

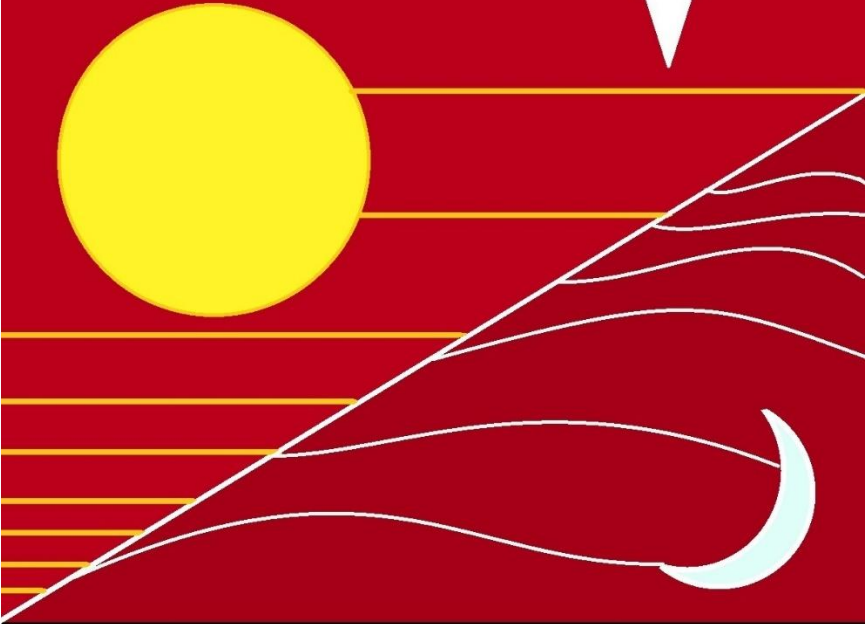
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ORION'S
BELT

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EDITED BY JOSHUA FAGAN



The Whispering Bones

Lyndsey Croal

Suddenly, I Remember
Camelot

Dafydd McKimm

A Cosmonaut's Prospectus

Joshua Fagan

Orion's Belt

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The Whispering Bones

by Lyndsey Croal

The bones whisper to me in my sleep,
in my waking,
in my moments of thinking nothing at all.
They whisper stories of pain, loss,
and of wishes that never came true
when they were living.
I try to drown them out with dreams of my own,
but I cannot compete with the dead.
Not when they are so many, and I am all alone.
Sometimes, I find fragments of them
beneath ashen soil or sunken sand,
or somewhere they were never intended to be found.
I put them together, piece by piece:
femur and rib,
skull and wing,
jaw and toes.
For a time, the whispers still,
so quiet they could just be a breeze
or the sea kissing a pebbled beach
or a cold breath lingering too long on the back of my neck.
But the peace is short lived.
There are always more lost and forgotten voices

waiting to be laid to rest,
waiting for someone to listen.
And so, I let the whispers in,
a flourish of wants,
a blossom of demands,
a bloom of desire.
I use the voices to find the bones,
gather them one by one,
day by day,
night by night,
until all the whispering bones lie together in a mosaic
ready for assembly.
I plant the bones in freshly tilled earth:
seeds of decay, bulbs of marrow, fruits of sinew.
Finally, the whispers still, and the bones can sleep.
Until the first sprout grows,
breaking from the soil
with skeletal fingers reaching for sunlight.
They are jointed stems with darkened veins,
pale white branches, and hollow buds.
Soon there is a whole forest of them,
whispering in rhythm with the wind,
almost drowned out by rustling leaves
or birdsong at dawn.
But now it is peaceful here, roaming and listening.

Between the living and dead,
or the dead and living,
for I am no longer sure
I can tell the difference.

A Cosmonaut's Prospectus

by Joshua Fagan

Writing about literary trends and tendencies from the narrow viewpoint afforded by the present has never been easy. In “How It Strikes a Contemporary,” Robert Browning creates as an allegory of the poet-figure an enigmatic observer, attempting to understand the beguiling networks of secrets and circumstances unfolding themselves in the enigmatic corners he observes. That the man feels unreal, more akin to an eerie, vague description of a spirit than a person of flesh and blood, is essential to the ideas Browning considers with this poem. An entirely comprehensive perspective of contemporary life strikes us as strangely inhuman. Virginia Woolf’s more famous “How It Strikes a Contemporary” explicitly discusses the difficulty of comprehending one’s own artistic era. Study the Romantic or Elizabethan eras, and there are lists of canonical poets and ideologies to comprehend and interpret. Without the aid of history, Woolf argues, considering a literary moment becomes a matter of slogging through an unsettled haze.

Despite these warnings, becoming detached from the present and living only in the past is no answer, especially as the editor of a speculative-fiction magazine. Fiction is at a particularly precarious and exciting moment, and to neglect the opportunity to document that moment would be wasteful. When I started *Orion’s Belt* in 2021, it was as a protest against the separation of literary fiction and speculative fiction, against the lack of flash fiction that combined the experimental daring of the best speculative fiction with the attention to craft and style of the best literary fiction. I would never claim *Orion’s Belt* was the only magazine to contemplate this intersection, even if it was one of the few that made its stance so explicit. Nor

would I be so arrogant as to claim Orion's Belt has fundamentally changed the fictional landscape. Still, I believe this magazine is representative of a distinct literary moment that deserves more attention. This moment is an attempt to make sense out of a chaotic era where words saturate us, and yet fiction and poetry seem fundamentally less important than they were in previous eras.

The most convenient, concise way to frame the current crisis in fiction is that realist fiction is no longer relevant to map the world as it exists. Reality has become unreal, breaking down and becoming fragmented. The best way to capture this unreality, then, is through speculative fiction. References to the crisis caused by climate change and other pressing modern-day issues add depth and immediacy to this narrative. Ask a speculative writer why they choose to write speculative fiction, and you will likely receive a response somewhat like this. A brilliant former professor of mine at Columbia, Hilary Leichter, said in an interview that she chose to set her modern surrealist masterpiece *Temporary* in a speculative register because "I don't feel like I'm in a realist world."

This narrative is not wrong, and it's an effective counter against inanities about speculative fiction not being as relevant or important as realist fiction. The problem is that the narrative is incomplete. In the middle of the nineteenth century, ambitious writers like Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert, determined to deflate the lingering corpse of Romanticism by capturing social life as it was actually lived, created what exists in the popular consciousness as the "realist novel." Since their triumph, every new school or movement of writers has positioned themselves as innovators against a sclerotic and outdated realist establishment.

Virginia Woolf, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," parries the attacks of steadfast realists of her era by asserting that the writing of these authors portrays reality by focusing ardently on external, empirically observable characteristics. This is wrongheaded, she claims, asserting that these dogmatic realists "were never interested in

character itself; or in the book itself,” but rather in “something outside.” They think of characters as an extension of material and social circumstances, not full, enigmatically vibrant people with stormy and unpredictable inner lives.

Just as Woolf and her fellow modernists attacked Edwardian realism, so did the postmodernists attack postwar realism, and so do the intelligent, vibrantly creative speculative fiction authors of today attack the elliptical, enervated form of writing that passes for realism in our century. Does this make the modern assault on realism redundant? Not necessarily. What is at stake today is not only the conception of what literature should be, but the relevance of literature itself.

I have no desire to declare that there are no great books being written, or that the art being made today is merely a pale shadow of the daring works made in decades and centuries past. Doing so would be regressive and a little silly. As Lincoln Michel has discussed in “The Future of the Future of Books,” consumers are not going to stop buying and reading books. The publishing industry is not in danger of collapsing. Yet success and even quality are not the same as relevancy. Bruce Springsteen’s last few albums have been relatively commercially successful, and they’ve received rapturous critical acclaim. Calling them relevant would nonetheless be an exaggeration to the point of mischaracterization. Literature is not going to disappear, but there is a chance that it could become the equivalent of classical music or opera: a fascinating subject continuing to produce daring works, but no longer a subject relevant to the zeitgeist. Poetry has faced this fate for years; no one writes poetry to become rich. Story-writing could face the same fate, displaced by film, TV, and videogames.

The current moment in literature arrives at a time of great uncertainty for realism as a fictional mode, but also for literature as a method of storytelling. Perhaps this era will pass. As Browning and Woolf demonstrate, accurately reading one’s contemporary literary

moment is nearly impossible. There is a chance that a fleet of canonical, widely beloved writers will emerge in the next five years. Perhaps we'll be awash in another golden age, filled with writers who will make as firm an impact on this century as Woolf and T.S. Eliot made on the last century. Still, from my contemporary position, that seems unlikely.

Yet we needn't despair. There is still a place for great English-language literature, even if it's a less prominent place than in past ages. In a world where conventional speculative fiction with enormous budgets has taken over film and TV, literary magazines like *Strange Horizons*, *Uncanny*, or even *Orion's Belt* exist to showcase an alternative. Haunting, intimate stories and poems we've published, like "A Generation of Darkness" or "architect of night-bridges," are not attacks on the supremacy of *Star Wars* or *Game of Thrones*. They are simply demonstrations that even though literature may no longer be the preeminent medium for world-historical, era-defining fiction, there are still avenues where it remains unmatched. Works like these two incisive, ethereal pieces depend on the specific words and sentences chosen, where written language functions as a kind of incantation summoning that which can't be accessed in quite the same way by any other format. As we end our second year here at *Orion's Belt*, I'm proud to say that we've published works like these, and we will ardently, lovingly continue to do so.

Suddenly, I Remember Camelot

by Dafydd McKimm

Did I want another cup of tea? my mother asks, rising awkwardly from her chair.

I shake my head and wave my half-eaten biscuit at her over my half-drunk mug.

She settles back down into her chair but starts twiddling her thumbs.

I swallow quickly and scoot over to her, phone in hand, encouraging her to scroll through some pictures from the weekend before of me, Michelle, and Kit at the beach.

“Oh, how lovely,” she croons, her eyes sparkling.

It’s always like this between us, a dance of avoidance. We take turns leading, keeping ourselves from mentioning the old man.

It’s ten years since they found him stiff and cold in the alley behind the pub, and although I make sure I’m here every year on the anniversary, we’ve never once mentioned him: as if we’re trying to convince each other we’ve forgotten him, that he was nothing but a bad dream.

Michelle and I almost didn’t have children, my fear of succumbing to the same disease as the old man keeping me one step away from that leap into fatherhood. But, dare I say it: I’m not doing too badly. Kit has no doubt that he’s loved and that he matters more than anything to his dad.

--“To forget,” the old man always said when Mum asked him why he carried on the way he did.

That answer always killed her. She thought what he wanted to forget was her, me, us.

“He wasn’t always like this,” she’d say. “You remember when he wasn’t like this, don’t you?”

But I had few memories of my father from before he started going on his benders, like my brain had somehow locked that part of my life away, perhaps to spare me the same sorrow that Mum felt remembering happy times in misery.

A fly buzzes in the window, unable to return to the fresh air and sunlight of the world beyond the glass. In the distance, the blue sky is receding, swallowed up by billowing black clouds.

--And then, when he did come back, it was like he was a man reborn, and for a few glorious days, he’d seem to notice us again. We would swell in his estimation: my good marks at school would suddenly mean something; he would tell Mum she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He became a man of passion once again, and in the evenings, I’d sit with him as he berated the politicians on the telly. I’d listen as he talked of how things should change, of how the world could be better.

God, I loved him in those moments, when whatever it was that plagued him had been pushed far down into the depths. But it was never long before it rose again, and that glazed look would once more overtake him, and nothing in the world mattered anymore. Soon after, he would be in the pub again.

My mother stands up and goes to the window. As she pushes open the glass, a breeze wafts in from the garden, bringing with it the scent of unkempt grass, wildflowers, and the promise of rain.

--And suddenly, I remember Camelot.

I am nine years old with my father; we are walking across the wildflower meadows that spread out along the bank of the river as it meanders away from town. It is late summer; a storm gathers

unnaturally above us; the air is charged and seems to fizz like a shaken bottle of pop.

A trumpet sounds over the meadowsweet where once a skylark sang, and where a moment ago only spires of foxglove and willowherb strained towards the sky—now rises a many-towered citadel.

Yes, I remember it all--the red-cheeked pages rushing round, the whinnying horses with their peacock-feather plumes and singing bridle bells, the kaleidoscope of regalia more thrilling than the packed shelves of a sweetshop--and Arthur, with twinkling eyes of chestnut brown and a kind voice, and Excalibur, blinding as he pulls it from its sheath, at once weighty and light as air as I take it from his proffering hands, and knowing then that all the tales were true, that Arthur's perfect city existed, beyond any doubt, and keeping that knowledge close in my heart as the sun set and the city and all its towers, horses, knights in their regalia faded with the dying light, leaving only a moonless gloaming, the whisper of distant thunder, and the scent of wildflowers on the air.

My mother's hand darts to her mouth. "You looked just like him then," she stutters. "You had the same look in your eyes that he—"

She turns away, sobbing, but I barely hear her and don't rush to comfort her as a good son should. All I can think is that Camelot exists! Perfect Camelot, before which everything else pales: everything I know and hold dear dwarfed by that resplendent city, where truth and goodness and beauty reign eternally.

I sit still, absorbed in the vividness of the place, in its perfection. Everything around me begins to chafe: the pettiness of our joys and sorrows, our grievances and great causes. Why concern ourselves with any of them when somewhere like Camelot is real?

As I blink at the brightness of that vision, my eyes fall on my phone and the picture of a woman and child--whose names I struggle to remember are Michelle and Kit. I rub my eyes.

Their faces appear dull, washed out in comparison to the brilliance of that sublime memory.

And now I see it. Now I see what ate up the old man. I am afraid--so very afraid--that I will never be able to forget Camelot again.

Notes on Contributors

Lyndsey Croal is an Edinburgh-based writer of speculative and strange fiction. She is a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Awardee, and her work has been published in several anthologies and magazines, including *Mslaxia's Best Women's Short Fiction 2021*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, and *Dark Matter Magazine*. Her debut audio drama 'Daughter of Fire and Water' was produced by *Alternative Stories & Fake Realities*, and was a finalist for a 2022 British Fantasy Award. 'The Whispering Bones' is her first poetry publication. Find her on Twitter as @writerlynds or via www.lyndseycroal.co.uk.

Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in New York City. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*. His YouTube channel has received over 1.6 million views.

Dafydd McKimm is a speculative fiction writer producing mainly short and flash-length stories. His work has appeared in publications such as *Deep Magic*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *The Cafe Irreal*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Podcastle*, *The Best of British Fantasy*, *The Best of British Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. He was born and grew up in Wales but now lives in Taipei, Taiwan. You can find him online at www.dafyddmckimm.com.