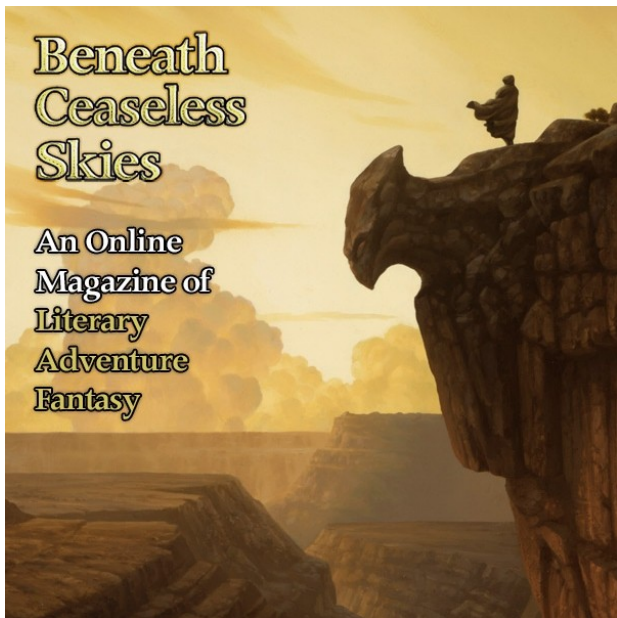


Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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MISTER HADJ'S SUNSET RIDE

by Saladin Ahmed

"...and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind."

—Qu'ran 5:32

The toughest man I ever met? That's an easy answer to give, but a tricky tale to tell.

Mister Hadj was from the same place as my rattlesnake of a Pa. Araby, or someplace like, though I don't rightly know the name since neither him nor my Pa ever said a blasted word about the Old Country. You'd ask and ask, and all you'd get back was a look as hard as rocks. No use digging after that.

I've ridden with good men and bad men, but I never rode with a man like Mister Hadj. That wasn't his proper name. Just a way of calling the old man respectful-like. My Pa taught me that, if I ever met a man from the Old Country, to call him 'Hadj.' Damn near the *only* thing that sonuvabitch ever taught me.

Anyhow, a good few years back now, when I was a young, full-of-hissself bounty hunter, I fell in with Mister Hadj in the

Black Hills. We rode together about a year. He was a little leather-brown knot of a man with a moonlight-white beard, and he took an immediate and powerful shine to me on account of my Pa's being from Araby.

Now, understand, I'm a bastard. I carry my momma's name—O'Connor. But the way I look—little darker than the average man, I know, and you can see the hatchet nose—well, I get taken for a lot of things. South of the border, I've fibbed that I was half-Mexican. Lived a summer trading with the Cheyenne, claiming to be part redman. Even got chased outta town once when I winked at the wrong girl—they was sure as could be that I was a mulatto!

It can be hell, sometimes, being different things to different folks. But it can be right useful, too.

Well, Mister Hadj musta smelled the Old Country in my blood, somehow. Like I say, he took a shine to me. And my knowing how to call him respectfully seemed to seal it for him. I can't say I ever understood it, but Mister Hadj was the kind of man you wanted on your side, so I wasn't about to complain.

For what it's worth, I was the last man ever saw him alive.

* * *

The last time I rode with Mister Hadj, we was in a little shit town in Texas, trailing Parson Lucifer's gang. Old Parson Lucifer was an ex-preacher, mad as a rabid dog. Said he took

the name ‘cause he was “part blessed and part damned, like any man.” Can’t say I ever saw the blessed part, though.

Like I said, the man was out of his blasted mind. Anything ruthless or nasty you might have heard about his gang was probably the plain truth. That three-day-slow murder of the blacksmith and his wife in Deadwood, done with their own smithing tools? That weren’t no tale. The widower sheriff of Redemption and his baby boys getting their ears chopped off and force-fed to them? Parson Lucifer’d done that, too.

We were in the employ of the town of Crossblood, where even the old Sunday school teacher was foaming at the mouth to see Parson Lucifer and his boys strung up. They’d lost a lot to that gang. Most of the gang had been caught before we ever got hired—and what got done to ‘em wasn’t none too pretty, neither.

But Parson Lucifer and his two sons were still out there.

Well, one and a half of his sons, anyway. To hear it told, two sheriff’s deputies had fired three shots each into his youngest, Shambles. Wasn’t nothing left but a bloody pulp shaped like a man. But Parson Lucifer and his eldest, James, went through the trouble of killing two more men just in order to haul the younger boy’s body away.

Now, Mister Hadj and me wasn't the only hunters hunting these dogs, but it was us that found 'em. Rather, it was *him* that did. By serenading the rocks.

See, that old man could *sing*. I don't think he knew what half the words meant. But when Mister Hadj started in on them cowboy songs—well, as sure as I'm standing here, when that man got to crooning a tune he made the earth itself cry. This ain't just me tale-telling, you hear? I *seen* tears fall from big red rocks when the old man hummed. *Heard* stones weep as they parted before him.

So when Mister Hadj said that a stone in the road told him where to find Parson Lucifer, I didn't doubt it. And though it still spooked me, I didn't flinch when he sang softly to a great big cliff-face until it wept and opened us a passage to a perfect ambush perch.

Y'all ain't got to believe me for it to be truth.

* * *

I never learned Mister Hadj's Christian name, but tell the truth I don't think he *was* a Christian. Not to say he wasn't *living* Christianly, you hear—when we were down Mexico way, that man'd toss his last peso at the first beggar what asked. But I don't think he'd ever touched a Bible in his life. And Sunday to him was just another day.

Every evening, he'd roll out this funny little rug. Then he'd turn his back to the setting sun, bow down and say some'a his words. Heathen praying, far as I could tell.

"You gonna do that every night?" I'd asked him early on.

"Should be more," he'd said in that rocks-and-honey voice. And that was all he'd ever say on the matter.

No, it wasn't nothing Christian. But my momma taught me that another man's religion was like another man's wife—none of my goddamn business. That old gal taught me a lot of lessons, but sticking to my own business was just about the best of 'em.

Granted, he ain't seemed to like words a whole lot. Never said much more than "Yup," "Nope," "I reckon," and "Good, huh?" Once in a while, when he'd get real mad, he'd start to talking his Old Country talk, sounding like... like a man clearing his throat with flowers.

I suppose it would have drove a lot of men mad, riding with a man as quiet as that. And I can't say that, once in a while, I didn't wish Mister Hadj a bit more social. But I've always liked my quiet. Ain't nothing in this world drives me up the wall like riding with a man who keeps on talking when there ain't nothing to say.

I always knew Mister Hadj was there, and that was all I needed to know. By my hope of being saved, I'll tell you I never

saw a man as good with a gun. It wasn't natural, the things that old man could do with a Navy Colt or a Winchester. You'll think I'm talking tall, but I'd swear it before the Almighty hisself: I seen Mister Hadj shoot the buck teeth off a jumping jackrabbit. Seen him shoot another man's bullets out the air. Seen him shoot more than a couple men, too. We made a over a dozen bounties in our year together. And not all of 'em were alive. Not by a clean sight.

* * *

We was spying on Parson Lucifer and his son from our hiding place high in the cliff-face when Mister Hadj, for reasons knowed only to him at the time, insisted we wait till the next day to nab the bastards. Well, I didn't want to hear that. I was a foolish young man in those days. Hot and headstrong, with even more to prove than your average prairie boy.

"Tummarah," he said, making the word sound like his Old Country talk. He was loading his Colt with funny-looking bullets. Silver, if I didn't miss my guess.

"Tomorrow!? We've got 'em dead to rights right now! With them powers you got—"

Mister Hadj looked up from his gun and ran a hand over his beard. "Powers? Shut up, you. Just a knack."

"A knack?! You can—"

I stopped, knowing I'd flapped my gums too much. The old man didn't like it when I brought up the things he could do. His eyes narrowed like I'd just called his momma a whore. Somewhere out there in the purple early evening, a coyote howled.

Mister Hadj spit at my feet and jabbed a tree-branch trigger finger at me. "Talk too much. Just heed, huh? Tummarah."

"Now look here," I said. "You know I respect your experience. And I do try to heed you, but—"

"Should be more," the old man said, and turned his back to me.

Now, if I'd had half a head on my shoulders, that woulda been the end of it. But I was young, a little fired up, and a lot of stupid. I thought I could make Mister Hadj respect me. And half a whisky flask later I just *knew* I could do it by bushwhackin' two outlaws singlehanded. So after Mister Hadj'd turned his back to the sunset, said his 'Should be more' rug-prayer to his heathen god and gone to sleep, I snuck down the cliff.

Like I said, young and stupid. If I hadn't been drunk on top of that, I might have given a second thought to those silver bullets Mister Hadj'd been fiddling with.

Them boys was too smart to set a campfire. But the moon was big and bright and by its light I could see Parson Lucifer's white preacher's collar. He was snoring away, but his son James was on watch. I crept up behind James, close and quiet.

Now, even a boy as brash as I was knows that taking on two men at once—even if one of 'em is sleeping—requires getting underhanded. And when it comes to a gang of killers like Parson Lucifer's, well, I got no problem shooting a man in the back. So that's what I done. Three shots right up that boy James's spine.

Excepting it wasn't James that I shot. It wasn't James that turned around. It was the other boy. The dead one. I swear it by God and my mamma's grave.

That boy Shambles just stared at me, something like a smile on his rotten, chopped-steak half-a-face. I put another slug right through his eyeball, but the boy didn't even bleed. Now I'd heard that when he was a natural living man, they called him Shambles on account of his funny walk. But when I shot that boy four times and he ain't stopped coming at me, well, that name wasn't so funny no more.

My mouth dried up, my heart hammered hard, and I screamed and ran back the way I'd come. But there was Parson Lucifer cut right across my path, wide awake and a revolver in his gray-gloved hand. His boy James was beside him.

They didn't shoot me. Just laughed and told me to drop my gun or they'd give me to Shambles. I heard the dead boy laughing through his opened throat and—I won't lie—I wet myself. Then I dropped my gun.

* * *

A half hour later I found myself lying trussed up on the ground with two teeth knocked out. Parson Lucifer's boot-heel was digging into my cheek, and I was wishing I'd listened to Mister Hadj 'stead of letting my hot blood send me off half-cocked.

"Don't look so worried, boy," the old bandito laughed. "I ain't going to kill you yet. No, you got to die in a special way. A slow way. That hex what raised my boy Shambles is constantly calling for fresh blood. Having you here, well, it saves me dangerous raidin' on a town." He took his boot from my face and strutted slowly into view. He smiled a nasty little smile and looked up at the night sky. "The spilling, though, has to happen at sunrise, when Shambles sleeps. So you got yourself another few hours to live."

Tears started to burn in my eyes. It's one thing to get shot, but it's another thing entire to have your blood spilled for black magic. I swallowed and foolishly tried to play on the guilty conscience of a man who didn't know what conscience was.

“You know you killed a little girl during that last robbery? Eight years old and you—” I felt fear filling me, but I still wasn’t ready to make the man shoot me premature for naming him for the monster he was. I switched up to make like I was giving him the benefit of the doubt. “Now, could be it was an accident...,” I started.

But Parson Lucifer just frowned at me like a disappointed uncle. “Boy, ain’t nothing involving a pistol and Parson Lucifer ever an *accident*.”

A better man would have called Parson Lucifer a devilish, dog-faced son of a whore just then. But it wasn’t a better man lying there with his face in the dirt. It was just me, and I kept my peace as that devilish, dog-faced son of a whore went on.

“The girl died for a purpose, boy—more than most folk these days can claim. Every man and every child must play his part. I ravage so that our Lord Christ can heal.”

“And I guess you make a nice living doing it, don’t you?”

The old bastard smiled. “There’s a Caesar in all of us, boy, and we must render unto him what is his. But the girl’s was just one life. Even way the hell out here, there’s a lot of lives to go around. Ain’t any one of ‘em any more sacred than another, far as God’s concerned. You think our savior cares more about some snot-nosed child than about a sinner like me? You must

not read your Bible then, boy. Ain't no man ever kept Jesus' love busier than I have."

That thing he called his son shambled into my view and gibbered something. Whoever it used to be, right then it just looked like a plate of bloody meat walking on two legs. My breath caught in my chest.

"And what about that creature there?" I said, trying to make the bold in me cover up the scared pissless.

"My hex brought my boy Shambles back alive, even after what them snaky deputies done to him. That's the Lord's work, boy. Same thing our savior did with Lazarus. This here's a Christian hex I put on my beautiful baby boy."

I couldn't hardly help myself. "Mister, I don't know *what* to call that, 'cept to say that it's about as Christian as pissin' in the pulpit on a Sunday morning."

And at that moment Mister Hadj appeared from I-don't-know-where, looking to my frightened eyes like an avenging angel of the Lord.

He sang a quick string of words in his talk—sounded similar to his sunset prayers, best as I could tell. The rocks around us wailed right back, and Parson Lucifer looked all around, frantic-like. Then Mister Hadj shot five of them silver bullets into Shambles.

That thing what used to be a living man stopped and dropped to the ground. There wasn't no blood coming from where Mister Hadj had shot him, but the way he started to moaning, well, it was like all them bullets that he oughtn't have been able to walk away from had all caught up with him.

There was one last howl, like a demon getting his tooth yanked by the meanest barber in the world. Then Shambles stopped moving, stopped kicking, and died an honest death.

Mister Hadj already had his gun on Parson Lucifer, and now he was whistling "Bright River Valley." The rocks kept a-wailing. And I swear to y'all that a little piece of flint jumped up and cut my bonds.

But by then the boy James, who'd been off shaking a sagebrush when Mister Hadj showed up, had his gun on me.

James gestured toward me with the gun and growled at Mister Hadj. "Looks like we're all of us in a fix here. But my Daddy can't see no hangman." He said it in that fast-slow Kansas City way that drives a prairie boy like me clean out my mind, and his Pa finally wore a look of real fear. "Now, I don't know what kind of Injun magic you got hold of here, but my Daddy can't see no hangman. You hear, old man? Whatever kind of red devilishness you done worked against my Daddy's hex, you'd best hope you can lift it and bring back my baby brother. I got a clean shot here at your—"

There was no movement that I saw. But there was a shot, and there was smoke coming from Mister Hadj's gun. And a boy with a hole in his head was lying where a fast-talking murderer had just stood.

"Hurt alotta people. Price to pay. Should be more." Nine words. For Mister Hadj it was like a whole sermon. He looked up at a patch of moonlit cloud in the eastern sky and nodded, like he'd been arguing with the Almighty but was granting God a point.

He didn't even flinch when Parson Lucifer spun around and shot him twice in the chest.

I tried to stop it—fumbled James's dropped gun into my hands and fired in Parson Lucifer's direction, feeling like my anger alone could push the bullet through his skull.

I'm proud to say I killed that hex-casting sonuvabitch.

But I wasn't fast enough. Parson Lucifer and both his boys were dead. But that didn't change Mister Hadj's lying there with two holes in him, and it didn't stop the little red rivers that seeped into the dirt around his old oak root of a body.

* * *

As I say, I was still half-green back then, but I'd already come to know by sight which wounds a man might walk away from. One look told me Mister Hadj wasn't going nowhere else in this life.

Any other man would have been screaming hisself silly. But Mister Hadj was so quiet I could hear the wind whispering in the brush. He grit his teeth and refused the rum and laudanum I offered him. “Tufusahal,” he said, and I thought he was speaking his Old Country talk. I wished my Pa—or anyone from the Old Country—was there, just to hear him say his peace. Hell of a thing to have to speak your last word to a man who can’t understand you.

But he said it again and I realized I *did* understand. “Tough as all Hell,” the old man was saying, the first time I ever heard him talk proud.

“Yeah. You *are* that, Mister Hadj,” I said to him, “Ain’t no man anywhere can begrudge you that.”

That man bought my life with his, God as my witness. I ain’t seen what I’d done to deserve it, to tell the truth. I told him as much, as he lay there dying.

The old coot spit out some blood and smiled real mean-like. “For you?” he said, and shook his head. He pointed his long brown trigger finger up at the sky, like he was naming a target. “For him. Hurt alotta people. Price to pay. Should be more.” And that was the last thing he said.

I watched the light go slowly out of his eyes, saw that smile go slack. I smelled crushed roses in the air, though I can’t say

where the scent came from. For a long time I just sat there, my thoughts mingling with the moonshadows.

I spent that sleepless night burying him with a short-handled shovel, his guns and his little heathen rug beside him. Come morning I was wore out as man could be, but it was time to leave.

“Ashes to ashes,” I said, by way of goodbye to the old man, “dust to dust.” Then I dragged myself eastward, my eyes half-blinded by the rising sun.

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Saladin Ahmed's fiction appears in Strange Horizons, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Clockwork Phoenix 2, and Beneath Ceaseless Skies. His poems have appeared in over a dozen journals and anthologies. He is a finalist for the 2010 Nebula and Campbell awards and is an Active member of SFWA.

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THE SECRET OF POGOPOLIS

by Matthew Bey

By the standards of The City, a place of manic revelry and combustible enthusiasms, Carneby Fleivorwort is an unusually somber man.

For that reason he never got along with his parents, a couple whose temperament ran to the frivolous, lacking what Carneby thought of as a certain disciplined sobriety. They died at perigee when he was still a student. Having reached their padded couches drunk on washtub gin and high on hallucinogenic mushrooms, they didn't settle themselves properly and their vomit was compressed into their lungs.

Few in The City live past the age of forty. Hundreds of perigees take their toll on the human body, on the blood vessels and organs. At the beginning of every ascent, city sanitation workers go from apartment to apartment, removing the quiet corpses from their couches. It is how most people expect to die; with their faces peaceful and their dead brains like sponges in buckets of blood.

As is the tradition in The City, the day after perigee is a day of rest, so Carneby Fleivorwort has not gone in to his job at the

City Library, and has spent the morning strolling along the balconies of Colonel Channellocks Memorial Park. He finds the park banal for the most part. It extends a mere dozen feet beyond The City Limits, and private terraces on the levels below obstruct a good portion of the view. His preferred park, The Grand Promenade, snapped off at perigee a dozen descents previously, the precious dirt and brick plummeting beyond recovery.

Carneby is a pessimist and insists on measuring time by perigees.

He walks along the edge, one hand on the balustrade, dodging the food vendors and the romantic couples. A mime simulates a suicidal leap over The City Limits, thrashing his arms to the amusement of several children. Behind and above Carneby The City rises through the whipping clouds, a sheer cliff of balconies, porticos, striped awnings, terrace cafes, and windows that shine in the sun. But as always, his eyes are not for the city but for the wide expanse of The Earth, creeping by far below.

In a rare act of splurging, Carneby inserts a paper pfenig into one of the observation telescopes set on the railing. Instantly he regrets the expenditure. The lenses of the telescope are laced with cracks from hundreds of perigees. But

he sweeps the telescope on its mount, scanning the ground for the scenery that will give him his money's worth.

Through the cracks in his view he sees a landscape of green forests and meadows, pocked by perfectly circular lakes. He could just barely make out the white flocks of birds wheeling above the choppy waters. Certainly some of these lakes are the marks made by The City in a previous passage.

He has heard people say that another city was sighted before his birth. The engineers spotted it bounding along the horizon, but it had not answered their signal flares and flashing mirrors, as if it were a ghost city, peopled only by the corpses of its citizens. Whether such a thing had really happened, Carneby couldn't guess.

Far out at the edge of the land, Carneby sees a cape stretching into a misty gray ocean. It curves twice; a sigmoid 'S.' He thinks he has never seen such a thing before. Perhaps The City has not passed this way for a lifetime or more; perhaps he is the only living man to have observed this cape.

Were there people living down there in the green of The Earth? Carneby wonders. Or did The Earth exist only for The City to rebound against?

The timing mechanism buzzes and the telescope's shutter irises closed.

No sooner has Carneby taken his eye from the darkened lens and smoothed the waist of his suit-vest than he is knocked to the ground. He smells body odor and an unfamiliar musk. He shoves a squirming body off himself, his irritation making him rougher than he needs to be.

“Get off me! Where are your manners?”

He finds a young woman looking back at him, wild and snarling, her hair tangled in unwashed clumps. It is difficult to determine how old she is. She has an air of freshness about her, a smoothness of skin and lucidity of gaze he has never seen before. She seems close to his age, perhaps a dozen perigees younger.

But it is her clothing that he finds startling. He has seen the material binding one or two of the rarest books in the library. But outside of the library, it is unheard of, and certainly unattainable at the freshness of her garments.

“Is that leather? Where did you get that?” Unable to help himself he reaches out to touch her.

She screams something in words he doesn’t understand and slashes his wrist with a stone tool. She’s on her feet in an instant, scrambling across the low, grassy hills of the park, startling the inbred albino squirrels as they beg for scraps from pedestrians. Carneby holds his bleeding wound and watches as

she disappears through the gate at the base of the Fourth Merchant's Insurance Building.

A few moments later the police run past, sweating and red-faced from their habitual complacency. The City's culture of permissiveness makes it difficult to both commit and enforce crimes. A cop with sergeants chevrons beneath his 'PPD' patch stops in front of Carneby, leaning his hands on his knees and panting. Between gasps he asks, "Have you seen a girl run past here? Dirty? Strangely dressed?"

Carneby just shrugs.

* * *

There are no windows in Carneby's apartment, so he sits on his padded couch of pigeon feathers and stares at the cupboard that holds his ironing board. He has bound the wound the girl has made, and he thinks it will heal without having to pay for a hospital visit. He can't stop thinking about the girl, about the leather she wore and the words she used. His thoughts keep returning to that great blind-spot in the municipal consciousness: the outside.

As far as anyone knew, there had never been anyone who had ever lived outside The City. According to legend a city engineer had once suspended himself on a giant elastic cord, dangling over the edge of the City United Trust Building in order to observe the action of perigee. As the terrible

deceleration of perigee began, his elastic stretched, and when the new ascent began, the elastic rebounded. The engineer snapped high above The City and fell back against the spire of the Commonwealth Building and Loan Headquarters, breaking nearly every bone in his body. He lived only long enough to recount what he had seen—the great shaft beneath The City striking the ground and compressing, then stretching back straight.

As they prepared his body for disposal, they found a clump of dried grass and dirt clenched in his right hand. It was believed that he had actually touched the ground for a moment, the only man in memory to have done so. A city park was covered in grass grown from the seeds found in his fist, a type of grass never before seen.

But no one knows for sure how much of the story is true and how much is an apocryphal legend told to schoolchildren.

* * *

Carneby stays awake all night thinking about the girl. When he arrives at work the next morning, his wounded hand feels swollen and throbbing. He stumbles blearily into the main collection. His supervisor, noticing that Carneby is fifteen minutes early, makes a note in the logbook. Habitual enthusiasm for one's work can attract critical attention in The City.

The library is The City's memory and history and collective character. The shelves of the main collection stand almost thirty-stories tall and coil in a spiral about the main shaft. The number of volumes it contains are beyond reckoning.

Long before the memory of any living librarian, the number of books unshelved by the forces of perigee began to outnumber the quantity of books the librarians could catalog during The City's ascent. Now the thirty stories of shelves are bare. Heaping mounds of books fill the narrow spiral aisle; twisting in dusty chaos toward the center of the library. At one time they had been ordered chronologically, with the volumes pre-dating the construction of The City at the heart of the spiral. Now it is a single scree of paper. In any cycle of ascent and descent, the librarians reshelve no more than the last four years. For that moment of time, for that span of history, before the archival amnesia of perigee, The City's memory is clear.

They had put in a request with the comptroller for straps, or retaining boards of some sort, to keep the books from being knocked loose at perigee, but the library had low priority on the material-allocation budget. The librarians expended all their political capital maintaining their jobs and preventing the recycling of the books into fire-lighters and plywood.

Carneby sits near the jumble of books at the very outside of the spiral. He has developed a system whereby the

reshelving takes half the time as previously. The first book he picks up is called “An Argument in Favor of a Homogenized Hegemony.” He has had to reshelve this very book at least twelve times. It weighs at least fifteen pounds. No one has ever asked for this book. Quite likely no one else in the city knows it exists, or even cares. He hefts it in his good hand and hurls it into the main collection. It enters the darkness behind mountains of dusty volumes, followed shortly by a thud and the flutter of a papery avalanche.

Six other librarians look up from their work. They blink with the indifference of accomplished academics, before returning to their silent labor.

“I’m though with this nonsense! It’s all pointless and circular and weird!” Carneby actually stomps his feet. Only one of the other librarians bothers to acknowledge him this time.

Carneby had once scaled deep into the library, into the darkness where no torch or candle was permitted, where the slightest spark could ignite a papery inferno that would consume The City like a match head; braving the shifting jumble which threatened to collapse further and trap him beyond the help of his colleagues. It was something every new boy at the library had to try at least once.

The old-timers tolerated the risk, knowing that the unsatiated curiosity would prove far more treacherous than any

danger of passage. He carried back a small, red book that dated from well before the memory of anyone living, or even the rumor of anyone who had ever lived. When he got back to the library entrance, he thumbed through it eagerly, hoping to discover forgotten secrets and black arts. In queerly archaic script the book described how to lay bathroom tile.

He does not think of this, but he thinks of the girl as he storms out of the library, out of the musty futility. A cloud envelopes The City, so the air is clammy and cold; an alien and hostile feeling. Rather than a cathartic release, he has an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. With no job or income, he would soon lose the apartment he had worked all his life to attain. He would have to move down to one of the dormitories or the squatter ducts.

* * *

He decides to tell his friend Kellee about the strange girl. Kellee had once worked for The City as an engineer. Often he had come to the library, seeking almanac data and old records. Several times he scaled deep into the library spiral, breaking his arm in the process.

The City had fired him for speaking openly about his theory that The City rebounded higher on every ascent. That the length of the apogee-perigee cycle steadily increased could not be disputed, but most engineers agreed that The City

merely covered more distance with every hop; or possibly that the boundings conformed to some greater cycle that would soon ebb.

Kellee had calculated that The City would someday bound off The Earth completely. He had spent his life's fortune publishing his results as a paid advertisement in the Daily Metropolitan, but few citizens could be bothered to think about threats that far in the future.

Ruined and disillusioned, he had moved to the undercity, to live with the cryptic possum people and spend his last days close to the shaft mechanisms that would decide The City's fate.

When Carneby lowers himself through the hatch into the undercity, he has to use his belt to hold himself to the ladder. His wounded hand can no longer grip with any sort of strength. He begins to question his decision not to purchase medical treatment.

The undercity grows from the shaft like lichen on a tree. The terraces of whicker and sod break off frequently, but they are constantly rebuilt and replaced by the inventive inhabitants. These agricultural patches provide the bulk of The City's food. Scrupulous scavengers salvage the trickles of sewage that drizzle down from The City proper, diverting it into whicker gardens. Because sewage—that perfect fertilizer and

irrigant—is so plentiful, they fight for light, occasionally placing reflectors of aluminum foil above a rival’s garden, diverting the sunshine onto their own crops. The feuds over light grow violent at times, the loser inevitably fertilizing the gardens of his enemy.

Carneby picks his way down a catwalk that spirals down the shaft. All around him the possum people work their harvests, hanging on booms and the edges of acre-sized baskets. Whenever they pass him on the walkway, these strange people with their short, furry bodies, bulbous snouts, and spherical hairdos, nod and greet him in their nonsense language, “Swaller dollar cauliflower,” or the ones with a more somber mood would say, “Harum scarum, five alarum bung-a-loo.”

No one knew if they were descendants of the possums who lived in the sewers and stormdrains, or if they were a separate race of people who had evolved to look possumish over time.

It takes two hours to descend the shaft and arrive at Kellee’s hut at the very bottom of the inhabited city. His ramshackle hut of whicker and cardboard dangles only a few feet above the crosspiece, the narrow plateau that stretches from two opposite sides of the shaft and effectively blocks view of the compression shaft that propels the city. On some of his visits, Carneby has caught Kellee hanging off the edge of the

crosspiece by a cord tied around his waist, mournfully regarding the shaft and the knob far down at the end. He has not yet been suicidal enough to attempt this during perigee, but Carneby suspects that it is only a matter of time before curiosity and perigee-stress dementia persuade his friend to give it a try.

Carneby knocks on the door of corrugated cardboard and Kellee answers, looking incrementally more haggard than previously. Much of his clothes from his period of affluence have torn, the ragged parts patched with tissue in the fashion of the possum people. Stubble and deep wrinkles mar Kellee's face, but he brightens like a child when he sees Carneby.

"My old friend! You have come to visit me. Come in, and I'll make tea."

The old engineer putters about his hovel, putting a fire-hardened gourd over a brazier of pigeon guano. Carneby flops into a sling of hemp fibers and the entire hut sways. Only a dozen cords anchored in rivets on the shaft prevent Kellee's home from dropping to the crosspiece and rolling over the edge like an abandoned bird nest.

Carneby tells his friend about meeting the strange girl at Colonel Channellocks Memorial Park and quitting his job at the city library.

“This is very interesting, Carneby. I draw the same conclusions you do. It is impossible that she came from The City. But it is equally impossible that she came from outside.”

“You’ve gone further into the library than anyone. Have you encountered anything that would explain her? Anything about the construction of The City that we don’t know?”

Kellee shakes his gray head. “In all my explorations of the inner library, I never found anything of interest. Maybe there are no records of the construction. Most likely the records still exist, voluminously perhaps, but nevertheless are lost to us in the chaos of the inner stacks.” He fixes Carneby with old and weary eyes. “You must find this girl. She is worth more than a dozen libraries. Find her, and we will know more about the nature of The City than anyone in generations. We will know what The City is.”

* * *

Carneby spends the rest of the day combing The City, climbing all the levels and promenades, scaling the tallest towers, plumbing the deepest storage lockers, and visiting every district. Although he has spent his whole life in wandering The City, he finds many streets and plazas that he has never seen before. There is an alley in the Washerwoman District where the sky is obscured by clotheslines; it makes him feel like he’s standing beneath a storm of butterflies. He sees an

amphitheater built above an open cistern where hobbyists compete with paper boats, and audiences of lazy housewives jeer at the sopping-wet losers. He meets a man who sells wax models of The City on the street. The devices are no bigger than Carneby's hand, and they hop about the sidewalk like a swarm of one-legged rats. He witnesses a bicycle race that rushes from the very top of The City to the lowest public level, the participants zooming past in a blur of yellows and blues.

It is a futile quest, and he knows this. The City has a glut of people, enough to bury any one person under its sea of humanity.

* * *

On the third day after perigee he attends the Freefall Foy. The celebration of the beginning of ballistic trajectory has always been held in the Upper Mall, the highest public space in The City, a long stretch of lawn and sculpture and fountain bounded by the most prestigious institutions in the community. The City Hall sits at the far end of the mall, faced by the Municipal Reserve Building, where they hoard billions of paper pfenigs against the possibility of economic collapse. Hemp netting stretches from one roof to another, forming a protective ceiling over the mall.

Carneby attempts a relatively anonymous position within the crowd. He can see the main stage from where he stands.

The Mayor sits there with his full ceremonial garb; the sashes, the medals, and the scarlet robes. About him are the municipal engineers, smug and pompous as any politician. They have predicted the moment of parabolic flight with micro-second precision, making trigonometric sightings off the stars, the moon, and passing land features. They have rigged a silver ball to rise on a pole and explode into confetti.

The crowd grows tense and silent as seconds of acceleration remain. Children crouch, preparing to leap just as The City ceases to push against their feet.

As much as he is caught in the mood, Carneby hates this part.

The silver ball explodes.

The City drops away beneath his shoes.

Confetti and children fly everywhere. There is a cheer and a scream of hooplah. The first children drift into the netted ceiling, bouncing back giggling or hanging in space, waiting for their friends to leap up to them.

For all the practice the citizens of The City have with freefall, there is some vomit; some a result of being stoned, drunk, or tripping, but most comes from the nausea of weightlessness, of having all perspective and orientation whisked away, of having the fluids and organs of your body spring into strange new configurations. Although The City

spends as much time in parabolic freefall as it does under acceleration, the body grows accustomed to the tug-of-war between gravity and the shaft.

For most, freefall is a time for drink and drugs. It is a time to forget and relax and celebrate being alive. Work is next to impossible while nothing stays put where you stick it, where your papers and projects can float out the window and never be seen again.

The Freefall Foy has become a three-dimensional turmoil of flying bodies. Strangers meet, colliding forty feet above the mall, and exchange frotteuristic gropes before tumbling their separate ways.

Carneby spots her then. She clings to the sculpted crotch of a urinating fountain, the water of which floats in undulating orbs all about her. She is screaming in mortal terror, the only human being at the foy who has never experienced this before, who has had no idea what to expect. Her locks of tangled hair float about her face like a nest of snakes. She is unbelievably beautiful.

He kicks toward her, cradling his wounded hand against his stomach. Now that he has lost his job, he can not even afford the rental of a chair in the hospital waiting room, let alone proper treatment. Red streaks twist up his forearm, following the paths of his gnarled veins.

She flinches as he snags onto an arm of the sculpted fountain, but fear prevents her from releasing into the tumult of bodies and levitating bubbles of water.

Carneby smiles, an expression he has practiced little, attempting reassurance. "I saw you, at the park the other day. I've been trying to find you."

She clenches the sculpture's thighs in her own, brandishing her stone weapon. It is blackly obsidian, its edge a ragged collection of glistening chips; as sharp and deadly as broken glass. Her warning shout terrifies Carneby, as much by its suggestion of meaning as its patent nonsense.

He shows his wounded hand to her and her eyes widen in recognition. With pantomimed motions he shows her the rope guiderails that line the paths of the Upper Mall for the express purpose of imposing a pedestrian order for those overwhelmed by the impropriety of freefall.

She follows him hesitantly until he buys her a rat- and possum-meat hotdog from a street vender, the cart tethered ten feet above the sidewalk for dramatic effect. With the gestured suggestion of more food, she returns to his apartment with him. After the next perigee, the landlord will come by and demand rent payment that Carneby cannot pay, but until that time, the space is his. The two of them have barely enough

room to stand side by side, even considering the freefall-utilized space near the low ceiling.

Carneby settles the strange girl into his perigee couch, the voluminous stuffing of which nearly swallows her whole. He putters about the countertop which serves as his kitchen, fixing her a meal of pigeon eggs and grits. As the lidded frypan boils above a flame of sewer gas, the girl's stomach rumbles, the first recognizable sound she has made.

"Where are you from? Why are you dressed like that?" He tries to communicate by pointing as she shovels food into her mouth. If it is possible, she is even less intelligible as she eats. Flecks of grits fly out of her mouth and orbit the tiny room as she tells an involved story about her leather skirt. Carneby is so frustrated he wants to pound on the walls until the neighbors call the cops.

"Are you just an idiot? Is that why you can't say anything? Are you too stupid?" Carneby is startled to discover that he is shouting.

The girl bawls. The tears pour out of her eyes, forming goggle-like globules that stick to her eyelashes. In remorse, Carneby holds her shoulders and strokes the tangles of hair that have never seen a comb, crooning words of comfort that make no more sense than hers. She buries her face in his neck, and they finally find a common ground of communication. Her

lips kiss the tender skin of his clavicle. He brushes away her hair and nibbles at her earlobe, tasting it with the very tip of his tongue.

As their hands and feet search the other's body, they lose their grip on the couch and float free inside the room. She pulls off her leather tunic and skirt; the huge flaps of untreated skin, torn in one piece from some monstrous animal that Carneby could not begin to imagine, hang empty in the air, suggesting the shape of a larger and more threatening enigma.

The girl terrifies and frustrates Carneby. But more than that, he is drawn to her in an explosive mixture of curiosity and desire.

They make love in his room, their naked thighs entwined against the freefall. The neighbors pound on the walls, but Carneby and the girl continue their noisy outbursts at intervals throughout the night.

* * *

For the next several days he shows her The City, avoiding the expensive attractions and the more rambunctious parties. They see the Flumbustle Museum of Art and its collection of perigee-mangled paintings and statues. They see the market district where breeders sell every variety of pigeon imaginable, from bright red pigeons, to fighting pigeons with knives tied to

their feet, to pigeons that mumble scraps of love poetry to themselves.

The girl learns the names of a few common objects but nothing of significance. She can point at a food vendor and say “hotdog,” but she cannot tell Carneby where she came from, or even understand the question, which he puts to her a dozen times a day.

Carneby’s hand begins to smell bad. He does not have the courage to unwrap the bandage and see what might be underneath. The girl holds his hand by the wrist for hours, cooing sympathetically. At least once she takes out her stone knife and clearly offers to amputate.

They attend the Apogee Swim, that moment at the height of The City’s arc when the air is becalmed. It is the only time when it is safe to venture beyond The City Limits, if only for a few minutes. Lifeguards perch on short towers along a promenade, equipped with lanyard whistles and padded gaffs tied to the ends of lariats. With serious eyes they watch over the citizens who swim into the great void with flippers and paddles made of cardboard and tape.

The swimmers are intoxicated with their vices of choice as well as the altitude anoxia, the result of the thin air at the top of The City’s bound. Kellee told Carneby once that if The City

bounds much higher, every single citizen will suffocate in the atmospheric kill-zone.

It takes some coaching to lure the girl beyond The City Limits, but she is ecstatic as she ventures out above the green and blue smear of The Earth. They thrash their cardboard fins, inching farther into the abyss, flirting with the airy abyss which is the only respite from the numbing continuity of The City. Carneby hugs her, the adhesive tape along his forearms and shins sticking in the tangles of her hair.

“I love you. I want to go away with you and never see The City again.”

She giggles and hugs him back, pointing at a brown smear of river delta below.

Carneby does not let her go. Not even when she pushes at his chest. Not even as the lifeguards blow their whistles and shout for the air swimmers to return. Not even as the wind picks up, ruffling their clothes. Not even as The City sinks slowly away from them like a cloud of brick and glass. Not even as the girl screams and pounds at his neck.

Carneby does not look down at The Earth. He looks up at the blue expanse of sky and imagines the two of them wafting forever through the heavens, a balloon of arms, legs, and cardboard.

The lifeguards hook them with gaffs and drag them back to The City. Neither he nor the girl look at each other for an entire day.

* * *

For the next six days, The City will be unable to ignore the fact of perigee. They will hurdle toward the ground, building speed until the wind whistles through the buildings like the madness of death, and they will know that soon the perigee will wrench every bone and cell and tendon in their body. Perhaps this will be the time that the shaft sticks improperly, that The City trips and falls. Maybe this time they will fall too far and no one will survive. Maybe this time perigee will strain that weakest blood vessel in their heart or in their brain.

The wind whistles around The City as it plummets, gaining velocity every moment. They are at the entrance to Colonel Channellocks Memorial Park, where they met, when Carneby has to restrain her to keep her from rushing out into the unprotected promenade. It is not uncommon during the descent for people to lose their grips while venturing close to The City Limits and have the wind buffet them into the sky.

Some children have ventured a short ways onto the park balcony, tethering themselves to the railing with cords. They are throwing pieces of paper and scraps of bread over the edge and watching the wind carry them away. Intentionally

removing anything from The City is one of the few things that will get you arrested. Nearly everything can be mended or recycled, but once something has passed beyond The City Limits, it is beyond recovery.

Frantically she gestures, pointing down.

“Yes. We’re falling. The deceleration starts tomorrow.” Carneby doesn’t want to think that far ahead. There is room on his perigee couch for only one. There are charity couches for squatters and the homeless, but they are of low quality and fill up quickly.

She snorts in exasperation and takes him by the wrist. She leads him toward the middle of The City. They float down pedestrian passages like fish of the air, pushing off windowpanes and gutters filled with trickles of cloud mist.

As they get closer to the interior, the neighborhoods grow seedier, the inhabitants more furtive and angry. Trash and filth covers the walls and floats in the air. Fat women in tissue dresses hang from their windows by their ankles, shouting drunken insults at passerby. Faint glimmers of sunlight percolate through the gaps between buildings, but its light is dirty and yellow.

The poor neighborhoods suffer from a leeching of material. Over time they are gutted of plumbing and gas utilities, their pipes torn out and sold to wealthier

neighborhoods. Anything of any value is scavenged, leaving skeletonized housing for those who cannot afford to relocate.

They come to the broad metal wall of the central shaft, the rusty iron dotted with rivets. The girl runs her fingers over it, mumbling to herself.

“This is the shaft,” Carneby says. “You shouldn’t mess with this. It’s against the law, darling.”

“Ah!” she exclaims, and with her fingernails, she pries open a section of plating. Carneby leaps at her, visions of arrest and municipal catastrophe running through his head. He tries to restrain her from this sacrilegious vandalism of The City’s core, the very spine of everyone’s existence, but in his haste he reaches with the wrong hand. The impact of his wounded hand against her shoulder sends him reeling with nausea.

She clucks at him, and he looks up from where he kneels, retching. The plate is open. He can see that it is a door, opening into a passage that leads to the center of the shaft.

Carneby has never heard of such a thing.

She clucks again, pulling him after her into the shaft. The door closes behind them, and they are in total darkness.

After a moment he can hear a chorus of metallic pinging sounds. It sounds like a cross between the tinkling of wind chimes and the thrumming of a banjo string. Carneby can feel the girl search in his pockets and remove his lighter, but he

makes no motion to help her. He is in awe at being inside the shaft, a place as mysterious and alluring as the moon.

Light flares. The girl has lit a torch made from leather and a spear haft. Carneby supposes that she has come this way before, that this was her route into The City. There are now a hundred more questions he wants to ask her, but they are swept away by the sight which surrounds him.

On either side of the passage, what he had thought were the walls, he now sees were springs, clusters of hundreds and thousands of springs of various sizes, shapes and colors. Some springs are small and made of shiny brass. Others are huge as utility poles and made of rusty iron. They are packed densely, each and every one strung from some point high above his head, out of sight in the shadows from the torch, and stretched taut, anchored somewhere beneath the floor of the passage. They drone. If it is a flow of air or temperature changes that disturbs them, or an amplification of vibrations from The City in general, Carneby cannot tell.

Again she leads him deeper, the stretched springs at either side of their passage. They pass through a portal in four-foot steel and emerge into a vast open space. Carneby and the girl both yelp, twisting and scrabbling for handholds, but their momentum carries them clear, surrounded by an infinity of darkness above and below. They cling to each other in the

absence of anything else, the torch with its globe of flame, spinning lazily nearby.

Its light does not illuminate far, but Carneby has the sense that the inner shaft is hollow, stretching as far as he can see toward the top and the bottom of The City. A stairway without a railing twists about the inside of the space. If the girl had climbed that when she arrived, she either had no fear of heights or she was remarkably brave.

They kiss as they tumble. After a seeming eternity, they collide with the far wall of the inner shaft, and the girl manages to snag a hold of the edge of the stairway. She smiles, triumphant in her familiarity with this place. Slyly she points her finger toward the base of The City, toward the bottom of the shaft.

Hand in hand they launch themselves into the depths.

They fall for hours. Occasionally they drift too far to one side and they have to alight on the spiraling stairs and leap again. The thought that deceleration might begin as they are suspended within this directionless abyss, terrifies Carneby. Their delicate freefall would last only as long as it took to collide with the bottom.

Finally they see a ray of sunlight that plays across the floor of the shaft. When they hit, they spring for the light that spills from a door at the very foot of the stairway. The room is several

times larger than Carneby's apartment. There is an open balcony that screams with the wind of descent. And there are several perigee couches, lumpy with age.

On the floor are the bodies of two men. They are dressed in leather like the girl. Their arms and legs are twisted. Perigee caught them standing up.

The girl will not look at them, so with as much respect as he can manage, Carneby pushes the bodies out the balcony, where the wind carries them away like scraps of newspaper. He holds onto the doorframe and leans outside as far as he can to watch them disappear. A ways above he can see the crosspiece, where perhaps even now his friend Kellee is pushing his luck in an effort to observe the shaft.

Below him the shaft seems to stretch forever, tapering into the knob, a blunt arrow poised to pierce The Earth. Carneby has never seen the ground like this, so unobstructed and huge. It occurs to him that although he has always known intellectually that The Earth was bigger than The City, he had never fully understood that fact until now.

The deceleration begins that night, and with it comes the suffocating pressure of their own weight. Carneby and the girl make love in their suddenly awkward bodies in the great emptiness of the inner shaft. They are hungry and thirsty, so

they lack the stamina of earlier efforts, but the sex drives the fear from Carneby's mind.

He has begun to feel panicky at the strangeness of it all. He doesn't know where all this is leading and the uncertainty has driven him to tears. He feels chills and fevers from the infection on his hand. He knows it is only hours before he has to take the girl up on her offer of amputation, or die.

* * *

Carneby wakes on a perigee couch. Already it is midafternoon, but he is uncertain of which day. He sweats with fever. From The City far above, he can hear the wail of the perigee sirens. The beginning of the great low point is only minutes away. The wind roars through the balcony, buffeting him even where he lies. Soon his weight will increase tenfold.

He spots the girl in a nearby couch. From her determined expression, he can tell she has some understanding of what is coming, what she will have to endure. Carneby gives her a reassuring smile, which she returns hesitantly.

Perigee slams him into the couch like a lead fist. He loses consciousness. Then cruelly he wakes. The fibers of his muscles feel like they are separating one by one. The skin of his face pulls back in a tight rictus. He cannot close his eyelids; the perigee peels them back into his head. The pain cannot be

ignored. He can feel The City slowing, dropping to some giant, alien thing.

The crushing force lasts minutes. Then it disappears with a sharp-edged finality.

The girl rolls out of her couch. Carneby tries to warn her about the tricky lull between the descent and the ascent, that moment when you want to believe that it is over, when you drop your guard in hopefulness, right before the equally terrifying rebound begins. Many people have died trying to sneak to the bathroom during this lull.

He croaks a warning at her, but she pulls him to the floor. They crawl together toward the balcony, still aching from perigee. The ledge of the balcony has no railing, so they can wiggle right to the edge and hang their nose over and see The Earth.

Carneby almost vomits at the sight of it. The ground is far too close. He can see individual trees with his naked eye; the trees surround them and tower over them with smothering density. The ground has churned and squooshed beneath the shaft, like eggs beneath a spoon. Carneby can feel the heat and the wet of The Earth, can smell the moist rot of the forest. The churned ground has risen to touch the bottom of the balcony.

The two of them struggle to their feet, leaning on each other for support.

Suddenly, intuitively, Carneby understands why The City has been rebounding higher with every perigee. Standing there underneath The City's massive bulk, beneath the tens of thousands of souls lying in their couches, he can almost sense the force that has paused The City at its lowest point, has primed the springs, tensed them measurably further. High above him, every man, woman, and child of The City has taken a breath in relief. They are stretching in their couches, they are sitting up and scratching their heads. With a hundred thousand tiny actions they have added to the kinetic energy of The City and played their own tiny part in its doom.

In unison and without signal, Carneby and the girl step off.

The balcony catapults upward, ripping off the back of Carneby's shirt. He turns to watch the doorway fade into the extending column of iron.

The City has been his mother, his master, his tormentor. Now it is gone, leaping away from him with relentless finality. It is a little like dying and a little like being born.

The girl pulls at his hand, pulling him toward the green and the hugeness of the forest, laughing at his fear and his confusion. The forest is filled with the sounds of birds and large things crashing through unseen brush.

The City shrinks into the sky.

By the time the end of the shaft extricates itself from the sludge of The Earth, Carneby and the girl have long since lost themselves in the woods.

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Matthew Bey writes and edits from Austin, Texas. His short stories have appeared in numerous publications, and he runs the sci-fi and humor zine Space Squid. His blog, Zombie Lapdance, can be found on [RevolutionSF.com](#). There he brags about his accomplishments and describes all the weird things he puts in his mouth.

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COVER ART

“The Canyon,” by Christophe Vacher



Christophe Vacher has provided artwork for the movie and animation industries since 1989, including the Disney films “Hercules,” “Tarzan,” and “Treasure Planet.” He served as Art Director for animated movies including the feature film “9,” for which he received an Annie Awards nomination for Best Production Design. Visit his galleries at www.vacher.com.

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