

The Artist In Landfill Village

Matthew Baker

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I.

The morning before the maharaja's granddaughter disappears, I take her into the shell of a fallen satellite. The satellite is slumped against a dead ash tree, half-buried under oil drums, chunks of plaster, battered vending machines, the rusted frames of bunkbeds. Circuit scavengers have hollowed the satellite, stripping its insides of everything but the metal. We drag strips of black plastic into it and tape them to the skeleton of the satellite, covering the metal bones with a lightproof skin, transforming the satellite into a camera obscura. The maharaja's granddaughter pokes a plastic chopstick through the ceiling, carving a tiny hole for the sunlight to drip through. Murky colors smear the metal floor of the satellite: shopping bags fluttering underneath a bunkbed frame, pigeons in the branches of the dead ash tree. I fall asleep on the pile of extra plastic. She naps on the floor, curled like a cat in the colors.

II.

There are some things we have lost. For years we have eaten nothing but the meat of cloned animals. Ground beef, minced lamb, pigeon squab, pork cutlets, all of it laboratory harvested. I would like to eat the meat of something born of fucking. I would like a tomato with dark bruises. A watermelon with seeds.

III.

In the landfill village where I live, there is a salt peddler who exists only one evening of every week. The salt peddler subscribes to an online world where he is a magician with silver eyes and an orange robe; the salt peddler hunches over his secondhand laptop, sprawled across a mound of broken birdhouses and stained sheets spotted with mildew, as his magician-self casts spells at golden-skinned gnomes. The salt peddler uses a screwdriver to operate the letters on his keyboard that are missing keys, poking the space where “x” should be, as his magician-self splashes into greenish shallows, wading into a flooded forest swarming with shimmering will o’ the wisps. The salt peddler leeches off of used automobile batteries, powering his laptop with black cords, nibbling on rice wafers as his magician-self stomps out of the snow into a dark tavern. Every Monday evening the salt peddler hides his laptop in a clump of weeds under an abandoned bulldozer and trades whatever he can salvage from the landfill for a bucket of sea salt. Then he wanders through our village, selling salt to the other villagers so that he can afford enough whisky and rice wafers to last him until the next Monday. Tuesday morning he returns to his magician life. He is not the only one that lives like this. Almost everyone subscribes to some sort of online world. The sock mender is an international soccer star for an imaginary team. The meat vender is an eight-year-old with red hair and glasses that lives in an online neighborhood and feeds imaginary puppies every morning. The woman with the purple birthmark on her face is a ghost poacher in a haunted online realm, where she also trades the ghost souls she collects for imaginary gold, which she then sells online for euros, not imaginary euros but actual euros, which she uses to pay for her addictions.

IV.

You can make homemade paint from a variety of waste materials: tallow wax, tar, ginger

beer, rotten porridge, fish oil. Pigment can be found in almost any sector of the landfill: dark brown pigment can be extracted from the blood of rancid meat, green pigment from copper pots and coins, black pigment from cracked bits of charcoal, or any sort of fire salvaged furniture—half-burnt dressers, half-burnt bedframes, half-burnt cabinets. Rust can be used for a dark orange pigment. Or a dark brown. Blue pigment can be extracted by melting down any sort of blue rubber: goggles, striped tricycle tires, the eyes of dolls. For brushes, use brooms, tattered socks, the feathers of stuffed birds.

V.

I once loved someone made of patchwork. Her eyes were huge and gold and her hair was dark and she slept under an abandoned station wagon with orange bottles of pills. When she was lonely she would swallow white pills with green stripes and when she was sad she would swallow grey pills with white stripes and when her dreams were haunted by changelings or mooncalves or the unborn or her father she would swallow pills from whichever bottle she found first in the darkness. Her blood was a sludge of chemicals and iron. The pills stitched her patchwork together, tugging the ends of her threads, yanking her hollows shut.

VI.

There was a time when I believed in things such as bathwater. Such as baklava. Such as flowerpots.

VII.

I bury the astronomer behind the stormstained carousel, scooping shovelfuls of bent tobacco tins and green glass bottles, digging deeper into the garbage. The astronomer is the

fourth to die of the disease of purple hives. The gravedigger says the diseased bodies are an abomination. He refuses to bury them in our cemetery of furnaces and sun-cracked bathtubs. I drag the astronomer by her ankles, gripping the dark blotches, and dump her into the burrow of umbrella bones and rusted baking tins. I mark her grave with a stick and a blue shopping bag. The paintchipped carousel animals snort puffs of fog into the mist, creaking with the wind.

VIII.

When the stormclouds drip mud and oil I make my roots from recycled newspaper, my leaves from the rusted husks of robots.

IX.

The maharaja says there are worse places to live. He bends over a weatherbeaten refrigerator and pinches a cigarette butt from a mound of broken glass. He says there are villages in the abandoned subways, the abandoned water towers, the abandoned zoo grounds. He says there are villages in the sewers, villages of people who have never seen the world aboveground, villages that live on sewer rats and pipe algae. He says there is a village in the abandoned asylum, a village of people who sleep on wire cots in cells wallpapered with graffiti and vomit. A milky film of blindness glazes his eyes. His skin is furrowed with wrinkles and veins. He drops the cigarette into a stained paper bag half-full of discolored cigarette butts. The maharaja says that in a time like ours we are lucky to live in a place where the broken and outdated and unwanted are left in colorful mounds of plastic and porcelain and rubber. That here we have everything we could ever need. That we aren't missing anything.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

Acknowledgements

“The Artist In Landfill Village” originally appeared in *Denver Quarterly* in 2010.

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