8. Survival Strategies for Weird Times

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Survival Strategies

Barron St. John must have been nearing his seventies by that point. The pictures I’d copied from magazine covers and newspapers charted his rise from a rake-thin tower of a man, nearly six-three, clad in a badly fitting white wool jacket with a thick crop of black hair cut like a bowl around his ears, to his older self: hair grey but still as thick as it had ever been, fine laugh lines etching the curve of that grinning, maniac mouth. In his heyday people had taken to calling him the King of Horror, a real scaremeister — that term always made me laugh — but the man I saw in those later pictures had the look of a grandfather, which I suppose he was, one who could spin a yarn, sure, but not the kid who’d posed with a shotgun for his university paper under the headline “Vote dammit!”

My university had given me a small grant for my research project into St. John’s career. I had planned to stay in Hotel 31, the cheapest place Luca and I had agreed we could afford. He

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1 Editorial Note: The story “Survival Strategies” originally appeared in *Black Static* 58 (2017). It has been reprinted here and is followed by a commentary, entitled “Survival Strategies for Weird Times,” which is published for the first time in this collection.
had wanted me in midtown so I could walk most places. He was a worrier, had never been to New York and the idea of me riding the subway right then made him uneasy.

“It’ll be fine,” I told him, “nothing will happen. It isn’t like that anymore. It hasn’t been since the ‘90s.” We both knew that wasn’t exactly true. The situation was different now, but scarier in other ways. There were journalists being stopped at the borders, asked invasive questions. Not everyone was allowed in. And Luca, for all his woolly sweetness and soft English manners, had a serious stubborn streak. He was protective, I knew, and didn’t like the idea of me traveling on my own, not after I’d reacted so badly to the procedure, and certainly not “abroad” as he called it in that charmingly old-fashioned way of his.

But “abroad” was what I had wanted. Even if it wasn’t home for me, which lay four-hundred miles north across the border in Toronto where my sister lived, New York still felt more familiar than the still-drizzly streets of London in the summer. Besides, I suppose there was a part of me that wanted to see how bad things had got.

And St. John was a new obsession of mine, one I’d taken up in my recovery. Luca had been reading his pulpy-looking paperbacks for years, but I’d never touched them. They were too scary, I’d thought, too low brow. I remembered the garish paperbacks though, the ones that showed off his last name in huge embossed letters. They’d been ubiquitous when I was a kid. Each had a plain black cover with a silhouette cutaway so you had to turn the page to get the full effect. *Rosie* was the first I ever saw, his debut, the starting point for his surprising upward trajectory. It featured a small New Hampshire town — eerily similar to the one where I’d grown up, what had once been a small farming community until the petroleum processing plants transformed it. The town was engulfed in a crackling lightning storm. *Gory and horrifying*, read the cover, *you can’t put it down!!!*

St. John didn’t live in New York, but his former editor did: Lily Argo.

I’d found her e-mail address online. Like St. John she must have been in her seventies but was still working freelance. There
were no pictures. The best I could find was a black and white shot of her and St. John at the signing of his fourth book, What Is Mine, the last they worked on together. Lily Argo was an inch or two taller than St. John, glorious, an Allison Janney look-alike, which meant the two of them towered over the line of moist-lipped teenage girls who were clustered around the table. That was back in ’79.

When I first approached one of my friends — an anthology editor named Dylan Bone (real name or not, I never knew) — about the possibility of an article on the publication of Rosie, he told me Argo had died. Dylan had even written up her obituary for Locus — but in retrospect he couldn’t remember how he’d first found out. She’d been one of the few female editors at Doubleday back then, mostly due to her lucky discovery of St. John. When I mentioned I’d been in contact with her, that she’d agreed to meet me, Dylan had stared at me thoughtfully.

“Just be careful,” he said.

“About what?”

He’d just waved his hand. “You know,” he said before lurching off to the bar to fetch another round.

I didn’t have any problems with the border guards. The customs line was tense, but I’d always had that feeling whenever I entered the States. Once I’d swallowed two painkillers before a flight back to London and the random swipe they’d done on my hands had registered a false positive for explosives or drugs. I’d been taken to a small backroom where a dark-haired woman in a uniform demanded to know why I had been in the country. I kept apologizing, I don’t know why. She had to search me by hand and the process was brusque and businesslike. She asked me to remove my bra. Then someone else came in, a heavy-set man with a broad forehead. He didn’t look at me. Neither of them did. Afterward they let me go but ever since I’d been stopped for
“random” checks whenever I boarded a plane. This time though the guard took one look at me and waved me through. I must have looked harmless to him.

Hotel 31 was as old as the Overlook, mostly derelict with a walk-in elevator whose grill door you had to close yourself. The room was sparse, but by that point exhaustion had sunk into my skin. I called Luca to tell him I’d arrived and then collapsed under the thin covers.

All night I could hear animal sounds in the walls. The bodies of whatever moved beyond the peeling wallpaper hummed like batteries. Still, I slept. And in the morning I felt better than I had in weeks. Not mended, but stronger.

I was still in that dusky phase of grieving so that sometimes when I slept it felt I had fallen through a hole in the world. Each morning I woke up as a different person, discovered new wrinkles at the corner of my eyes, wires of thick, unrecognizable, grey hair. The doctor warned me of changes in my body, cramping, small clots of blood between my legs. I had expected my breasts to shrink but they’d only gotten larger. I read online the best thing to do was to bind them tightly with a snug towel and apply ice for ten minutes on, twenty minutes off. He hadn’t told me how old I would feel after.

I had given myself three days to acclimatize to jetlag before I met up with Lily Argo.

In the meantime, I’d arranged a visit to Doubleday, St. John’s first publisher. In the last thirty years Doubleday had joined with Dell and Bantam which in turn joined up with Random House. Size, they had thought, was the best way to survive an uncertain economic climate.

Two weeks ago, I’d contacted an editor at Random House in the hopes he might know if the company had kept some of the records from St. John’s days. But after the bag search and the
metal detectors, when I was buzzed into the offices, a blonde receptionist told me my meeting had been postponed. She was young, slickly made up in that New York way with manicured fingers and perfect plucked eyebrows. I was wearing a dark blue cardigan which, seeing her, suddenly felt so English, so matronly I almost laughed.

So I waited in the reception for an hour, browsing the display copies of new books by Margaret Atwood and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. They too were slickly produced.

After a while I pulled out my beat-up copy of Strangers and Friends, a collection of short stories St. John had published in gentlemen’s magazines like Cavalier and Penthouse over the years. The book had never been one of St. John’s most popular, but I’d been thumbing my way through it slowly for weeks. On the flight I had started a story called “The Survivalist” in which a doctor finds himself trapped alone in a bunker after a nuclear blast. He lives there for years, decades, devouring canned peaches and Spam until finally he comes to the end of his stashed supplies. He knows he doesn’t have many options left. He can open up the door, risk contamination for a sight of the outside world—or he can continue to wait. The doctor stares at the door, wanting desperately to go out, but he can’t bring himself to open it. The story ends as, driven half-mad with hunger, he begins to contemplate how long he could survive eating first the flesh of his legs, his thighs, how much he could withstand. He is a doctor after all, and he thinks it could be quite some time…

The story was gross, and it had all the macabre glee you would expect from a St. John chiller. But I didn’t feel scared by it. No, what upset me most was its sense of futility. The doctor had given up on hope. He wasn’t waiting for rescue. He didn’t believe anyone else in the world was alive. He was simply… persisting. If he was the last man on earth, he wanted to last as long as possible. It was grotesque. Why didn’t he open the door? That’s what Luca would say when I tried to explain the plot him. But then Luca was the kind of man who would have opened the door. He couldn’t see another way of living.
Another hour passed. Eventually the receptionist waved me over. Her manicured nails glinted dully in the light. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” she said, “but the records from those years haven’t been maintained. I didn’t even know we were the ones who published Barron St. John.” She gave a little laugh.

I asked her what that meant for me.

“No one’s free to meet you. We converted to digital years ago,” she said, barely sparing me a glance. “Whatever we had, we dumped back then. Besides, who reads that trash anyway?”

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After that I found myself at loose ends, so I called up a friend of mine, Benny Perry.

Benny and I had gone to grad school together at the University of Toronto, both of us doing doctorates in medieval literature in those early days after the financial crash when we still thought the market would recover enough to give us jobs. I’d kept at it, spinning my work on the scribal culture that produced Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* into a postdoc in Oxford and then riding that into a full-time position in Publishing Studies of all things at a former polytechnic university. It wasn’t glamorous, not like Oxford had been, but I liked the students, I liked my colleagues, and I liked the work itself: imagining how books moved through time and all the people who left their mark on them along the way.

Benny had taken another route. He’d always had a talent with photography and after he dropped out of the program he’d moved to New York and taken a job with *House & Garden* before it closed. It’d paid well enough that he’d stuck with photography, jumping from one magazine to another until he had enough of a portfolio to go freelance. He’d taken one of those famous pictures of Trump, the one where his face seems to be receding into the folds of flesh around his neck. In the past cou-
ple of months, I’d seen it on social media from time to time and reprinted in the papers.

“It’s made things a bit hard for me,” Benny told me as we sat sipping margaritas in The Lantern’s Keep, a classy place near Times Square where the cocktails cost four times what they would at home. There had been a teary week before Luca and I made our decision when I’d given up alcohol, and even after we changed our minds I still hadn’t felt like touching the stuff. This was the first drink I’d had in eight months.

“How do you mean?”

“Well it’s brought me lots of attention, sure, but not the good kind, you know? Trump supporters hate that picture. Trump does too, which is why it gets recycled so often.”

Benny’s face looked strained and he fidgeted with his glass. He wasn’t quite how I remembered him. Benny was always a big man, a cornfed, Iowa type whose Baptist parents had taught him to shun dancing and drink. When I’d met him at orientation, he’d been shy, a bit overwhelmed. But after those first awkward weeks he’d just thrown himself into everything. He had this irrepressible love of the new, and he’d taken to those things he’d missed out on most: booze, women — then men, dancing late into the night with this kind of unselfconscious clumsiness which made you want to join in.

He was much thinner now, that kind of thinness that didn’t look healthy. “I’m worried about Emmanuel,” he said, “worried about … well. Anyway. People can be absolute shits, can’t they?”

I agreed that they could.

“But you’re looking good,” Benny said, and I caught his eyes skimming over my breasts. Even though it didn’t mean anything coming from him I still blushed and pulled at the cardigan. “But not … I don’t know, maybe not entirely good?” he was going on. “Hell. I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

I took his hand gently and told him not to worry about it.

As The Lantern’s Keep started to fill up eventually we wandered out into the street. It was hot and swampy, that kind of early August weather that makes you feel as if you’ve been
wrapped in a damp blanket and beaten. We headed south toward the West Village by foot so I could see the sights. North was Central Park and Trump Towers, which were all basically off limits now. New York hadn't changed so much, not in terms of that strange and beautiful blend of architecture and anger, but there were bits that alarmed me. Like all the police cars had stickers listing the reward for information on cop-killers with a number you could call.

When I told Benny about the project I was working on, it turned out he'd read St. John as a kid, which surprised me, given his background.

“What I remember about him was that my parents were reading him. They never read anything like that otherwise. Murder and cannibalism and demons and all that stuff. But Faction of Fire, you know, it was all about faith, wasn't it? In that book there was no getting around it: The Devil was real. And I suppose that's what my parents thought anyway. Good and evil weren't abstract concepts to them. There were good folk and there were bad folk. And it wasn't just that the bad folk made bad decisions. They were… bad. It was something more fundamental. Badness worked through them. It was something tangible, real. And St. John, well, his books were all about that, weren't they?”

Benny grinned at me and for a moment I could see his younger self peering out, that kid who'd never touched a drop of liquor in his life before I met him.

“How're your parents doing?” I asked him because that was the kind of thing we were supposed to ask one another now that we weren't kids anymore.

“Mom had a stroke two years ago,” Benny said with a shrug. “I go back when I can to help her out. She's lonely, I know, but whenever I do go we just end up fighting.”

I didn't ask him about Emmanuel, about whether his parents knew. I figured probably they did. There were enough profiles floating around about Benny's photos so you could only avoid knowing if you really tried.

“How are you and Luca doing?”

“Good.”
“He didn’t want to come with you?”
“Couldn’t get away. You know how it is with these NGOs. Anytime he leaves he feels like he’s letting people down.”
“It’s good what he’s doing,” Benny told me. “We need more people like him right now.” After a moment he stretched, and I heard the joints in his shoulders pop. “It must be hard writing horror stories now, you know? It seems like that’s all we’ve got these days. I can’t bear to watch the news anymore.”

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I didn’t sleep well that night. When I’d glanced at the papers, they were filled with stories about tensions escalating, something to do with the South China Sea islands and whether the US was being too aggressive. John McCain was trying to dial things back, but you could tell he was getting tired of it. His eyes looked sharp and a little bit scared.

I’d had panic attacks all throughout the October leading up to the election. There’d been Brexit, of course, our own particular mess. At a conference last summer an American colleague had told me, “what we’re seeing is radical politics. People stopped believing that they mattered to the system — but all that’s different now. It’s exciting, isn’t it? Anything could happen.” Trump had seemed funny back then, dangerous but still avoidable. They called it all a horror show but you could tell there was fascination underneath it all. How close could we come to disaster? But Hillary was ahead in the polls. Some of the Republicans were denouncing Trump, trying to put a little distance between themselves for when the eventual shellacking came on November 8th.

But it didn’t come. For weeks after, all throughout the Christmas break, whenever I heard Trump’s name it was as if there was a loud gong echoing in my head. My feed was filled with anguish, betrayal, heartbreak. But I had seen all that already. I felt immured, resilient — and besides I still didn’t believe, not really,
that it would happen. Then eventually the cold hard truth settled in when I watched the inauguration with Luca. As Trump walked to the podium, I burst out laughing, I don’t know why, the sheer cognitive dissonance of the whole thing. I felt hysterical. My palms were sweating.

Afterward I learned St. John had written a novel about something similar, *Answering the King*, about a madman who cheats his way to becoming the President of the United States. Eventually it comes down to a fifteen-year-old girl tormented with visions of the past and the future to stop him. The question at the heart of it is: if you could go back in time to stop Hitler, would you? They had made a movie about it with Steve Buscemi. I don’t remember who played the girl, only how wide her eyes were, how she captured that world-weariness so well for someone so young. She was a Cassandra. No one would listen to her.

That was the night when the whole thing with Luca happened. Normally we were very careful. I hadn’t been in my job for very long, and he’d just moved across the country to live with me. We had talked about having kids one day but... we weren’t careful enough. Disaster crept in the way it always does.

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I called Argo the next day. It was the first time I’d spoken to her and her voice was thin and cagey with a flat, Ohio accent. It sounded as if it were coming from much further away than the Upper East Side.

It felt strange to be listening to her voice and I thought about what Dylan Bone had told me. I’d read the obituary in fact, half as a joke and half because I knew Dylan didn’t make mistakes very often. He’d cut his teeth in the eighties horror boom and still made most of his money by convincing writers like St. John and Clive Barker to give him new material. It might sound mercenary, but it isn’t, not really: Bone was a believer, a horror fanatic. He loved the stuff and even when the market dropped
out of it in the nineties he had kept at it, putting out anthology after anthology with cheesy, hand-drawn skeletons or zombified hands reaching out of the grave. Argo had been part of that, someone who’d made the genre in its heyday.

On the phone Argo was polite and she agreed to meet me for lunch the next day at a cafe. “It’ll have to be close to my apartment,” she told me, “I can’t move very well now.”

I told her I understood and could meet her wherever she wanted.

“What’s this about then? Really?” Her tone wasn’t querulous but wondering. “You know I wrote a chapter about working with St. John for some anthology twenty years ago, Devilish Discussions or something like that.”

I hesitated because I didn’t really have an answer. Yes, I knew the story about how she’d been sent St. John’s first manuscript by mistake. It had been meant to go to her boss, but he’d been on vacation. She’d liked it but her boss wouldn’t touch it, and she didn’t have enough support inside Doubleday to push it through, not then, a low-level assistant. But they’d kept in touch, writing letters when the mood took one or the other. Then when Rosie had come along it had been “a day of glory” — so she called it.

I gave her the answer I gave most of my colleagues. St. John had changed the genre, really changed it. For one brief moment horror hadn’t been the red-haired stepchild of fiction. Horror had been king. And I wanted to know how that had happened. Part of my answer was true. I’d always been fascinated by the way books were made, the countless decisions that went into them. But if I was really honest it was simply because I’d become a fan, a real fan — maybe not Dylan Bone level — but my admiration for St. John was genuine.

It was more than that though. The real reason was one I couldn’t quite put my finger on, but it had something to do with stories of chance — which St. John’s certainly was. And that underneath every story is a pivotal moment when things changed. I wanted to know what that looked like. I needed to know if Argo had understood when that manuscript crossed her desk.
what it would mean, if she’d felt a chill when he opened the envelope. Like someone had walked on her grave.

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That afternoon Benny took me out to the Cloisters for old time’s sake, and it was beautiful, just like he’d promised it would be. The place was a mishmash of architecture taken from a series of medieval abbeys in France, Catalan, and the Occitan, simultaneously peaceful and surreal, liminal, a sliver of another world transplanted into New York.

“I thought you’d like it,” Benny told me. We were staring at a tree that had been shaped to fit one of the alcoves in the garden. Its branches curved unnaturally like a menorah to fill the space. I couldn’t help but wonder how it had been manipulated, what sort of subtle violence had pressurized the wood to assume the shape it had.

“I do,” I told him, shivering despite the mid-day heat.

“So, tomorrow. The editor, what’s her name again?” He snapped his fingers. “Argo, right? Lily Argo. You’re going to interview her. What about St. John then? Any chance you’ll get to speak to him?”

I didn’t think so. St. John lived in New Hampshire, and I had no idea what kind of relationship the two of them still had. If they kept in touch. If Argo would even like me.

“Of course she will. You’re—well, you’re the makeles quene, aren’t you?” He smiled. “You are without blot.”

“Someone back home said she was dead,” I told him uneasily. I still didn’t like that part of the story. Why would Dylan have thought that?

“Huh,” Benny said. “It sounds like the beginning of a ghost story, doesn’t it? Like she’ll bestow her wisdom on you, settle her unfinished business, and vanish into the night.”

“It sounds exactly like that.”

“But maybe you’re lucky, not seeing St. John.”
I asked him what he meant.

“You know. He’s bound to be pretty weird, isn’t he? I mean he’s been writing that stuff for more than forty years now. You can’t keep that close to the darkness without some of it sticking to you.”

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard something like this before. I was used to getting it myself, sometimes at the university. But the horror writers I’d met were among the most well-adjusted people I knew, certainly they were much calmer than the other writers I tended to deal with. Some people said it was because there wasn’t much money in horror writing these days. But I thought it was something else: writers were good at channeling their anxieties into something productive. We all have those nasty thoughts, those worries that maybe we don’t love our partners as much as we should, or maybe they don’t love us. Fears that maybe something awful will happen tomorrow. The phone will ring and it will be the police. An accident somewhere. Or a fight escalated, a button pushed.

“When I studied the Middle Ages,” I told him, “it always seemed like it must have been so difficult for those people. I mean, the Black Death wiped out 40% of the population. Imagine whole villages lost, your family — everyone you’ve ever met — wiped out.”

“I know,” he said, “I just couldn’t take living like that. I’d, I dunno. I’d go crazy, I guess.”

I wondered if he really would go crazy. Or if he was going crazy right now, waiting for that call about Emmanuel. Waiting for Trump to finally get around to signing a new Executive Order. I had always liked Benny because he had a sense of outrage, a keen abhorrence of injustice. I knew he had marched in those early protests, and knew that he wasn’t marching anymore. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Benny was strong but he was adaptable. He was finding ways to survive, to keep making his art — but doing it so it didn’t hurt Emmanuel.

Luca was the same way. Most nights he didn’t come home until close to midnight. There was always more he felt he could be doing. For a while I’d felt really proud of him. And then when
things got bad, I’d just felt resentful, angry at him for spending so much time saving other people when what I really wanted was for him to save me.

In the gift shop I chose a postcard for him, a picture of the Flemish tapestry called *The Hunt for the Unicorn*. It showed five young men in aristocratic clothing with their spears and their dogs. If it weren’t for the title you wouldn’t have been able to tell what they were doing there. I wanted to choose one with the unicorn, but all of them looked too violent or depressing. Something about the unicorn in captivity, collared, in a fence that can barely hold her, reminded me of *Answering the King*, and how the girl had been taken to prison after she shot the president. There had been a coda at the end of the novel, the little girl twenty years later, grown up, in solitary confinement. They had thought she had gone mad because she wouldn’t stop hurting herself.

But St. John showed the real reason. The girl had had another vision, one worse than what she’d stopped all those years ago. But this time there was nothing she could do about it.

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I couldn’t get hold of Luca that night. He wasn’t answering his e-mail and when I tried him at home—and then at work—the phone just rang and rang. It wasn’t that unusual. Sometimes there were emergencies, and Luca would become so totally absorbed in them he would forget everything else.

There were emergencies like that, I knew, one every few days it seemed. So eventually I left a message saying I loved him. I tried the TV but got nothing except static. Eventually I settled down to read. It was another story from *Strangers and Friends* but this one was about a haunted house called “Question the Foundations.” It was a twist on the trope: the houses weren’t haunted by people so much as the people by houses. In St. John’s world each person had a tiny space within them, an impression
of the place where they had been born. And it remained there, like a scar, or a memory. And everyone else could see it too, who you were and where you came from. Except there was this young boy who didn’t have a place like that. He had nothing. He had come from nowhere. And because he had nothing, he scared people.

I put the book down, confused and unsure of myself. The story bothered me but I didn’t know why. It was different from the others, softer, sadder. There was no real horror in the story. It had been about loneliness. How it felt to be hollow, an outsider. Rootless.

Maybe it was just those constellations of images, emptiness and violence. Luca had told me a story once about how his family used to keep chickens. He had lived in the middle of a wood. One day a fox broke into the henhouse and tore open all the chickens. He’d found their bodies, or what was left of them, the next morning. Inside their bodies he had found strings of growing eggs, like pearls.

After he told me that, I couldn’t sleep, and it was the same feeling now. I didn’t have any regrets. Luca and I had talked, and he had left the decision to me. There had been no pressure, none from him anyway. But I’d been watching the news. And when the first bomb exploded in Paddington Station it had been like a warning sign. Not now. It wasn’t safe. Things would settle down soon, they had to. And then we could try again.

I put the book down and touched my stomach gently, tentatively. Beneath my fingers all I could feel was my own thick flesh.

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Three times I passed the cafe before I finally had the courage to meet Lily Argo. I could see her—at least I thought it was her—sitting in the courtyard with her walker folded up beside her. She had long white hair and a red-and-grey printed dress.
with long sleeves. I knew her because of how tall she was, even a little stooped over. She still had at least six inches on me.

“Ms. Argo?” I asked her and she nodded politely while I pulled up a seat.

“So you’re the one who’s come asking about Barron St. John.”

“That’s right.” I tentatively launched into my pitch: an article on St. John’s early publication history, documenting her involvement in acquiring and editing his first title. She stopped me with a wave of her hand.

“Sure, honey,” she said with a wide, generous smile, “you don’t need to go on like that. I’m happy to talk about those days, though I confess they seem a while ago now. You know I got that manuscript by accident, don’t you?”

I nodded, and she seemed relieved.

“Good, so we’re not starting from scratch. What you want is the story, I take it, of how Bear — that’s what I always called him — and I got along in those early days? Where the horror came from?” I nodded again and took out my phone but she eyed it warily. “I’ll tell it as best I can and you can make of it whatever you will — but no recordings, okay? You can listen and you can write down what you get from it, but you only get to hear it once.”

What was I supposed to say? Already I could feel a kind of strange buzz around her, the magnetic pull of her charisma. I had wanted her story and here she was, ready to give it to me.

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“I was pretty young in those days,” she began, “when I first started working for Doubleday. I’d grown up in Ohio which I never liked very much in part because it didn’t seem like I was much use to my parents. I was a reader, even then, but they had wanted me to go to one of the nursing schools, but I knew I’d never be happy with something like that, taking care of people all the time. So when I was seventeen I ran off to New York City.
“Publishing was still very much a gentleman’s sport back then and if you were a woman you were either someone’s secretary or you were publishing feminist pamphlets and burning your bra. I was the former.” She paused and took a delicate sip from her Coke. Her lipstick remained unsmudged though it left a trace of red on her straw. “Most of us at the time wanted to be writers. I suppose I did as much as anyone, and so we’d spend our days editing, and we’d spend our nights writing. What was funny was that we knew all the people we were sending our drivel to, we’d met them at luncheons or for after-hours drinks. I was embarrassed. I was a good editor, and because I was a good editor I knew I wasn’t a very good writer. I thought, how on earth will these men take me seriously if they see what I’m coming up with?

“So I did what most women did at the time, or anyone who wasn’t Daphne du Maurier anyway, and I made up a name. Mine was Victor Wolf, which today seems so damned fake I don’t know why no one thought anything of it. Or maybe they did but they just didn’t care. Anyway I may have been writing garbage, but eventually the garbage got better and I started getting some of it published. It was what they called Kooks and Spooks stuff, I suppose, sort of crime fiction but with some other bits thrown in, monsters, sometimes, and ghosts. Possession—or Russian spies using hypnosis to control young American teenagers, that sort of thing. There was a real taste for that sort of thing back then. By the early seventies the papers were going crazy, telling us the irrationalism of our reading was helping the Commies and we had to get back to old-fashioned, American literature. But Rosemary’s Baby was an absolute hit, and then there was The Exorcist, and people just wanted more of it.

“That was when Bear’s first manuscript came across my desk. The two of us call it an accident but it wasn’t that, not really, See, I was used to reading submissions for Donnie Rogers and when I finished Bear’s first one I knew there was magic in it, raw, maybe, but magic nonetheless. And I knew Donnie was slated for laparoscopic gallbladder surgery. He was going to be off for
at least a week recovering. That was when I tried to pitch the manuscript.

“Of course, I got laughed out of the offices. No one took me seriously and when Donnie came back he heard what I’d done and he bawled me out in front of the whole crew. Jesus, he took a strip off one side of me and then the other. After that I didn’t dare try anything like that for a good long while.

“Still, Bear had appreciated the support. He was poor as a church mouse and he and Mya had a second little one on the way. He tried me with this and that a couple of times, but it never really made it anywhere. I guess it was after a while of him sending me his stuff that I sent him one of mine. God, the nerve I had!” she chuckled, and I couldn’t help but chuckle along with her. “Well Bear wrote back and said it was pretty good, and I said it was better than pretty good, that Playboy had taken it. Bear had been trying to crack Playboy but hadn’t managed it by that point.

“For six months Bear went silent after that, and I guess I thought maybe I’d offended him. Men don’t like being shown up, not then, not now. That’s why there’s all the craziness there is today. Women are afraid of violence, but men? Men are afraid of humiliation. Humiliation to them is like dying over and over and over again. And speaking of humiliation, I had just about survived mine. Donnie Rogers had moved over to New American Libraries, and I was covering for him while they looked for a replacement. That was when the next manuscript crossed my desk.”

“That was Rosie?” I asked her.

“Indeed it was, though it was called Revenge of the Stars at the time which was a godawful title, I have to say.”

“And this time it stuck?”

“Not right away it didn’t. The ending was clunky. It had Rosie transforming into this giant radioactive slug thing and devouring the town that way. Pure St. John, you know. He always loved the EC Comics stuff. People want to say he’s got literary chops, and sure he does, but a part of him is pure pulp and is perfectly content to stay that way, thank you very much.”
“So what happened?” I wanted to know.

“Oh, that’s the easy bit. Some good luck, I suppose. Ira Levin was big, and Bear’s book was enough like that for me to pull together an advance for him. Small, you know. The real success came later with the paperback sales, and that wasn’t me, not exactly. But I suppose if what you’re after is who found Barron St. John then it’s me as much as it was anyone.”

She paused there to take another long drag of her Coke. While she’d been talking, she seemed so animated, so full of vigor, but as the seconds stretched on I could see how old she was now, how time had etched fine lines around her lips. Her wrists were thin and frail, the skin bunching and slack at the same time.

She moved then, pulled up a black leather handbag and began to dig around in it. Eventually she came up with a Christmas card. “Look at that,” she said, her eyes sharp. The paper was old and creased in several places. When I opened it there I found a simple handwritten note. To Lilian, it said, a real wolf in sheep’s clothing. We owe you so much. Love, Bear and Mya St. John.

Lily was smiling slightly as she showed it to me, smiling and watching to see my reaction. I tried to smile back but there was a part of me that felt disappointed. Most of the story was what she had published in that chapter. Little of it really surprised me. It felt rehearsed, the way you keep old memories by telling yourself the story behind them again and again. Whatever I was looking for, it wasn’t there.

I was getting restless, and it seemed like she was finished when she cocked her head to the side. “That’s not what you wanted to hear, was it?”

I tried to tell her it was great, wonderful stuff. It would certainly make it into the article.

“Sure it will,” she said, “but you didn’t need any of it. Certainly you didn’t need to fly over here from England just to get this story, did you? I could’ve told you that over the phone. You didn’t need to come.”

I shrugged.

“What you wanted was him, wasn’t it? You wanted Bear.”
“Maybe,” I told her wearily. The heat was starting to get to me, making me a touch queasy.

“It isn’t easy, you know,” she said, “to try to tell your story when the best parts are about someone else.” She sighed. “You know, I had to give up writing once I found St. John. It wasn’t like it had been before. We were so busy all the time. St. John could write like a madman, he was fast. There was always another book. And then things got tricky with the contracts. You must know about this?”

I did. Everyone did. St. John had left Doubleday after a series of well-publicized contract disputes. Doubleday had been keeping most of the profits on the paperback sales, and he felt he deserved a bigger cut. Doubleday wouldn’t budge and eventually he left.

“There wasn’t much I could do for him. They wouldn’t give him a better deal and they wouldn’t listen when I told them how serious he was about leaving. When he finally did switch publishers all those men at the top said it was my fault. I got parked for a while editing books on what types of music you can play to help your plants grow, that sort of kooky trash. After a year or so they fired me.”

I fiddled with my own straw, unsure how to react to any of this.

“Bear didn’t take me with him, see. I told him not to. I told him I had enough status in the company—but I was wrong. When you’re on top you always think you’re going to stay there forever, that there aren’t sharks circling beneath. But I guess Barron knew about those sharks. The one thing he knew about was the sharks. He could be one himself when he needed to.”

“You didn’t want to go back to writing?”

“Nah, I felt I’d spent my chance by that point. I think I had one lucky break in me—and it went to St. John. There wasn’t going to be another. I got by after that. I moved over to another house for a little while and convinced St. John to come do a book for us. But by that point things were different. He was a superstar and I felt spent. I had had enough of horror. It was the eighties. Despite everything it still felt as if the world was falling
apart. There was the banking crisis, the AIDS epidemic. The people weren’t reading the news though. They were reading Bear.

“I did write one more story though. I tried to sell it myself, but no one would buy it. Victor Wolf had been forgotten. Bear liked it though. And he knew I was in danger of losing my mortgage. So he sent it out for me, under his name. When it sold to the New Yorker — his first real literary sale though God knows he deserved others and got them eventually — he gave me the profits.” Her smile then was bitter. “I was grateful, you know. At the time he said it was only fair. I had made his name after all. I should get the use of it whenever I wanted.

“And I was grateful at the time. I kept my brownstone, paid it off eventually. When he sold the collection, he gave me the whole advance. For a while I thought about going back to Ohio, but I still couldn’t admit to my parents I hadn’t been able to last in New York. So instead I stayed.”

She stared at me for a moment or two after that, and I could feel the cool ripple of sadness passing over me like a shadow.

“Someone told me you died,” I said, just to break the spell of her silence.

“Of the two of us, Barron was always the shark, you see?” she told me wryly, “No, I didn’t die. I just learned something he never figured out: how to stay alive when you stop moving.”

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That evening I collected my things from Hotel 31.

Benny offered to drive me to the airport, but I told him he didn’t need to do that. I could get a taxi. The university had given me a budget for that. When he said okay it sounded like there was relief in his voice, and I wondered if that meant Emmanuel was home. Or maybe it was just that he didn’t want to get so close to the airport. There were regular protests still going on. People were angry about the deportations, but no one knew how to stop them.
“Did you get what you wanted from Lily Argo?” Benny asked me. “She wasn’t just a ghost?” I told him I hadn’t really known what I wanted but I was certain, despite everything, I had met Lily Argo. But I was probably going to scrap the story. My Head of Department would be pissed but that was how these things went. Sometimes you thought you had something, and you didn’t.

What she had told me felt too invasive to write about. What I had wanted, I realized, was not just her story but a glimpse of her secret self. I didn’t have a right to it. And that’s what had made me want it even more. Maybe we all have a secret self: some of us keep it chained in the basement of our minds while others like St. John learn how to feed it.

“Well,” he said, “it was good to see you anyway. Give my love to Luca. You tell him to take proper care of you.”

I promised I would.

While I waited for my flight to board, I watched the news. We were all watching the news. We couldn’t help it. Tense security officers patrolled the hallways with machine guns at the ready, just in case. There were fewer travelers those days, fewer coming in, fewer getting out. But I felt a kind of solidarity with the others as our eyes were glued to the screens. We were liminal people moving from one reality to another. We were going home.

So we watched the footage of explosions in Yemen. Pleas from refugees who had found themselves trapped in abandoned tenements, living in filth. It was only when I saw the story about the bomb that had gone off on a train along the Victoria Line that I remembered Luca still hadn’t called me back.

I was watching them pulling survivors out of the rubble and the blood gelled to ice in my veins. I couldn’t move. It had happened then. It had happened. Time seemed to slow. Luca mostly worked from Cambridge, but the NGO had offices in London. He went there from time to time. When had I last heard from him? Who could I call to check? But by that point the attendant was calling me forward. I didn’t move. She called me again and the people behind me began to murmur. I must have had a dazed expression on my face, a look they didn’t like. The attendant
called me a third time as an officer drew near. It was only then I was able to move. I showed them my passport and made my way down the ramp.

Inside the plane most of the seats were empty. The air was canned, stale tasting in my mouth. I wondered if I might have a panic attack but out on the runway I didn’t dare check my phone again. The hostesses were murmuring to each other. I could tell they were twitchy. But already a strange calm was taking hold of me — a sense of icy horror. There was something inevitable about what was happening. There was nothing I could do to stop it. Whatever had happened had happened.

And this feeling? It wasn’t the same as all those St. John books I had read. There I could find purpose, structure — meaning in all the bad things that had happened. But outside there was only chaos. The unraveling of beautiful things into violence. It signified nothing.

As the plane taxied down the runway I settled back in my chair and tried to sleep.
Survival Strategies for Weird Times

1. Autobiography

Art sends us information from another place.
— Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*  

The short story “Survival Strategies” offers a semi-fictionalized account of a young academic on a research trip to New York to interview the editor of Barron St. John, a bestselling author who came to prominence during the horror boom of the 1970s and eighties. Set against the backdrop of the new Trump administration it uses autobiographical elements to blur the line between fiction and reality. In doing so it asks, where do the boundaries between “true horror” and speculative horror intersect? To what extent can our situatedness in the present moment become a source of the uncanny? 

The autobiographical elements of story are important. In the summer of 2016 I began a research project to investigate the publishing history of Stephen King’s *Carrie* by the hardback publisher Doubleday in 1974. At the time, I argued that

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2 I would like to thank Nina Allan whose many conversations on the subject have informed my own developing approach to weird fiction as well as Anglia Ruskin University which funded my research. Thanks also go to Bill Thompson for his generous interview, Bob Jackson for providing copies of a number of crucial documents, and Bev Vincent for his support and guidance on all things King related. Many of the threads discussed in this commentary relate to a series of articles I have written. These include: Helen Marshall, “Introduction,” in *The Year’s Best Weird Fiction, Vol. 4*, eds. Helen Marshall and Michael Kelly (Toronto: Undertow Publications, 2017), ix–xvii. Also see my discussion of King’s work (drafted on this trip) at Helen Marshall, “The Only Lights are Headlights,” *Weird Fiction Review*, August 10, 2016, http://weirdfictionreview.com/2016/08/101-weird-writers-43-stephen-king/.

3 I make no claims to be a speculative realist nor a philosopher and so my understanding of Morton’s work may be limited. I have responded to his text here as a writer, recognizing a likeness in approach. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 47.
the unexpected success of *Carrie* launched “the Stephen King phenomenon,” and was one of several important books inspiring the marketing approach to horror paperbacks from the late seventies to the early nineties. As with the publication of any breakthrough novel, the penning of *Carrie* had taken on its own mythological status. In one of the autobiographical sections of his memoir and guide to the craft, *On Writing* (2000), King opens up about his difficulty in producing a first draft. He managed three single-spaced pages, which he crumpled up and threw away only to have them rescued by his wife, Tabitha. The sense of a historical moment interested me — as I imagine it was intended to. I had recently completed a Ph.D. in medieval literature and was accustomed to working in the archives, aware of how much material had been lost over the centuries. Studying a contemporary novelist was innately appealing: it promised abundance where I had previously encountered dearth. But there was also an extra voyeuristic angle. Here was a writer I admired intensely whose life I might be able to approach in some way through my research. I wanted intimacy.

I was not entirely prepared for what I would find. I contacted Bill Thompson, King’s first editor at Doubleday through his editorial freelance website and arranged a meet-up in New York. But in conversation with several horror fans, authors and editors — both in the UK and in the US — I was repeatedly told it would be impossible to meet Thompson because he had passed away years ago. Let me avoid all ambiguity here: as I found when I met him, Thompson was still very much in the land of the living. But my repeated encounter with claims of his apparent death began to evoke that creeping-under-the-skin sensation of the “fantastic” — that moment identified by the Russian structuralist Tzvetan Todorov in which something apparently supernatural is encountered, creating a period of hesitation as


5 This story has been recounted in a range of other articles and interviews, but I have found King’s sense of the story here to be the fullest in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 68.
different possibilities are suggested and discarded. I did not know how to react. I had been in contact with Bill Thompson, had exchanged e-mails and agreed on a date for meeting, but all that contact had been on-line with no further way of verifying his identity. I nearly reached the point of believing. This is the formula Todorov presents to sum up the spirit of the fantastic: “Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life.” I lingered in that period of hesitation. Bill Thompson was alive, of course he was alive, but the sense of the uncanny soaked into my perception of him. The trip came alive with the possibility of the real unreal.

2. The Real Unreal

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

― H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”

It was the summer of 2016, and already my world had been destabilized. The Brexit vote had shaken UK politics, threatening my university which was heavily reliant on EU students and EU-


7 Ibid., 31.

research funds. In New York, the American election was in full swing, already tilting toward Trump. “Be careful,” I told friends, “it could happen here.” No one took me seriously.

In a 1989 issue of SF Eye, Bruce Sterling described slipstream writing as “a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility.”9 Slipstream writing drew heavily on the fantastic; as Sterling said:

[I]t is a contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so. It does not aim to provoke a “sense of wonder” or to systematically extrapolate in the manner of classic science fiction.10

Where science fiction seemed coherent, the vanguard of a single dominant ideology, slipstream was postmodern, infused with a sense of ironic detachment that seemed to exemplify the natural response to conditions in Anglo-America. But twenty-five years on, how might we describe the contemporary sensibility? In 2016 I was post-postmodern though I had not fully realized it yet. Post-truth, if you like, or rather, pre-post-truth, which is not to say that I was living in a time of truth but rather that we had not recognized its loss. I was locked in a moment of hesitation.

As I write this now, I find Todorov’s notion of the fantastic an imperfect vehicle to describe the feeling of that year. He imagines the moment of hesitation as fragile and difficult to sustain, liable to collapse either into “total faith” or “total incredulity.” In the years since I have attempted to grapple with this problem. If the twentieth century offered slipstream as its primary mode—ironic and playful—then increasingly it seems as if the twenty-first will be a far weirder age. Here, I draw upon the


10 Ibid.
definition of weird fiction as first proposed by H.P. Lovecraft in his seminal work “Supernatural Horror in Literature” (1927) as writing which exhibits a “malign and particular suspension or defeat of […] fixed laws of Nature.”¹¹ This mode, discussed by Jeff and Ann VanderMeer, China Miéville, and Roger Luckhurst, among others, to me, plausibly evokes the feeling of living in the twenty-first century: an age thus far characterized by political crises, fake news, and environmental catastrophe.¹² It is an age in which the unreal intrudes upon consensus reality, shattering it with often terrifying consequences.

Of the writing I have encountered on the subject, that of the speculative realist Timothy Morton has most resonated with me. An intimate understanding of the weird infuses his discussion of hyperobjects, real things with discernible impacts which cannot be apprehended in their entirety, but which affect our understanding of what it means to exist. He cites global warming as one significant hyperobject: its effects are massively distributed, so much so that the object itself becomes difficult to grasp, seeming to disappear from our vision or to undulate in our minds and in reality. Morton describes our present moment as the age of asymmetry, a period of hypocrisy in which the ironic detachment characteristic of many postmodern writers is impossible because there is “nowhere to stand outside of things altogether.”¹³ Hyperobjects engulf us. However much we seek to escape them, we find there is no away.

¹³ Morton, Hyperobjects, 12.
This view finds eerie parallels with the primary processes of weird fiction. It evokes the brilliant ghost film *Ju-on: The Grudge*. This was an early foray of mine into horror. I could hardly stand to watch it. The violence seemed senseless and unmotivated. A series of abstract images presented themselves, many of which still haunt me. A ghost clings to the body of a woman, invisible only when she enters a shower and discovers someone else’s hand in her hair, as she begins to wash it. Likewise, another woman attempts to escape from the vengeful ghost by crawling into her bed — the psychological source of the greatest safety. But it is too late. She discovers the ghost is already inside, with her. No escape was possible from the ghost of *Ju-on* because no space, however personal, however intimate, was unavailable to it. Likewise, the weird is a profoundly intimate a form of writing, designed to haunt, to project a trace of unreality onto the surface of the real. It creates ruptures, and in doing so, makes briefly visible what lies beneath. We encounter this as an intrusion in most cases, but if it is an intrusion, it is only an intrusion of *some other thing* upon our closed-off perception of the world. Those things were not summoned into being by our perception of them. They already existed, independent of our encounter with them. One of the primary functions of the weird is to remind us how little we see, and how the influence of those things we do not see can still be deadly.

This sensibility flowed into the text of “Survival Strategies” by itself. I did not set out to write a story about Brexit and Trump but the sense of dislocation, the uncanniness of these hyperobjects, permeated multiple aspects of the story, conflating the painfully personal and the public, the story of myself and the story of the world in which I found myself living. To attempt to write about Stephen King as a researcher was to realize that there was no detached, objective position from which I could undertake my research. The story of King was the story of America in the late seventies, and that story is still the story of the present moment:

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one riven with violence and uncertainty, asymmetries in power, wild successes and also devastating failures. It felt profoundly uncomfortable, and it felt uncomfortable in a way that resonated with the experience of Brexit and Trump, the double punch. Taken together they suggested a sort of rising tide of—something. It was not clear to me exactly what. But whatever it was seemed inescapable. It was as if Brexit and Trump were simply “a local manifestation of some vast entity”—Morton’s hyper-object. I could not separate myself from it, just as I could not return King to a distance where writing about him seemed easy. The real possibility of encountering King triggered a flight into fiction. The only way to write honestly about the experience was to write myself away from it.

3. Flights

As the plane taxied down the runway I settled back in my chair and tried to sleep.


The narrative voice of “Survival Strategies” is detached and yet the detachment marks a deep emotional engagement. The narrator floats through events, cynical at times, but only as a mask; cynicism deflects, but the narrator absorbs from a distance she seeks to maintain, only to find that no distance is possible. The world intrudes, sometimes violently. In the true fashion of the weird tale, her encounter with Lily Argo demonstrates that the world has always dangerously intruded, the world has always already dangerously intruded. There is no safe vantage point to observe without becoming immersed. In short, it feels like the end of the world.

Morton has something specific to say about this sense of the ending world in the twenty-first century. He calls into question the notion of world, labeling it an “aesthetic effect based on a
blurriness and aesthetic distance.”¹⁶ I cannot help but agree. The act of writing “Survival Strategies” was a simultaneous engagement with and flight from an increasingly inexplicable world. Its world was my world, but not my world — the unheimlich home, a home that does not allow one to feel at home. The act of writing was an attempt to create, through aesthetic engagement, a new world. Literally, the act of writing was, for me, an act of worldbuilding.

The process of worldbuilding lies at the heart of speculative fiction and yet it is an area with which I have always struggled, perhaps because my own style is improvisational and intuitive rather than clearly structured along conventional lines. But more than this I find weird fiction a natural fit, because I find the real world — the world as I experience it — to be incoherent and uncanny. It has no respect for genre. My project in writing is not to mask these inconsistencies but to draw them out and highlight their effect. But inconsistency is often considered the sign of poor worldbuilding or a failure of craft. A recent blog-post by the science fiction author Charlie Stross began to clarify my problems with the conventional approach to worldbuilding. Stross candidly discusses his rejection of most contemporary science fiction writing on the basis of flawed worldbuilding:

“The implicit construction of an artificial but plausible world is what distinguishes a work of science fiction from any other form of literature. It’s an alternative type of underpinning to actually-existing reality, which is generally more substantial (and less plausible — reality is under no compulsion to make sense).”¹⁷

Artificial but plausible — this is a formulation I have since returned to many times in my attempt to grapple with what fiction

¹⁶ Morton, Hyperobjects, 87.
is and what it should do. There is a tension at work in Stross’s rejection of science fiction. He seems to seek plausibility from his reading, which in this case coincides with artificiality. This artifice is necessary because, as he says, reality is under no compulsion to make sense. Fiction provides sense. Fiction creates coherence. As a result, the kind of fiction Stross is after—the plausible—is a kind he recognizes as more real than real, one which is therefore inherently unreal. Stross’s position exemplifies Morton’s claims about the aesthetic effects of the notion of the world. Drawing on Lord of the Rings as a prime example, Morton alludes to the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art), a creation in which, as Carl Maria von Weber said in 1816, “partial contributions of the related and collaborating arts blend together, disappear, and, in disappearing, somehow form a new world.” The Gesamtkunstwerk is the ideal, science fiction story in Stross’s formulation, one in which the writer has total control of all aspects. However, for Morton, the Gesamtkunstwerk is suspect because the act of worldbuilding extends beyond fiction into the Real, which he also sees as artificial, falsely presented as coherent when in fact it is utterly weird.

Writers of weird fiction do not have the same expectations as writers of science fiction. Their worlds exhibit inconsistency. In fact, the sine qua non of the weird writer is that gap in consistency: the extra stair at the bottom of the staircase that makes the reader stumble, the grit in the reader’s eye, the living dead. Opposed to Stross’s model of the plausibly constructed world is M. John Harrison, an important figure in New Wave science fiction writer who has also contributed to the rise of the New Weird. He says:

Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of writing over worldbuilding.

18 Morton, Hyperobjects, 88.
Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding literalises the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding numbs the reader’s ability to fulfil their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done.  

Harrison’s sensibility speaks to me. His argument is subtle and contentious within the field. He describes the conventional view of worldbuilding as “a bad idea about the world as much as it is a bad idea about fiction.” He rejects the notion of the author-God and warns against readers who expect the world of the story to be anything other than a story. For Harrison the invented world has no outward substance. It adheres only in language and in that sense it is purely an aesthetic effect. Stross would not, I think, disagree with this, but the difference between the two lies in the kind of immersion they are seeking. Harrison prefers fiction which acknowledges what it does as “a shell game, a sham,” yet his work is not post-modern in the framework we have been discussing. In fact, he rejects postmodernism with its three impossible claims:

[F]irstly that we can change the real world into a fully prosthetic environment without loss or effort; secondly that there are no facts, only competing stories about the world; & thirdly that it’s possible to meaningfully write the words “a world” outside the domains of imagination or metaphor, a solecism

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.
which allows us to feel safely distant from the consequences of our actions.\textsuperscript{23}

Reading, according to Harrison, ought to be a ludic act. It offers the possibility of escape, but of a substantially different kind. Escape \textit{into}, not \textit{away from}. Here, escape should not be misread as escapism. Where Stross looks for sense, Harrison’s work is profoundly unsettling. It presents fiction as a vehicle for non-sense — the unraveling of sense, the minute exposure of senselessness. Crucially, it seems to acknowledge that I may not always know what I mean when I write. Writing is not the attempt to translate coherence of thought from one mind to another. My mind is mischievous. I am not an author-God. There is a need for other sense-makers here.

In Lovecraft’s weird tales an encounter with the real leaves three possibilities: death, madness, or flight. In 2016 I found myself struggling to find a new response. If I am honest, I did not find it within “Survival Strategies.” The inspiration for the story arrived after a sleepless night following a viewing of \textit{The Invitation} (2015),\textsuperscript{24} a claustrophobic film about a man named Will attending a dinner party hosted by his ex-wife, Eden. Eden and her new husband have, it seems, subscribed to the beliefs of a nihilistic, death cult. Before its brutal conclusion, the film shows Will’s unease as he is continually encouraged to ignore his growing anxieties through the constant weight of social pressure: surely everything is fine, the film seems to say, and it would be rude to leave, wouldn’t it? Will hesitates. He cannot decide how to process the telltale signs of danger he sees around himself. Only one character does, and it is her fate that kept me up that night. Early on in the evening, one of the guests, Claire, unsettled by a game of “I Want” she is forced to play, makes her excuses and is followed out of the house by one of the other guests, David, whose looming presence throughout presages the

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Karyn Kusama, dir., \textit{The Invitation} (New York City: Gamechanger Films, 2015), Blu-ray Disc, 1080p.
bloodbath he will later initiate. We never find out what happens to Claire. Does David murder her off-screen, or does she manage to flee to safety, warned by the niggling feeling in the back of her mind that something is wrong? Her fate was important to me, and as the night advanced, I was left wondering: how effective was her strategy? What if our niggling sense of danger is too little, too late? What if we cannot run because what we are fleeing is waiting for us everywhere?

Morton asks another question: “What is left if we aren’t the world?” What if — like one of H.P. Lovecraft’s hapless intellectuals — our sense of control dissipates as we come to recognize our insignificance in the face of much larger forces? Morton’s answer is startling: “Intimacy,” he writes, “we have lost the world but gained a soul.”25 If we are not obliterated, we are made more real by the encounter. The narrator of “Survival Strategies” boards the aircraft despite the panic of an ill-described terrorist attack in London. She settles into her seat as the plane launches into the air. Perhaps her husband is dead. Perhaps everything she believed in has fallen apart. She cannot decide. She hesitates. She falls into sleep. The story had no answers for me then, but now I think that was part of the point in writing it. As a story it is not fully coherent. The metaphors do not perfectly unravel into clear meanings. But then a story cannot perfectly digest what it encounters.

The narrator sleeps, but she will wake, flying into, not away from. The world had ended before she ever left London. What is to come is a new kind of intimacy with the real. And wisdom, we can hope — and survival.

25 Morton, Hyperobjects, 90.
Bibliography


