned. If this is true, why didn't they tell me? Don't I also want the world to survive? It's my world too. This also means that I am more important to them than they ever let me know. I didn't realize all this at once; it is just now beginning to connect in my mind.

I burn inside with anger. At the same time, I am undone with wonder.

~~I think the dead man is trying to save the world. I think the scope and the dead man are part of the same Machine.~~

I wonder how much of their schemes I have messed up by locking the Machine into a different time and place than their calculations required.

What shall I do?

For now I have done nothing.

I need to find out more. How terrible it is to be ignorant! One doesn't even know where to start.

I looked at the history books Nondini had let me have—talking books—but they told me nothing about Rassundari. Then I remembered that one of the rooms on my floor housed a library from the days before the scientists had taken over the building.

I think Nondini sensed how restless I was feeling, and she must have talked to Kajori (I can't think of her as Dr. Mitra now) so I have permission to spend some of my spare time in the library.

They might let me go to the night market tomorrow too, with an escort. I went and thanked Kajori. I said that I was homesick for my mother's village home, Siridanga, and it made me feel crazy sometimes not to be able to walk around. At that she really looked at me, a surprised look, and smiled. I don't think it was a nice smile, but I couldn't be certain.

So, the library. It is a whole apartment full of books of the old kind. But the best thing about it is that there is a corner window from which I can see between two tall buildings. I can see the ocean! These windows don't open but when I saw the ocean I wept. I was in such a state of sadness and joy at once, I forgot what I was there for.

The books were divided according to subject, so I practiced reading the subject labels first. It took me two days and some help from Nondini (I had to disguise the intent of my search) before I learned how to use the computer to search for information. I was astonished to find out that my housewife had written a book! So all that painful learning on the sly had come to something! I felt proud of her. There was the book in the autobiography section: *Amar Jiban*, written by a woman called Rassundari more than two hundred and fifty years ago. I clutched the book to me and took it with me to read.

It is very hard reading a real book. I have to keep looking at my notes from my lessons with Rassundari. It helps that Nondini got me some alphabet books. She finds my interest in reading rather touching, I think.

But I am getting through Rassundari's work. Her writing is simple and so moving. What I can't understand is why she is so calm about the injustices in her life. Where is her anger? I would have gotten angry. I feel for her as I read.

I wish I could tell Rassundari that her efforts will not be in vain—that she will write her autobiography and publish it at the age of sixty, and that the future will honor her. But how can I tell her that, even if there was a way she could hear me? What can I tell her about this world? My wanderings through the building have made me realize that the world I've known is going away, as inevitably as the tide, with no hope of return.

Unless the dead man and I save it.

I have been talking to Rassundari. Of course she can't hear me, but it comforts me to be able to talk to someone, really talk to them. Sometimes Rassundari looks up toward the point near the ceiling from which I am observing her. At those moments it seems to me that she senses my presence. Once she seemed about to say something, then shook her head and went back to the cooking.

I still haven't told anybody about my deceit. I have found out that Wajid Ali Shah and Rassundari lived at around the same time, although he was in Kolkata and she in a village that is now in

Bangladesh. From what the dead man tells me, it is time that is important, not space. At least that is what I can gather from his babblings, although spacetime fuzziness or resolution is also important. So maybe my deception hasn't caused any harm. I hope not. I am an uneducated woman, and when I sit in that library I feel as though there is so much to know. If someone had told me that, encouraged me as a child, where might I have been today? And yet think about the dead man, with all his education. There he is, a hundred times more trapped than me, a thousand times lonelier. Yet he must be a good man, to give himself for the world.

He's been asking me anxiously: *Kajori, can you feel the shift in the timeflow? Have we locked into the pastpoint?* I always tell him I feel it just a little, which reassures him that his sacrifice is not for nothing. I wish I could tell him: I am Gargi, not Kajori. Instead I tell him I love him, I miss him. Sometimes I really feel that I do.

I have been speaking to Rassundari for nearly a week.

One of the scientists, Brijesh, caught me talking into the scope. He came into the room to get some papers he'd left behind. I jumped guiltily.

"Gargi-di? What are you doing . . . ?" he says with eyebrows raised.

"I just like to talk to myself. Repeat things Wajid Ali Shah is saying."

He looks interested. "A new poem?"

"Bah!" I say. "You people think he says nothing but poetry all the time? Right now he's trying to woo his mistress."

This embarrasses Brijesh, as I know it would. I smile at him and go back to the scope.

But yes, I was talking about Rassundari.

Now I know that she senses something. She always looks up at me, puzzled as to how a corner of the ceiling appears to call to her.

Does she hear me, or see some kind of image? I don't know. I keep telling her not to be afraid, that I am from the future, and that she is famous for her writing. Whether she can tell what I am saying I don't know. She does look around from time to time, afraid as though others might be there, so I think maybe she hears me, faintly, like an echo.

Does this mean that our rivulet of time is beginning to connect with her time stream?

I think my mind must be like an old-fashioned radio. It picks up things: the dead man's ramblings, the sounds and sights of the past.

Now it seems to be picking up the voices from the books in this room. I was deaf once, but now I can hear them as I read, slowly and painfully. All those stories, all those wonders. If I'd only known!

I talk to the dead. I talk to the dead of my time, and the woman Rassundari of the past, who is dead now. My closest confidants are the dead.

The dead man—I wish I knew his name—tells me that we have made a loop in time. He is not sure how the great delta's direction will change—whether it will be enough, or too little, or too much.

He has not quite understood the calculations that the Machine is doing. He is preoccupied. But when I call to him, he is tender, grateful. "Kajori," he says, "I have no regrets. Just this one thing, please do it for me. What you promised. Let me die once the loop has fully stabilized." In one dream I saw through his eyes. He was in a tank, wires coming out of his body, floating. In that scene there was no river of time, just the luminous water below him, and the glass casing around. What a terrible prison! If he really does live like that, I think he can no longer survive outside the tank, which is why he wants to die.

It is so painful to think about this that I must distract us both. We talk about poetry, and later the next few lines of the poem come to me.

Clouds are borne on the wind

The river winds toward home

From my prison window I see the way to my village

In its cage of bone my heart weeps

When I was the river, you were the shore

Why have you forsaken me?

I am getting confused. It is Kajori who is supposed to be in love with the dead man, not me.

So many things happened these last two days.

The night before last, the maajhis sang in the night market. I heard their voices ululating, the dotaras throbbing in time with the flute's sadness. A man's voice, and then a woman's, weaving in and out. I imagined them on their boats, plying the waters all over the drowned city as they had once sailed the rivers of my drowned land. I was filled with a painful ecstasy that made me want to run, or fly.

I wanted to break the windows.

The next morning I spent some hours at the scope. I told Rassundari my whole story. I still can't be sure she hears me, but her upturned, attentive face gives me hope. She senses something, for certain, because she put her hand to her ear as though straining to hear. Another new thing is that she is sometimes snappy. This has never happened before. She snapped at her nephew the other day, and later spoke sharply to her husband. After both those instances she felt so bad! She begged forgiveness about twelve times. Both her nephew and her husband seemed confused, but accepted her apology. I wonder if the distraction I am bringing into her life is having an effect on her mind. It occurs to me that perhaps, like the dead man, she can sense my thoughts, or at least feel the currents of my mind.

The loop in the time stream has stabilized. Unnikrishnan told me I need not be at the scope all the time, because the connection is always there, instead of timing out. The scientists were nervous and irritable; Kajori had shut herself up in her office. Were they waiting for the change? How will they tell that the change has come? Have we saved the world? Or did my duplicity ruin it?

I was in the library in the afternoon, a book on my lap, watching the gray waves far over the sea, when the dead man shouted in my mind. At this I peered out—the hall was empty. The scientists have been getting increasingly careless. The lift was unguarded.

So up I went to the floor above. The great wood-paneled door was open. Inside the long, dimly lit room stood Kajori, her face wet with tears, calling his name.

“Subir! Subir!”

She didn't notice me.

He lay naked in the enormous tank like a child sleeping on its belly. He was neither young nor old. His long hair, afloat in the water like seaweed, was sprinkled with gray, his dangling arms thin as sticks. Wires came out of him at dozens of places, and there were large banks of machinery all around the tank. His skin gleamed as though encased in some kind of oil.

He didn't know she was there, I think. His mind was seething with confusion. He wanted to die, and his death hadn't happened on schedule. A terror was growing in him.

“You promised, Kajori!”

She just wept with her face against the tank. She didn't turn off any switches. She didn't hear him, but I felt his cry in every fiber of my being.

“He wants to die,” I said.

She turned, her face twisted with hatred.

“What are you doing here? Get out!”

“Go flee, Subir!” I said. I ran in and began pulling out plugs, turning off switches in the banks of

machines around the tank. Kajori tried to stop me but I pushed her away. The lights in the tank dimmed. His arms flailed for a while, then grew still. Over Kajori's scream I heard his mind going out like the tide goes out, wafting toward me a whisper: thank you, thank you, thank you.

I became aware of the others around me, and Kajori shouting and sobbing.

"She went mad! She killed him!"

"You know he had to die," I said to her. I swallowed. "I could hear his thoughts. He . . . he loved you very much."

She shouted something incomprehensible at me. Her sobbing subsided. Even though she hated me I could tell that she was beginning to accept what had happened. I'd done her a favor, after all, done the thing she had feared to do. I stared at her sadly and she looked away.

"Take her back to her room," she said. I drew myself up.

"I am leaving here," I said, "to go home to Siridanga. To find my family."

"You fool," Kajori said. "Don't you know, this place used to be Siridanga. You are standing on it."

They took me to my room and locked me in.

After a long time of lying in my bed, watching the shadows grow as the light faded, I made myself get up. I washed my face. I felt so empty, so faint. I had lost my family and my friends, and the dead man, Subir. I hadn't even been able to say goodbye to Rassundari.

And Siridanga, where was Siridanga? The city had taken it from me.

And eventually the sea would take it from the city. Where were my people? Where was home?

That night the maajhis sang. They sang of the water that had overflowed the rivers. They sang of the rivers that the city streets had become. They sang of the boats they had plied over river after river time after time. They sang, at last, of the sea.

The fires from the night market lit up the windows of the opposite building. The reflections went from windowpane to windowpane, with the same deliberate care that Rassundari took with her writing.

I felt that at last she was reaching through time to me, to our dying world, writing her messages on the walls of our building in letters of fire. She was writing my song.

Nondini came and unlocked my door sometime before dawn. Her face was filled with something that had not been there before, a defiance. I pulled her into my room.

"I have to tell you something," I said. I sat her down in a chair and told her the whole story of how I'd deceived them.

"Did I ruin everything?" I said at the end, fearful at her silence.

"I don't know, Gargi-di," she said at last. She sounded very young, and tired. "We don't know what happens when a time-loop is formed artificially. It may bring in a world that is much worse than this one. Or not. There's always a risk. We argued about it a lot and finally we thought it was worth doing. As a last ditch effort."

"If you'd told me all this, I wouldn't have done any of it," I said, astounded. Who were they to act as Kalki? How could they have done something of this magnitude, not even knowing whether it would make for a better world?

"That's why we didn't tell you," she said. "You don't understand, we—scientists, governments, people like us around the world—tried everything to avert catastrophe. But it was too late. Nothing worked. And now we are past the point where any change can make a difference."

" 'People like us,' you say," I said. "What about people like me? We don't count, do we?"

She shook her head at that, but she had no answer.

It was time to go. I said goodbye, leaving her sitting in the darkness of my room, and ran down the stairs. All the way to the front steps, out of the building, out of my old life, the tired old time stream. The square was full of the night market people packing up—fish vendors, and entertainers, getting ready to return another day. I looked around at the tall buildings, the long shafts of paling sky between

them, water at the edge of the island lapping ever higher. The long boats were tethered there, weatherbeaten and much-mended. The maajhis were leaving, but not to return. I talked to an old man by one of their boats. He said they were going to sea.

“There’s nothing left for us here,” he said. “Ever since last night the wind has been blowing us seaward, telling us to hasten, so we will follow it. Come with us if you wish.”

So in that gray dawn, with the wind whipping at the tattered sails and the water making its music against the boats, we took off for the open sea. Looking back, I saw Rassundari writing with dawn’s pale fingers on the windows of the skyscrapers, the start of the letter *kah*, conjugated with *r*. Kra . . . But the boat and the wind took us away before I could finish reading the word. I thought the word reached all the way into the ocean with the paling moonlight still reflected in the surging water.

Naibar chhuto bi jaaye, I thought, and wept.

Now the wind writes on my forehead with invisible tendrils of air, a language I must practice to read. I have left my life and loves behind me, and wish only to be blown about as the sea desires, to have the freedom of the open air, and be witness to the remaking of the world.

TWEMBER

Steve Rasnic Tem

Will observed through the kitchen window of his parent's farmhouse as the towering escarpment, its many strata glittering relative to their contents, moved inescapably through the fields several hundred yards away. He held his breath as it passed over and through fences, barns, tractors, and an abandoned house long shed of paint. Its trespass was apparently without effect, although some of the objects in its wake had appeared to tremble ever so slightly, shining as if washed in a recent, cleansing rain.

"It might be beautiful," his mother said beside him, her palsy magnified by the exertion of standing, "if it weren't so frightening."

"You're pushing yourself." He helped her into one of the old ladder-back kitchen chairs. "You're going to make yourself sick."

"A body needs to see what she's up against." She closed her eyes.

He got back to the window in time to see a single tree in the escarpment's wake sway, shake, and fall over. Between the long spells of disabling interference he had heard television commentators relate how, other than the symptomatic "cosmetic" impact on climate, sometimes nearby objects were affected, possibly even destroyed, when touched by the escarpments, or the walls, or the roaming cliffs—whatever you cared to call the phenomena. These effects were still poorly understood, and "under investigation" and there had been "no official conclusions." Will wondered if there ever would be, but no one would ever again be able to convince him that the consequences of these massive, beautiful, and strange escarpments as they journeyed across the world were merely cosmetic.

His mother insisted that the television be kept on, even late at night, and even though it was no better than a white noise machine most of the time. "We can't afford to miss anything important," she'd said. "It's like when there's a tornado coming—you keep your TV on."

"These aren't like tornadoes, Mom. They can't predict them."

"Well, maybe they'll at least figure out what they are, why they're here."

"They've talked about a hundred theories, two hundred. Time disruption, alien invasion, dimensional shifts at the earth's core. Why are tsunamis here? Does it matter? You still can't stop them." At least the constant static on the TV had helped him sleep better.

"They're getting closer." Tracy had come up behind him. There was a time when she would have put her arms around him at this point, but that affectionate gesture didn't appear to be in his wife's repertoire anymore.

"Maybe. But it's not like they have intelligence," he said, not really wanting to continue their old argument, but unable to simply let it go.

"See how it changes course, just slightly?" she said. "And there's enough tilt from vertical I'm sure that can't just be an optical illusion. It leans toward occupied areas. I've been watching this one off and on all day, whenever it's visible, almost from the time it came out of the ground."

"They don't really come out of the ground." He tried to sound neutral, patient, but he doubted he was succeeding. "They've said it just looks that way. They're forming from the ground up, that's all."

"We don't know that much about them. No one does," she snapped.

"It's not like it's some predator surfacing, like a shark or a snake, prowling for victims." He was unable to soften the tone of his voice.

"You don't know that for sure."

Will watched as the escarpment either flowed out of visual range or dematerialized, it was hard to tell. "No. I guess I don't."

“Some of the people around here are saying that those things sense where there are people living, that they’re drawn there, like sharks to bait. They say they learn.”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “I hope not.” Of course she was entitled to her opinion, and it wasn’t that he knew any more than she did. But they used to know how to disagree.

He could hear his father stirring in the bedroom. The old man shuffled out, his eyes wet, unfocused. The way he moved past, Will wasn’t sure if he even knew they were there. His father gazed out the window, and not for the first time Will wondered what exactly he was seeing. In the hazy distance another escarpment seemed to be making its appearance, but it might simply be the dust blown up from the ground, meeting the low-lying, streaked clouds. Then his father said, “Chugchugchugchugchug” and made a *whooh whoohing* sound, like a train. Then he made his way out to the porch.

In his bedroom, Jeff began to whimper. Tracy went in to check on him. Will knew he should join her there—he’d barely looked at his son in days, except to say good-night after the boy was already asleep—but considering how awkward it would be with the three of them he instead grabbed the keys to his dad’s pickup and went out looking for the place where the escarpment had passed through and touched that tree.

Will had grown up here in eastern Colorado, gone to school, helped his parents out on the farm. It really hadn’t changed that much over the decades, until recently, with that confusion of seasons that frequently followed the passage of escarpments through a region. The actual temperatures might vary only a few degrees from the norm, but the accompanying visual clues were often deceptive and disorienting. Stretches of this past summer had felt almost wintery, what with reduced sunlight, a deadening of plant color, and even the ghostly manifestation of a kind of faux snow which disintegrated into a shower of minute light-reflecting particles when touched.

Those suffering from seasonal affective disorder had had no summer reprieve this year. He’d heard stories that a few of the more sensitive victims had taken to their beds for most of the entire year. Colorado had a reputation for unpredictable weather, but these outbreaks, these “invasions” as some people called them, had taken this tendency toward meteorological unreliability to a new extreme.

Now it was, or at least should have been, September, with autumn on the way but still a few pretty hot days, but there were—or at least there appeared to be—almost no leaves on the trees, and no indications that there ever had been, and a gray-white sky had developed over the past few weeks, an immense amorphous shroud hanging just above the tops of the trees, as if the entire world had gone into storage. Dead of winter, or so he would have thought, if he’d actually lost track of the weeks, which he dare not do. He studied the calendar at least once a day and tried to make what he saw outside conform with memories of seasons past, as if he might will a return to normalcy.

Thankfully there had been few signs as yet of that fake snow. The official word was that the snow-like manifestation was harmless for incidental contact, and safe for children. Will wasn’t yet convinced—the very existence of it gave him the creeps, thinking that some sort of metaphysical infection might have infiltrated the very atomic structure of the world, and haunted it.

“Twember,” was what his mother called this new mixing of the seasons. “It’s all betwixt and between. Pretty soon we’re going to have just this one season. It won’t matter when you plant, or what it’s all going to look like it died.”

He thought he was probably in the correct vicinity now. Parts of the ground had this vaguely rubbed, not quite polished appearance, as if the path had been heated and ever-so-slightly glazed by the friction of the escarpment’s passing. The air was charged—it seemed to push back, making his skin tingle and his hair stir. A small tree slightly to one side of the path had been bent the opposite way, several of its branches fresh and shiny as Spring, as if they had been gently renewed, lovingly washed, but the rest with that flat, dead look he’d come to hate.

Spotting a patch of glitter on the ground, Will pulled off onto the shoulder and got out of the truck. As he walked closer he could see how here and there sprays of the shiny stuff must have spewed out of the passing escarpment, suggesting contents escaping under pressure, like plumes of steam. He dropped to one knee and examined the spot: a mix of old coins, buttons, bits of glass, small metal figures, toys, vacation mementos, souvenirs, suggesting the random debris left in the bottom of the miscellanea drawer after the good stuff has been packed away for some major household move—the stuff you threw in the trash or left behind for the next tenants.

The strong scent of persimmons permeated the air. The funny thing was, he had no idea how he knew this. Will didn't think he'd ever seen one, much less smelled it. Was it a flower, or a fruit?

For a few minutes he thought there were no other signs of the escarpment's passing, but then he began to notice things. A reflection a few yards away turned out to be an antique oil lamp. He supposed it was remotely possible such a thing could have been lost or discarded and still remain relatively intact, but this lamp was pristine, with at least an inch of oil still in its reservoir. And a few feet beyond were a pair of women's shoes, covered in white satin, delicate and expensive-looking, set upright on the pale dust as if the owner had stepped out of them but moments before, racing for the party she could not afford to miss.

The old house had been abandoned sometime in the seventies, the structure variously adapted since then to store equipment, hay, even as a makeshift shelter for a small herd of goats. From the outside it looked very much the same, and Will might have passed it by, but then he saw the ornate bedpost through one of the broken windows, and the look of fresh blue paint over part of one exterior wall, and he knew that something had occurred here out of the ordinary.

The house hadn't had a door in a decade or more, and still did not, but the framing around the door opening appeared almost new, and was of metal—which it had never been—attached to a ragged border of brick which had incongruously blended in to the edges of the original wood-framed wall. Two enormous, shiny brass hinges stood out from this frame like the flags of some new, insurgent government. The effect was as if a door were about to materialize, or else had almost completed its disappearance.

Once he was past the door frame, the small abandoned house appeared as he might normally expect. Islands of dirt, drifted in through the opening or blown through the missing windows, looked to have eaten through the floorboards, some sprouting prairie grass and gray aster. There were also the scat of some wild animal or other, probably fox or coyote, small pieces of old hay from back when the building had been used for feed storage, and a variety of vulgar graffiti on the ruined walls, none of it appearing to be of recent vintage.

A short hallway led from this front room into the back of the house, and as he passed through Will began to notice a more remarkable sort of misalignment, a clear discrepancy between what was and what should have been.

A broken piece of shelf hung on the wall approximately midway through the brief hallway. It had a couple of small objects on it. On closer inspection he saw that it wasn't broken at all—the edges of the wood actually appeared finely frayed, the threads of what was alternating with the threads of what was not. Along the frayed edge lay approximately one third of an old daguerreotype—although not at all old, it seemed. Shiny-new, glass sealed around the intact edges with rolled copper, laid inside a wood and leather case. A large portion of the entire package bitten off, missing, not torn exactly, or broken for the missing bite of it too was delicately, wispily frayed, glass fibers floating into empty air as if pulled away. The image under the glass was of a newly married couple in Victorian-style clothing, their expressions like those under duress: the bride straining out a thin smile, the groom stiffly erect, as if his neck were braced.

A piece of pale gauze covered the opening at the end of the short hall. Now lifting on a cool breeze

the gauze slapped the walls on both sides, the ceiling. Will stepped forward and gently pulled it aside feeling like an intruder.

A four-poster bed sat diagonally in the ruined room, the incongruous scent of the perfumed linen still strong despite faint traces of an abandoned staleness and animal decay. The bed looked recently slept in, the covers just pulled back, the missing woman—he figured it was probably a woman—having stepped out for a moment. Peering closer, he found a long, copper-colored hair on the pillow. He picked it up gently, holding it like something precious against the fading afternoon light drifting lazily in through the broken window. He wanted to take it with him, but he didn't know exactly why, or how he could, or if he should. So he laid it carefully back down on the pillow, in its approximate original location.

Half a mirror torn lengthwise was propped against a wide gap in the outer wall. Beyond was simply more of the eastern Colorado plains, scrub grass and scattered stone, but somewhat smoother than normal, shinier, and Will surmised that the escarpment had exited the farm house at this point.

He found himself creeping up to the mirror, nervous to look inside. Will never looked at mirrors much, even under normal conditions. He wasn't that old—in his fifties still, and as far as he knew, the same person inside, thinking the same thoughts he'd had at seventeen, eighteen, twenty. But what he saw in the mirror had stopped matching the self-image in his brain some time long ago.

He stopped a couple of feet away, focusing on the ragged edge where the escarpment had cut through and obliterated the present, or the past. More of that floating raggedness, suggesting a kind of yearning for completion, for what was missing. His reluctance to find his reflection made him reel a bit. What if he looked down and it was himself as a teenager looking up, with obvious signs of disappointment on his face?

But it was himself, although perhaps a bit older, paler, as if the color were being leached out and eventually he would disappear. The problem with avoiding your image in the mirror was that when you finally did see it, it was a bit of a shock, really, because of how much you had changed. Who was this old man with his thoughts?

He left the abandoned house and strolled slowly toward the pickup, watching the ground, looking for additional leavings but finding nothing. The empty ground looked like it always did out here, as it probably did in any open, unsettled place, as if it were ageless, unfixed, and yet fundamentally unchangeable. Whatever might be done to it, it would always return to this.

He wanted to describe to Tracy what he'd seen here, but what, exactly, had he seen? Time had passed this way, and left some things behind, then gone on its way. And the world was fundamentally unchanged. His mother might understand better, but Tracy was the one he wanted to tell, even though she might not hear him.

He felt the pressure change inside his ears, and he turned part of the way around, looking, but not seeing. Suddenly the world roared up behind him, passed him, and he shook.

He bent slightly backwards, looking up, terrified he might lose his balance, and having no idea of what the possible consequences might be. The moving escarpment towered high above him, shaking and out of focus as it passed, and shaking him, seemingly shaking the ground, but clearly this wasn't physical shaking, clearly this was no earthquake, but a violent vibration of the senses, and the consciousness behind them. Closing his eyes minimized the sensation, but he didn't want to miss anything, so other than a few involuntary blinks he kept them open. He turned his body around as best he could, as quickly, to get a better view.

He could make out the top of the escarpment, at least he could see that it did have a top, an edge indicating that it had stopped its vertical climb, but he could tell little more than that. As his eyes traveled further down he was able to focus on more detail, and taking a few steps back gave him a better perspective.

There were numerous more or less clearly defined strata, each in movement seemingly independent of the others, sometimes in an opposite flow from those adjacent, and sometimes the same but at a different speed. Like a multilayered roulette wheel, he thought, which seemed appropriate.

Trapped in most of these layers were visible figures—some of them blurred, but some of them so clear and vivid that when they were looking in his direction, as if from a wide window in the side of a building, he attempted to gain their attention by waving. None responded in any definitive way, although here and there the possibility that they might have seen him certainly seemed to be there.

The vast majority of these figures appeared to be ordinary people engaged in ordinary activities—fixing or eating dinner, housecleaning, working in offices, factories, on farms—but occasionally he'd see something indicating that an unusual event was occurring or had recently occurred. A man lying on his back, people gathered around, some attending to the fallen figure but most bearing witness. A couple being chased by a crowd. A woman in obvious anguish, screaming in a foreign language. A blurred figure in freefall from a tall building.

The settings for these dramas, suspenseful or otherwise, were most often sketchily drawn: some vague furniture, the outlines of a building, or not indicated at all. The figures sometimes acted their parts on a backdrop of floating abstractions. In a few cases, however, it was like looking out his front door—at random locations a tree branch or a roof eave actually penetrated the outer plane of the escarpment and hung there like a three-dimensional projection in the contemporary air.

It was like a gigantic three-dimensional time-line/cruise ship passing through the eastern Colorado plains, each level representing a different era. It was like a giant fault in time, shifting the temporal balance of the world in an attempt to rectify past mistakes. But there was no compelling reason to believe any of these theories. It was an enormous, fracturing mystery traveling through the world.

And just as suddenly as it had appeared, becoming so dramatically *there* it sucked up all the available reality of its environment, it was gone, reduced to a series of windy, dust-filled eddies that dissipated within a few seconds. Will shakily examined himself with eyes and hands. Would he lose his mind the way his Jeff had?

If they'd pulled their son out of school when these storms first began he'd be okay right now. That's what they'd been called at first, "storms," because of their sudden evolution, and the occasional accompanying wind, and the original belief that they were an atmospheric phenomenon of some sort, an optical illusion much like sunlight making a rainbow when it passed through moisture-laden clouds, although they couldn't imagine why it was so detailed, or the mechanism of its projection. Tracy had wanted to pull Jeff out until the world better understood what all this was about, and a few other parents, a very few, had already done so. But Will couldn't see the reasoning. If there was a danger how would Jeff be any safer at home? These insubstantial moving walls came out of nowhere, impossible to predict, and as far as anyone knew they weren't harmful. There had been that case of the farmer in Texas, but he'd been old, and practically senile anyway, and it must have been a terrible shock when it passed through his barn.

Tracy inevitably blamed Will, because in Jeff's case it certainly hadn't been harmless, and then Will had compounded things by being late that day. Will was often late. He had always worked at being some sort of success, even though the right combination of jobs and investments had always eluded him. He'd been selling spas and real estate, filling in the gaps with various accounting and IT consulting. Too many clients, too many little puzzle pieces of time, everything overlapping slightly so that at times his life was multidimensional, unfocused, and he was always late to wherever he was scheduled to be.

He'd pulled up to the school twenty minutes late that day to pick up Jeff. Normally it wouldn't have mattered that much—Jeff liked hanging out in the school library using their computers. And if

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