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Hands Like Wings,
Dancing Upon the Air

Goran Lowie

The Lighthouse

Marianne Xenos

Cyberpunk,
Hopepunk, and Beyond

Joshua Fagan

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Hands Like Wings, Dancing Upon the Air

by Goran Lowie

I.

There is so very little time left—
my father never lived to see the usurpation of the fossil fuel empires
and the treaties of the climate wars,
 fallen with the decomposing trees, something else taking root in
his place.

He never gave up the fight—
 his feet stomping the violence cradled by their hands, his fingers
untying
the knots of our extended life,
 muddled beliefs conflicting with an ever-estranging world.

II.

He was never more than Dada to me—
 a gentle statue fiddling his prop, wistfully playing sounds of spring
as he paused the preparation of soil
 and learned the lessons taught by the seasons and the valley.

I remember when his arms embraced the skies
 of our valley, our farms, our forests, proclaiming they weren't for
us
to claim as our own—simply nomads temporarily

relying on the kindness of the valley, taking and giving both.

III.

It was after his death the stories started getting told—
my father, progenitor of the climate wars in younger times:
frozen hurricanes destroyed in celebration of the sun,
city gardens separated by walls, meticulously maintained,
sharp, acrid smells and the silence of the birds.

And then, the change that followed. A man under construction—

My father, listening, learning the terms of balance:
sunset raying between trunks of apple trees,
a city adapting, a woodland regrowing,
birds singing in the wind.

IV.

Stories told in the shadowy corners of a tavern.

Old handbooks and historical documents.

Images of flooded lakes and scooped-up hills.

Uncensored proof of past mistakes.

Our hands reaching out

like wings dancing upon the air.

Cyberpunk, Hopepunk, and Beyond

by Joshua Fagan

Stories pursue truth. A narrative that feels sentimental and cloying, portraying the triumph of the pure and just over heartless, cackling evil will not resonate beyond an audience of schoolchildren because it does not convey truth. The same is true of a narrative that portrays humanity as universally corrupt and heartless, caring only for material gain and rejecting community and compassion. These two poles, while ostensibly different, make the same error: their worldview rings false. Their basic vision of the world does not register as accurate. Though stories rely on fictitious elements, these elements serve to convey a greater and more philosophical truth. The debate about cyberpunk and hopepunk is largely a debate over what resonates as true.

Cyberpunk has many ancestors, from Japanese anime and manga to underground, experimental French comics. The Los Angeles Review of Books ran a comprehensive article in 2021 detailing the debt cyberpunk owes to graphic novels around the world, arguing that the experimental space afforded by those comics encouraged the proliferation of haunting, patently non-mainstream visions of corporate-controlled nightmare worlds, forming the foundation for cyberpunk. Still, cyberpunk in the English-speaking world largely owes its foundation to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, released in 1982,

and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, released in 1984. These two sources largely define what the average person thinks of when they think of cyberpunk as a genre: lurid, flashing lights contrasted against grime-soaked, crime-ridden streets, unchecked corporate power infiltrating the most intimate and personal spaces, and existential questions about the difference between the organic and the artificial in such a disorienting and overstimulating world.

That cyberpunk remains influential does not necessarily mean it has flourished. The cyberpunk aesthetic—one part Tokyo, one part noir, one part Las Vegas—has perhaps become too popular to stimulate the creativity that once defined the genre. There are still great cyberpunk works being made, such as the ethereally existential *Blade Runner 2049*, released in 2017, but too often cyberpunk becomes only an aesthetic, a familiar set of tropes and conventions. This familiarity affects middling works in the genre, such as the largely forgotten show *Altered Carbon*, but it also affects even grandiose blockbuster videogames like *Cyberpunk 2077*, a game that diligently attempted to be thoughtful and philosophical but ultimately did little that the masterworks of the genre, from *Blade Runner* to *Akira*, had not already done better.

Gibson, in his cyberpunk novels, attempted to demonstrate that “the future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.” It pairs an ostensibly exciting future with the sobering revelation that only a select few would benefit from this future. Still, many works of cyberpunk allow the exotic glamor of the aesthetic to obscure any politically or philosophically salient points, and even works like

Cyberpunk 2077 that take the implications of cyberpunk more seriously lack the streamlined focus of Gibson or Scott. The omnipresence of cyberpunk has transformed it from being a radical, avant-garde movement to an established aesthetic often associated with cynicism and somber pessimism. In a cyberpunk world, little improves or changes for the better, earning the genre the ire of those who refuse to believe in such a bleak vision of the future. Artists with ardent activist sensibilities understandably seek alternatives to the cyberpunk understanding of postmodern commercial society.

A flurry of more optimistic “punk” subgenres has thus flourished in the last ten to fifteen years. The most famous of these is probably solarpunk, a term coined in 2008 to refer to a future combining technological advancement with avid environmentalism. Renewable energy often features in these stories, but they typically focus less on technology and more on sociology. Solar panels do not themselves make a story solarpunk. The “punk” ethos of rejecting hierarchical authority and commercialism, embracing a rougher but truer perception of the world, remains emphasized. Solarpunk details how new communities can live sustainably and ethically, taking inspiration from the ecologies of lakes and forests, embracing interdependence and mutual reliability.

These stories are not always necessarily activist or utopian, and the definition of the term is broad enough that it can include anything from Art Nouveau-inspired organically futuristic designs to movies like *Nausicaa*, but they tend in a more radical direction. Solarpunk Magazine, for instance, adamantly states that “we need more

literature that demands utopia.” Rhys Williams gives one of the most concise definitions of solarpunk, arguing that it creates “imagined worlds as clear figures of a desire for a socially just and ecologically harmonious social organization.” Solarpunk engages in a dialogue with cyberpunk, tweaking but not wholly rejecting it. Gibson in “The Gernsback Continuum” gives a delightfully acidic critique of the triumphalist techno-futurism that animated pulp sci-fi. Solarpunk, accepting that critique as valid, attempts to kindle a different kind of optimism, and in its wake, a variety of different “punk” movements have emerged, taking the radical optimism of solarpunk in new directions.

From this rebellion came the category of “hopepunk.” Coined on Tumblr in 2017 by Alexandra Rowland as the “opposite of grimdark,” it is a rather capacious category defined by the hope that considerate people, despite the grim difficulties they face, can create a better world by working together. Hopepunk can admittedly seem vague, lacking even the general aesthetic characteristics of solarpunk. Still, like cyberpunk at its best, what defines hopepunk more than a specific set of tropes is a general attitude. Hopepunk believes in community and the courage to confront difficult situations. It believes in an imperfect and hard-won but ultimately satisfying future. Rejecting the image of the ideal, chrome-and-glass future provided by corporations or charismatic individuals, hopepunk believes in a flawed but beautiful tomorrow won by ordinary individuals exercising selflessness and compassion.

Not every hopepunk story counts as solarpunk, but most solarpunk stories count as hopepunk. A 2019 Den of Geek article, “Are You Afraid of the Darkness?: A Hopepunk Explainer,” gives varied examples of hopepunk, ranging from *Mad Max: Fury Road* to *Snowpiercer*. These are feel-good stories for a feel-bad age that too often wallows in despair, or roughly what Modest Mouse called “good news from people who love bad news.”

Certainly, there is much commendable about hopepunk. In an age defined by an overstimulation of distressing headlines, hopepunk definitively argues that gloom, while temporarily cathartic, does not solve climate change or any major social problem. Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, an expansive saga of terraforming and colonizing Mars that acknowledges the influence of governmental corruption and corporate power but depicts them as forces that determined and thoughtful communities can overcome, shines as a beacon of what solarpunk and hopepunk storytelling can accomplish. William Morris, the late nineteenth-century polymath and the grandfather to this kind of storytelling, combined an ardent opposition to the uprooting, lifeless unease created by mass production and utilitarianism with an imaginative willingness to create new worlds inspired by ideas of egalitarian community and interrelatedness.

Still, the rising emphasis on hopepunk storytelling is not beyond criticism. Robust hopepunk works may deplore easy answers and sentimentality, but it nonetheless emphasizes the eventual triumph of virtue. Hopepunk relies on uplifting messages and morals. It models

good behavior in a fallen world. At its worst, the genre sinks into complacency, reminiscent of the kind of “activist” self-care that views spending time with friends and quitting a bad job as daring rebellion. There is nothing wrong with attempting to heal a wounded psyche, but though those wounds may derive from an avaricious and mechanistic society, healing them does not equal radicalism. A 2018 Vox article implies that giving another award to N.K. Jemisin constitutes hopepunk and activism. Even the Den of Geek article implies that hopepunk “is a vital ingredient to the recipe to change.”

This attitude, while superficially harmless and even uplifting, has unsettling implications. In the minds of its most ardent proponents, hopepunk is not just a narrative about moral people trying to do what is right in a difficult world, but a fundamentally moral way of storytelling. It inculcates virtue. There is nothing wrong with happy endings and righteous protagonists, provided they are not cheaply sentimental or oversimplistic. Hopepunk over-enthusiasts err, though, when they tie the worth of a narrative to its capacity to offer a model for resistance and activism. Cyberpunk narratives, whatever their faults, never default to this moral absolutism. They never assert that stories should make their audiences feel upstanding and clean, providing a blueprint for collective action. They understand that sorrow, anxiety, and unease belong to art not merely as passing phases to be subsumed under the tide of optimism, but as important ideas deserving of mature exploration.

Perhaps stories like *Blade Runner* offer too few answers and wallow in gloom. But perhaps hopepunk stories offer too many

answers and embrace neat resolutions. Gibson acridly decried Singapore, a welcoming and glamorous state built by the unyielding, arguably authoritarian vision of one man, as “Disneyland with the death penalty.” This perspective, while reductive, fits the anti-authoritarian cynicism of Gibson’s vision. What should a hopepunk writer think of Singapore, which elevated its people from abject poverty to prosperity in one generation at the partial cost of personal freedom? Fraught and murky, such an issue cannot be resolved by the hopepunk paradigm of good-hearted people working against a cruel world. Great art reflects the messiness of life, instead of viewing that messiness as a problem to solve.

There is nothing wrong with writing hopepunk. There is nothing wrong with writing cyberpunk. Both express truth. Neither expresses the complete and total truth, as no one perspective can. The artistic environment flourishes when it accepts that a plurality of well-considered perspectives have significance. Artists relentlessly pursue truth, but what truth means differs depending on individual viewpoints. For some writers, cyberpunk rings false, emphasizing only gloom. For others, hopepunk rings false, emphasizing only cheer and optimism. No amount of discussion will resolve a division that comes primarily from a difference in worldviews. Still, both sides can commit themselves to the common ideal of all artists: to use visceral, vibrant details to communicate a psychological intensity of vision that overwhelms the indifference and apathy created by routine and convention. That vision, not a cool aesthetic or a desire to morally educate, is what creates art of enduring value.

The Lighthouse

by Marianne Xenos

Vita lay on a cold slab of stone, feeling disappointed with death. She resented the darkness and chilly discomfort, and resented being alone. Vita wasn't the kind of woman who enjoyed solitude. A memory nudged her, and she wriggled her toes, which were cold and bare, but animate. She'd come to this place to find her friend. Even in death, love made her restless.

Tentatively she opened her eyes and watched a flash of light across the ceiling. No, not the ceiling—the light swept across the indigo sky. Over and over, with a rhythm like the ocean, the light surged. The ocean was near; she sensed the bite of salt and rot in the air. This wasn't the cold table of a morgue. She was outside a lighthouse, and she was looking for her friend. For Virginia.

Vita lay collecting her thoughts as the night faded. The dawn chorus began, and she shivered in a white muslin nightgown. Wishing for a shawl, or better, her leather riding coat, she pulled herself to sitting, and wondered who would turn off the great light at dawn. Maybe she was the light's keeper now. Then, as the sky brightened, the beacon blinked out, and Vita stood up to look around.

The last thing she remembered was haunting her writing room at Sissinghurst Castle. Death had been expected, but the haunting took her by surprise. And even more surprising than the haunting was her longing for Virginia.

The writing room was full of books and paintings, the treasures of Vita's life—lush oils, first editions, and a manuscript inscribed with her friend's distinctive scrawl: "To Vita from Virginia." She paused near each object as though it could be a portal to another world. She was searching for something. She was at home, but also homesick. Homesick for another world. As she paced her writing room, agitated yet utterly silent, she found herself pausing in front of a simple painting of a lighthouse.

She'd bought the painting at a shop in London. Vita owned exquisite pieces of art, but this one was almost cliché and sentimental—a lighthouse in the sunset. The composition was amateur, although the colors and detail were lively. She'd bought it because it had reminded her of Virginia's lighthouse—the one in Cornwall she'd visited as a child. The one at the center of Virginia's famous book. When Vita flipped the painting over, she found she was right about the location, but wrong about the time of day. The title was "Godrevy Lighthouse at Dawn."

In her writing room, Vita stood with her feet deep in the plush Turkish carpet, and reached one hand towards the frame. She hesitated, but a sense of urgency was building. Was she afraid of getting lost, or being rejected once again? Or more ominously, afraid she would eventually snuff out like a candle? Maybe all of these.

Vita had never been a coward. She thought of her friend, put two hands on the frame, and tumbled through the dark to the lighthouse.

The indigo sky had brightened to pale blue, and the day promised to be fine. Vita circled the lighthouse, and found a small cottage in the back. She knocked and called Virginia's name. The door creaked open to a small tidy space smelling of coffee and toast, but whoever enjoyed the early breakfast was gone. Vita lit a lamp, and saw a gallery of paintings along the walls, including one painting she knew well. The lighthouse hung central on the wall, and when she stepped close, she saw that it was identical to her own. She thought to look at the back, but she was afraid to touch it.

The thought gave her goosebumps, or as the Turks say, "My hairs become thorns." At the thought of thorns, Vita remembered the garden outside the lighthouse, and went to the door. She heard the ocean in the distance, and worried once again she'd be turned away.

She noticed a note pinned to the door. It hadn't been there before, but it seemed death had its own logic, as dreams do.

"Darling V. Take the path through the garden and meet me at the shore. I spied a mermaid, although she may be a Russian princess. Yours, V."

Vita left the cottage in her white nightgown, running with dark hair streaming behind her like the heroine in a penny dreadful, and rushed down the path to the garden. Morning light reflected on two borders of white flowers, and at the end of a stone path she saw her. Virginia.

Vita was relieved that Virginia was also in a night dress, although her hair was carefully coiffed at the back of her head. She stood close to the water and Vita was irrationally afraid of losing her again.

Losing her to the waves, which seemed hungry for life, like beasts stamping on the shore. She saw her friend's feet firmly planted on the rocky edge, and took a deep breath.

"Hello? I'm looking for a Russian princess. Have you seen her?"

Virginia turned and smiled, less constrained than she'd ever been in life.

"What took you so long?"

Vita stepped forward cautiously. She'd never been a cautious person, but the stakes had changed. Death changed everything. Her friend's face -- neither young nor old, masculine nor feminine, pretty nor plain -- was piercing and precious. She touched Virginia's face, and caressed the back of her bare neck, and they kissed, listening to the waves. The ocean danced like an unchained beast.

Notes on Contributors

Marianne Xenos is a writer and artist living in western Massachusetts. For decades, stories were part of her visual art, but she recently shifted focus from visual work to the stories themselves. Her first published story appeared last year in *The Future Fire*, and several will be published this year in anthologies and magazines, including *The Fantastic Other* and *The Underdogs Rise*. Recently, she was a first-prize winner of the Writers of the Future contest, and the winning story was published in the Volume 39 anthology. Marianne has always loved the fantastic, including artists Joseph Cornell and Frida Kahlo, and writers Ursula K. Le Guin and Toni Morrison. "The Lighthouse" echoes her first literary love, Virginia Woolf. Marianne's publications are listed at www.mariannexenos.com, and you can follow her on Twitter @MarianneXenos Instagram at @mariannexenos.

Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in Scotland. 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*.

Goran Lowie is an award-winning aro/ace poet from rural Belgium with poems in *Strange Horizons*, *Heartlines Spec*, *Radon Journal* and others. He writes poetry in his second language and is a high school teacher in his day job. You can follow him on Twitter @goranlowie.