

a queer speculative fiction novel



home
is a verb

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home is a verb (sample)

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dedication

I dedicate this story to the bird-loving elders who took me outside and taught me to listen.

And to the birds themselves who accompanied this writing—to the Charnecos and their flashes of morning blue, to the Wind-hovers who cause me to point and squeal *every single time*, to the Eisvögel and the Heidelerchen whose calls remind me to breathe, to the Dipper diving into cold water who made my heart leap, to the Eichelhäher who watched me write this dedication and to the tiger-striped baby Greenfinches fresh from the nest. And all the others, without exception. I love you, thank you.



1. threat

prelude

An explosion in the sky above and I felt vibrations wash over me. Another drone crashed into the ground, launching blue sparks over dry grass.

I stood at the bunker entrance, trying to ignore the chaos and stay on task. My eyes blurred from the chemical smell as I squeezed thick industrial glue out of a dispenser and along the edges of the door. It was messy work. My gloves stuck together several times and the nozzle kept getting blocked. I wanted to do a good job, but these were all new skills, and my mind felt like it was on fire.

I finished and stepped away, not especially proud of my work. A friend moved in and continued sealing the bunker entrance with materials we had liberated from a DIY shop that week. I had never met this person before, but we were all friends that day. We were drawn by something more powerful than choice to do something unspeakable.

Another drone buzzed overhead. This one was armed, and someone shouted out a warning. My back was stiff and cold as I threw myself down into the dust of baked soil. We were exposed; surrounded for miles by open land with nothing except fences and bunker entrances. Someone appeared near me, lifted their gun, and took out the armed drone with the first shot.

I didn't carry a gun. Until a month before that day, I had never even seen one, except on TV. But we were here to kill and there was no point denying it. A drone is just a piece of electronics and engineering. The people down below the earth—as dangerous as they were—were human beings and we were sentencing them to a slow death.

The door was sealed, and a last layer of chains was secured around the entrance. It was the only part of the colossal bunker visible above ground, but I knew the grand tunnels and living spaces, swimming pool

and storage chambers stretched out for hundreds of metres below us. I had seen the blueprints.

A friend I didn't know ran up to our little group. Her hair was damp with sweat and plastered over her forehead, and her pale, freckly skin was smudged with oil.

"Comms are down," she declared. "Antennas, dishes, we took out everything we could. There might still be some phone cables down there somewhere, but as far as we can tell, they were still setting up when they went down. They didn't plan this."

Unlike us, I thought. The people below us had retreated to their safe space in a state of utter panic. After unleashing terror on the world, after nature began to fight back, after the riots brought their reign to an end. Now they waited for their time to come again, in a billion-dollar bolthole surrounded by cans of foie gras.

And that's where they'd stay.

The friend with freckles led us out of the 'action zone' as we'd called it—as if we were trained soldiers and not cleaners, nurses and other regular, desperate, people. Kicking a smashed drone out of the way, I followed the others through the fence. When we had arrived just a few hours before, the barrier had looked so intimidating—five metres high and lined with barbed wire and security cameras. Now it hung at a strange angle full of holes chewed open by bolt-cutters.

We set out into the yellow grassland as a group and I looked back, half-expecting dust clouds from security vehicles or the roar of a police helicopter descending, guns ablaze. But the landscape was still—the sky was white and empty, and the only dust was stirred up by our tired footsteps. No-one was coming to the rescue of the super-rich trapped in their hole. Their power had shifted. We continued walking for an hour and barely spoke a word.

At the edge of a forest, the group began to gather, and the atmosphere became suddenly electric. Some people shouted and cheered, others talked frantically, buzzing with adrenaline. One person started doing cartwheels on the grass. I sat down by myself and remained

silent. I looked back at the land, heat shimmering over the horizon.

A tiny bird was calling and rising upwards in a perfectly straight line. A *skylark*, I noticed, one of my favourites. As I watched them disappear into the sky, I began to understand what that day meant—what protecting the earth truly looked like. We could no longer clear our conscience with organic parsnips and recycling, and we wouldn't want to.

Around me, people hugged each other in celebration. Someone was starting a fire to make dinner. Someone else spun around, their arms outstretched, face bright with elation.

I waited for the skylark to come back down. My head craned upwards, I felt dizzy. Breathing as slowly as I could, I tried not to throw up.

after

I don't enjoy revisiting the actions of that day, but sometimes it helps to channel the memories into stories. At least in the form of narrative, they have some meaning, otherwise they can too easily feel like intruders, hunting at the edge of my consciousness. I've learned that a story can be a container as well as a lesson.

The following memories are an offering, intended to help us all to understand the changes we went through during that time. The Shift, as we learned to call it, transformed us in ways that were both painfully dramatic and sometimes so subtle that I still struggle to understand what changed and what didn't. I have learned a lot since the days of the Bunker Blockades, and the years that followed, and yet, gaps remain. I've discovered that memory, for me at least, can be a deceitful companion.

In my recollection, life is a series of blurred out events with the occasional moment of shame remembered in perfect high definition. No matter how complete this version of reality might feel, I know it can't be the whole truth and I also know that my stories were never only about me. Perspective kills some of the pain.

But five years after the blockades, living alone on a beach, I had little of this insight. Without story to direct me, I was adrift in memories and only the daily tasks that defined my survival kept me tethered to the earth.

* * *

A familiar pain had returned to my shoulders. It had crept up unnoticed, brought by the sea wind and my hours sat in stillness. My neck was a series of cables, stretched so tight I could barely turn my head. A sharp stone dug into my ankles and my overgrown hair hung heavy and damp over my face.

I became aware of the pain in my left temple. It was a dull thud that came in waves, and it was always a bad sign, either that rough weather was coming, or that I hadn't eaten enough. Both were possible.

The land was overdue for a rainstorm. The wet season approached and each year it seemed to be heavier. More than the rain though, the weather that was sure to mess with my nervous system were the freak storms of dry lightning. They rolled in over the sea every few weeks, forcing me into my home for safety. The constant flashing was enough to bring migraines and I would throw up for days and nights without even the cooling relief of rain. Maybe it was that pain my body was anticipating.

I was also fairly certain I hadn't eaten since the day before. My last meal had been some left-over rice that was already turning. Living by myself, in the damp cave I had come to call my home, food was a constant struggle, and it was easier not to eat sometimes. Maybe that's what my teenage years had been preparing me for. Food had always been difficult.

I looked out over the expanse of blue-green water ahead of me. The waves were small and slow; only my mind was turbulent and unsettled. A bright white seabird—a gull or a tern, they were too far away to tell—dropped suddenly down into the water and re-emerged seconds later with a fish in their beak. My stomach rumbled.

I stood and headed back over the few metres of rock and sand that separated the sea, and all its unpredictability, from my tidy little cave in the cliff.

My home wasn't much, but I loved that place as if I'd built it myself.

Millennia of rainwater leaching through porous limestone had slowly carved out the perfect hollow; cool on warm days and sheltered

from the rain with a stunning sea view. When I discovered my cave, I found the remnants of a bedframe and a shelf suspended from the wall—all set up ready for me to move in.

Who built my house and why will remain a mystery but months after the blockades and weeks after leaving the nearest town, walking with just my backpack, torn-up tent, and the most basic of supplies, I reached the end of the land and down below, nestled inside a calm cove, home was waiting for me to arrive. Several years had passed since then and when I had the choice, I never left.

At the entrance, I knelt down to the circle of pebbles on compacted sand where I laid my offerings to the land every day. The last crumbs of food had been taken away by the spirits—and crabs—and the small metal bowl I tried to keep topped up with fresh water had been half-emptied by thirsty sparrows and the warmth of the sun. I made a mental note to refill it when I could spare the water.

A line of large white stones demarcated the inside of my home from outside. I had brought the boulders there myself to create a symbolic sense of safety and they had served me well. I remembered the long afternoon it had taken to roll, drag and push the rocks into place, and the exhaustion and relief when I was done with my task. I remembered the storm who had rolled in that night and the difference I already felt, protected by my new guardians.

As I knelt there in the sand, I was drawn back into the land of memories: how smooth the transition from the moment. How tempting those familiar channels of regret.

My eyes stung from fire smoke. We sat in a circle, eating canned hotdogs and, following the elation of that afternoon, the conversation had become sparse and pensive. My legs and arms were tired—an emotional exhaustion I was powerless to prevent. I tried to smile and make small talk with the friends from the blockade, but my thoughts were of the people trapped below the ground. The wealthy and powerful locked up with their gyms and recycled water systems. I knew that they were people who had committed genocide and ecocide. That

they had to be stopped by whatever means necessary. And I also knew, in the tightness of my chest, that they were people, as much human beings as those of us gathering to quietly celebrate their entombment. I remembered wondering how long their food supplies would last. How long until they began starving and turning on each other. How long until—

Food. That's why I had come to my cave. I needed to check if there was food left. I already knew the answer.

I stood and stepped through the guardian stones and walked the four metres to the back wall and the area I called my larder. It was a single rotting shelf of driftwood hanging from two knotted ropes that had welcomed me on my first day. The shelf was empty. The plastic supermarket bags that I had carefully suspended from it to keep food away from the ants, were empty too. Tied to juts of rock in the wall, the ropes were twisted blue plastic that still smelled like the ocean.

As a house made of literal trash, you might think my home was a mess. It certainly wasn't. My life was as tidy and hygienic as it had ever been. Every fourth day without fail, I brought new bracken leaves down from above the cliff to freshen up my mattress. Every morning I hung up my sleeping bag from another blue rope to air out: from the cave wall if it was raining, outside if it was sunny. Every sixth day I covered the latrine with sand and pebbles and dug a new one, two metres further along the beach.

A stolen water bottle—made for water coolers in some distant past of offices and jobs—would last two weeks if I was careful. I kept all the used bottles in a row in case I needed them one day for construction or storage. I wasted nothing.

Despite a lack of plumbing, my one pot, knife, fork and cup were always spotless. I had even managed to find an unopened pack of five brightly coloured kitchen sponges during a previous foraging mission and they had lasted me well. You see, home is very important to me. This is something I didn't realise until I lived for a while without one.

A shallow cave surrounded by screaming seabirds and itchy

sandfleas, occasionally flooded, and exposed to the caprices of the wind might not be everyone's idea of a perfect place to live, but I loved it the best I could. Also, it was easy to keep things tidy when there was only one shelf, and it was empty most of the time.

Standing in my larder slash bedroom, I began to process the lack of food, water—and pretty much everything else. Somewhere between that morning and the night before, I must have snacked on the last hunk of bread. The last apple had gone into the compost heap a few days ago. As far as I could remember, the bread and that almost-turning rice had been all I'd consumed for days.

I was usually meticulous at measuring out my rations—and making offerings when I could spare them—but my headache was getting worse. I wasn't thinking clearly.

I took my cup, filled it with some of the fresh water and poured it out into the metal bowl in the altar. I offered a silent prayer to the beings and the land I belonged to. I refilled the cup—the bottle was nearly empty now—and I took it with me to the edge of the sea. I looked out again to the horizon and between seabirds diving, thoughts of food, and the memories I had no control over, I made that precious drink last for an hour.

* * *

I am a bit ashamed to admit that I didn't eat again that day—or the next. It was only when my stomach really started cramping that I made the decision to go foraging. Sometimes I just don't like to leave home.

Maybe you've felt the same way. Home, wherever that might be, sometimes feels like the one place we can control when the world outside is chaos, danger, and unpredictability. I don't live like that now, but at that time, the gravity of safety, the inertia of staying still usually outweighed the desire, or necessity, of leaving.

And so I delayed as long as I could.

Although they came and went in waves, my headaches were getting worse. At one point I started retching but nothing came up except some yellowish water that spilled onto the beach. A curious young crab ran over immediately and began eating. I wasn't particularly disgusted, maybe a bit worried, and realised it was time to leave. Although I had barely anything to take with me and only one other set of clothes to change into, preparing to leave took a while.

before

I've always been good at preparing.

Years before this—when home had been a tiny flat in the city and not a sandy cave—stacks of canned food and ten-litre bottles of water lined up under my bed had literally kept me alive.

I remember a Tuesday night. My housemate, Adam, had had friends over for the evening. They were watching football on TV—which was still a thing in those days, for good or for bad.

Although Adam was sweet in a kind of innocent and simple way, his friends were a nightmare. I doubt a group of more clichéd, beer-loving jocks could exist in the world and I had been hiding in my bedroom the whole evening curled up with my microbiology books waiting for their little gathering to finish.

Finally, my bladder protesting, I put my ear against the door. As far as I could tell, they were all in the living room, the TV was blasting and I'm pretty sure one of Adam's friends was talking about dogs, or it might have been women. I decided to risk it and dashed out and across the kitchen towards our shared bathroom. Of course, they caught me.

"B!" one of them shouted in my direction. They all called me B back then. The jock stood in the middle of the kitchen, his clothes oversized and vaguely sports-themed. "Where've you been hiding?"

He was tall I noticed, and I would have found him hot if he wasn't disrupting my evening and my tidy house. For whatever reason he had opened almost every cupboard in the kitchen. I stood, frozen to the spot, looking, I'm sure, like a tiny, terrified mouse.

"You okay, B?"

I managed to nod and force a smile. "Just studying."

"Cool, mate, cool. Say, what is all this stuff?" he asked, indicating the open cupboard next to him. The cupboard was filled to the edge

with bags of lentils and pasta. He pointed to another which held my secret stash of toothpaste, tubes neatly piled in stacks of ten, and several industrial-size bottles of hand gel. “Are you hoarding or something? I saw a documentary about that. This woman had like twenty cats—”

I had no interest in the documentary or this person’s perspectives on mental health.

“Were you looking for something in particular?” I asked as bluntly as I could although my voice still wavered. As stupid as I found him, this guy still had power over me.

“Corkscrew, mate.”

I opened the drawer that was very clearly labelled for cutlery and kitchen implements—unlike all the cupboards he’d been poking around in—and handed him the corkscrew.

“Cheers. Join us for a beer? Half time’s nearly over.”

It was a demand pitched as a request and it all sounded awful. I mumbled an excuse, managed to escape, pee, and didn’t emerge again until late in the evening to help Adam clean up the mess his friends had left behind. There was a chocolate stain on the sofa, a circle of wine on the carpet and a broken bottle on the balcony. I wasn’t impressed.

Once order was restored, I retreated to my bed. It still felt odd in its new, higher position and there was less space between myself and the ceiling than I was used to. My room smelled of sawdust and plastic packaging.

The week before, Adam had helped me to elevate my bed by a metre to make space for the water bottles and giant bags of rice. He took my hoarding like most things in life: chilled and slightly detached. I had been prepping for years by that point, each week buying a few extra tins or a bag of coffee, spreading out the cost bit by bit so I wouldn’t notice it in my budget.

Our walls were so thin, I could hear Adam making a phone call to his parents and later jerking off to some screechy porn. I knew he was even using headphones—as per our agreement—our building was just really badly built. There could be no secrets between us.

Apart from the occasional visits from his friends, living with Adam was easy and we were close. He was objectively cute and smelled good after a day at work, snuggled close to me on the sofa with a beer. But we never had anything sexual together. He was more like a little brother and after the first few times that he left the toilet seat up or put a stinking ashtray in the sink 'to soak', I knew it would never be more than that.

He teased me a lot, in a brotherly way. After a while of my obsessive stocking up, he started to call me 'Packrat', which I have to admit I didn't hate.

I was pretty sure I knew what was coming and that prepping was the best thing any of us could be doing. I was half-right. I was also half-wrong.

after

With preparation in mind, I got ready to leave my cave-home. I cleaned the sand out of my rucksack and replaced it with the remaining drinking water, decanted into a plastic cola bottle. I sharpened my knife by scraping it at an angle, several times along the bottom of my saucepan. I have no idea when I learned to do that but thank God for survival skills. I retied my laces three times and then I went through what I had come to call my ‘ritual’.

Three soft little touches on my bed, with my left hand, for comfort.

Three touches to my larder shelf to let my home know that I would soon bring new supplies.

Three touches to each of the five white rocks at the cave entrance. For protection and safety because that’s exactly what I was leaving behind.

Some part of me was whispering that this wasn’t healthy. Some part of me said it was fine and we do what we need to. Then without looking back—because I really can be disciplined when I want to be—I stepped onto the rocky beach I knew so well and headed east.

I had gone less than a hundred metres when the beach cliffs began echoing with my screams.