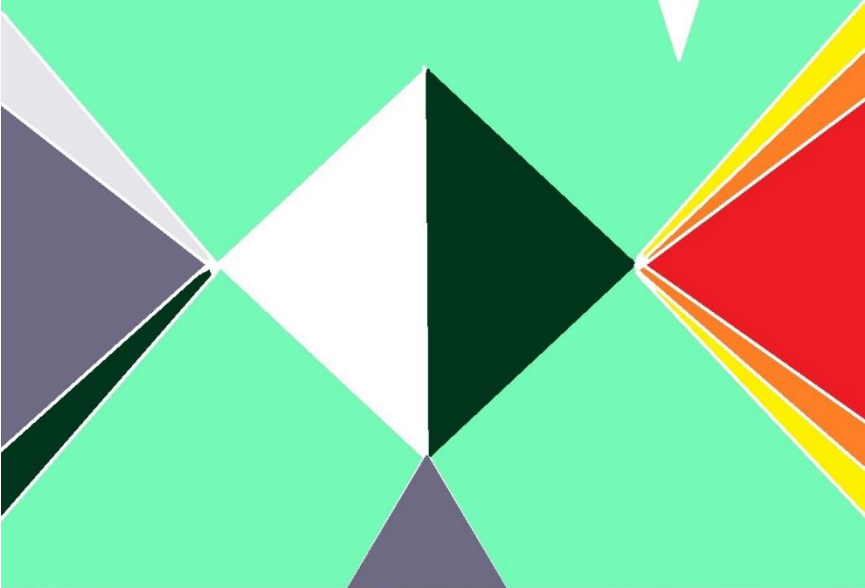


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ORION'S  
BELT

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EDITED BY JOSHUA FAGAN



syndrome()

Dawn Canada

Blood, Bone, and Water

Ash Huang

Democracy and  
Science Fiction

Joshua Fagan

# Orion's Belt

## September 2023

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# syndrome()

by Dawn Canada

## ACT 1:

The left hand of the Universe swats the dirty fly resting on my cheek.

In one swift moment I am acquainted with the real, shining face of tragedy;

In one swift moment, molten white stars move to orbit my head like a crown of thorns. I stare up (/down?) from this ceilingless room and fall into a freshwater lake of vertigo – The Earth is spinning.

It has been spinning since the day it was born, wrapped up in a celestial, carbon-fiber swaddle, crying with its eyes closed and mouth open, tongue one-third of the way out...

The Sun is hugging the Earth somewhat tightly (skin to skin), singing him a lullaby with silent notes.

Galaxies watch as I watch,

Galaxies watch as I float and blink and float unblinking.

## ACT 2:

The Moon, sulfuric and brutalist, orbits the teen Earth as the Sun watches.

The teen Earth orbits the Sun as the Sun watches. We spin and spin and spin.

ACT 3:

Does the Sun [triune states of matter (all at once!)] get motion sick?

How many circles are there in existence?

(

Steering wheel, vinyl record, silver & gold hoop earring,

Soccer ball, clock, terrified pufferfish

)

ACT 4:

I count in my mind the amount of repetitions.

I count in my mind the amount of spins occurred, now past participle, non-prophetic perfect tense (!=). A sphere's sides, either infinite or zero— I turn over in my mind the preferable answer.

ACT 5:

The shape of a quark became known to me—

The knowledge I've tucked where the roots of my hair meet the bare skin of my nape (completely out of sight)

Each morning (/night?/noon?) the Sun tells me a story I cannot hear nor retell Each morning...

Each morning I find that the real, shining face of tragedy has burned itself into my retinas like dead pixels, like double exposures shot at an important ceremony for corrupt politicians.

The tragedy that I have come to know is so Newtonian and so palindromic.

And so exact it becomes worth nothing.

Voiceless in the vacuum of space I can only spin and spin and spin and count in my mind the number of repetitions—

Like a director with no crew, like a saint with no human witnesses.

## Democracy and Science Fiction

by Joshua Fagan

On or about April 1978, the division between popular art and critically acclaimed art solidified. That is when Annie Hall defeated Star Wars at the Oscars and a chasm opened between “the kinds of movies that receive awards” and “the kinds of movies most people want to see.” This divide is not unique to film, and it of course preceded the 1970s, but 1978 nonetheless seems a watershed moment in the unnecessary divorce between critical acclaim and popularity. It is the kind of divorce that makes both sides resentful.

To the snobs, explosions and bombast cannot co-exist with quality. To the populists, a good narrative is an exciting plot happening to relatable, likeable characters, and nothing more. The idea that fiction, like politics, should be democratic, giving the people what they want, is a common idea that is nonetheless insidious. As the snobs in the early, pulp days of science fiction derided the genre as being low-quality pablum, an advocate for the genre might instinctively side against them. Yet the surrender to empty spectacle is anathema to the kind of thoughtful, introspective speculative fiction that a blockbuster-saturated world like ours deeply needs.

Nowhere is this divide between popularity and critical praise more evident than in the film industry, where more populist types readily blame the ratings decline of the Oscars on the dearth of popular

films nominated. The Oscars, as tone-deaf as ever, attempted to assuage this decline back in 2018 by introducing an award for “Best Popular Film,” a condescending move that resulted in widespread backlash and the eventual cancelling of the category. The implication, as Stephanie Zacharek wrote bluntly at *Time*, is that the “Academy thinks the public is stupid.”

So is the public stupid? Are audiences dense, sentimentalist imbeciles who lack the capacity of appreciating great art? While stereotyping those who hold this opinion as septuagenarians dressed in musty tuxedos is simple, the truth is more nuanced. As acerbic journalist and noted snob H.L. Mencken wrote, “there is always a well-known solution” that is “neat, plausible, and wrong.” Mencken disliked the common tendency toward facile reassurances and populist rhetoric, the desire to uphold decorum instead of honestly searching for truth. Mencken famously covered the Scopes Monkey Trial, where failed presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan argued in favor of a Tennessee law banning the teaching of evolution. For the thunderously cosmopolitan Mencken, Bryan was the embodiment of everything wrong with popular taste. Bryan offered only “theologic bilge” in response to scientific reasoning and broad-minded sophistication.

This opinion on the inadequacies of popular taste defined the general ideological-artistic current known as modernism. T.S. Eliot burrowed into a royalist, quasi-aristocratic contempt for the masses, and even the less emphatic Virginia Woolf published an essay that she rather playfully titled “Am I a Snob?” One of the defining



characteristics of modernist literature is its conscious difficulty, its insistence on resisting superficial understanding and demanding deeper engagement. No one goes to Eliot's "The Waste Land" or Woolf's *The Waves* for a breezy beach-read.

The modernists faced the accusation that they made their books difficult to read in order to separate their "high art" from the taste of "the rabble," but such a reading is rather narrow. They found in the modern age a fragmented world overwhelmed with superficial stimulations and obsessed with efficiency. For the modernists, what made art truly great was its capacity to create an oasis from the mechanistic routines of everyday life and see the hidden significances lingering beneath the surface. The plot of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* involves a middle-aged woman proceeding through a rather uneventful routine as she prepares to host a dinner party, while the cavernous world of her psyche inundates her with interlocking streams of memories that surprise and unsettle her. Art that refuses the ease and efficiency prioritized by the commercial world could refresh and revitalize the senses. As Eliot once wrote, "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

This modernist approach resulted in daring literature that foregrounded form to such an extent that no reader could extract a simplistic moral or message from them while ignoring the techniques and narrative strategies shaping the literature. As an approach, it succeeded artistically, recreating a sense of lost clarity and cohesion while doing so in a way that accepted the confusion and

contradiction of a technologically saturated modern age. Yet it was not the only approach. Nor was it the most popular approach. Pulp magazines dominated the popular consciousness of the early twentieth century to the same extent as modernist masterpieces dominated its intellectual consciousness. These magazines, made with cheap paper and sold for cheap prices, carried the reputation of containing disposable and empty stories. They were made to be thrown away. Despite these inauspicious beginnings, two of the defining genres of the last hundred years emerged from them. The first was noir detective fiction. The second was science fiction as we now know it.

As noir writer Raymond Chandler once wrote, these stories had “unnecessarily gaudy covers, trashy titles and barely acceptable advertisements,” and in them “far too many people got killed and their death was celebrated with a rather too loving attention to detail.” Despite these defects, these novels captured what, to him, all the sophistication and elegantly rich writing of an Eliot or Woolf never could. Chandler, following in the tradition of Andrew Lang and other critics of intellectual refinement in literature, argued that subtlety and “elevated” subject matter were not the same as producing great literature. With a populist sneer, he opined against stories that are “jammed up with subordinate clauses, tricky punctuation, and hypothetical subjunctives.” Harrowing directness had a virtue that the opacity of the intellectuals lacked. Chandler was not anti-intellectual, and he readily admits the insight of writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. These writers succeeded at conveying

brilliant and philosophical narratives, but he argues that “literary” storytelling is not the only correct form of storytelling. Therefore, a novel could use conventional plots and artless writing and still manage to create the same unease and anxiety that Eliot creates with allusions to Indian mythology and Greek literature.

The easy response to snobs like Menken, which Chandler does not employ, is to imply that they are innately wrong because they are elitist. According to this perspective, people should simply like what they like without judgement. Such a perspective often dismisses those who demand more from art as being pretentious and wanting to view themselves as superior. The problem with this perspective is that there really is a difference between superficial works that blindly fulfill trite expectations and works that at least endeavor to defy the distractions of a commodified world, that create a heightened awareness to the impressions and contradictions that overwhelm easy reassurances. There really is a difference between making art and making empty entertainment. Art still exists in a market economy, of course, but it attempts to provide more than a few laughs and a few more senseless stimulations. Chandler never makes the facile argument that there is no difference between the worst pulp stories and the work of Dostoevsky. Rather, his argument is that the “high” artists do not entirely succeed at their motive. There is a harsh, stygian clarity that the detective novel captures that elaborately written stories about upper-class families do not. The same is true of the early sci-fi stories. While stories that a modern reader would classify as sci-fi are at least as old as Frankenstein, the term “science

fiction” did not exist until the pulp era, nor did the process of grouping these kinds of stories together into a genre.

Most of these pulp stories have been rightly forgotten. They are questionable to a modern audience because of their outdated stereotypes and barely concealed lasciviousness about women. Their obsessive utopianism about technology and order verges on the vaguely fascist. Yet the real reason few of these stories survived is because their writing is simply not very good. They had names like *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*, and their plots and characters were no less generic. Now-forgotten names like Hugo Gernsback were the heroes and icons of this tawdry age of science fiction. The disappearance of these stories from the public consciousness reveals one major problem with giving the audience what it claims to want. Trends change, and fads fade. Eliot still matters because he wrote for eternity, because he captures particular shades of disorientation and tenderly cynical ennui that will never vanish.

Yet Raymond Chandler still matters too. Noir left an important legacy on the landscapes of both film and art. The early sci-fi pulps may have faded, but they helped start the careers of writers like Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, who would help sci-fi emerge as a respectable genre after World War II. Admittedly, the snobs were correct in their dread of a commodified world where literature and art have nothing to offer but more trite platitudes and exciting explosions. Still, the solution cannot be to blithely accept that popular fiction can only ever be saccharine and empty.

The vulgarly democratic idea that popularity and worth are the same deserves condemnation, but there are more productive options than simply rejecting the demos altogether, as Eliot does. Popular art, as writers from Shakespeare to Chandler prove, can appeal to both the sensorial desire for action and the intellectual desire for contemplation and depth. There is sadly no future in which a daring sci-fi film like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* will ever attain the same widespread popularity as the next big-budget space opera, but Asimov and Bradbury are still read, as are later, brilliant writers like Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler. Stories that appeal to the curiosity and earnest skepticism of the general audience do not always succeed at outshining superficial clutter, but "not always" is not the same as "never." Perhaps, as Mencken writes, the mainstream audience will disdain all aspects of an artwork except its "orthodoxy of doctrine, its platitudinousness, its usefulness as a moral tract," but perhaps not. Artists can at least hope.

# Blood, Bone, and Water

by Aimee Ogden

Today, knights come from all corners of the world to fight the rose hedge, clanking in metal suits, wielding curved swords and spears, lobbing flaming arrows. Because the reward for defeating the hedge is so great, the men do not guard their secrets. They gather by bonfires and trade strategies, knowing if they split the prize seven, eight, nine ways, they still make a tidy profit.

The hedge is a dark mass on the horizon, heavy with scarlet roses. According to legend, there is a castle swallowed up inside, all peaky spires and stained glass. Each room is piled in treasures and lost knowledge. Chests spill over with precious gems, carpeting the floors like acorns.

Most men never make it inside the hedge. They socialize and hack at the bushes, then return to their villages laughing, proud, with scars to show the little ones.

Once in a while, the vines choose a hapless man. When his back is turned, the branches snatch him up. They close over his quivering cheeks, around his eye whites, his gaping mouth, and the rest of the knights thrash against the fist-sized thorns to no effect.

At least if a man is taken by the hedge, his compatriots will whisper about him forever.

A hundred years ago, a knight wandered through an abandoned village. He stopped under the shade of an oak tree, brushing a place

to sit from the carpet of acorns. He enjoyed a fire and a lunch of apples and venison, and a cupful of cold water from the well.

The rose hedge had already grown huge. In the slanted light it was a gloomy smear against the autumn sky. The knight wondered what ancient treasures must be hidden inside such a hazard. A wizard or a king must have bewitched the very earth to keep his riches safe.

The knight found a rusted axe and honed its edge beside a campfire, flinching at every howl and caw that came from within the thorns. He approached the hedge with a torch held high, and any nearby beasts fled from the flame, scattering into the shadows.

The white roses put him at ease, and he approached with a sense of destiny. Carefully, he tested the stems of the hedge, slicing a single branch.

The vines wrapped around him, thorns biting flesh, lifting him off the ground. He shrieked and shrieked, but the next village was much too far to hear his cries.

The bush shook him hard, twice, and released him to the ground. The knight's wounds wept, and he dripped blood at the base of hedge. As soon as he regained his breath, he fled back to the city he came from, eager to tell his story.

Five hundred years ago, a hedge sat behind town. It ran mostly wild, poking any trespassers who happened near. In the spring, the bleak bush burst with pinks and yellows as its flowers bloomed and took in sun.

A gardener sought to tame the hedge, made vows to conceal any mysteries it protected. He was handy with a rake, and knew where to prune, when to water. The hedge needed a little convincing, and carved many long scratches through the gardener's thick work clothes.

It became tame under his care. Still a bit wicked if he trimmed the wrong leaf, prone to nicking a calf or elbow, but the gardener didn't mind. He brewed healing potions from the rose petals, and the hedge protected his children and animals from wolves.

He buried fish skeletons, bones, tea grounds, old fruit beneath its roots. He grafted new cuttings when parts of the hedge looked thin. But all things die: chickens, men, and rose bushes. The gardener's children went away to war, and they died, too.

The town emptied. The hedge would have been content to expire, too, if the first knight hadn't come, a torch clenched in his hand.

A thousand years ago, a woman lay on a threadbare blanket outside of her newly built cottage. She thought she would miss the city and all its daily distractions, but she loved the country.

She planted a rose bush as a little piece of home. Her auntie had been in a rivalry with the neighbors and grew roses on the balcony to signal excellence, fastidiousness. The poor things suffered in the claustrophobic shade of the neighboring building, and never survived more than a season.



Here in this small sunny town, a rose could thrive. No one would be monitoring its progress. It would flourish freely.

The plant became a bush and then a hedge. The woman tended to it daily. No matter how bent her back went over the years, no matter how hot the morning, she watered it religiously, cutting the spent golden flowers to encourage the hedge to grow.

Until the day she died, she could be found singing to the branches every morning: you're perfect, I love you, you needn't sprout a single flower.

## Notes on Contributors

**Ash Huang** is a Chinese American writer. Her words appear in *Alien Magazine*, *Catapult*, and elsewhere. Her novel in progress, featuring motherhood and a shapeshifting secret society, won the 2022 Diverse Worlds Grant from the Speculative Literature Foundation. She is an alum of the Roots. Wounds. Words. Workshop, the Tin House Winter Workshop, and the Periplus Fellowship. Find her online at [ashsmash.com](http://ashsmash.com).

**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*.

**Dawn Canada** is an 18-year-old First-year student in a Literary and Cultural Studies course in the Philippines. At 2 years old she had mastered the alphabet enough to sing it backwards, and at 3 she learned a skill that allowed some historical figures to save nations – she learned how to hold a pen. Those skills were the Big Bang of Dawn's intense, manic fixation with writing and literature. She is simultaneously fearful and excited that one day she will arrange a sequence of words exact and specific enough to cause a cataclysmic, world-ending, entropic collapse. On that day the sky blanketing her hometown, Cebu, will be red or green or purple or some other color only shrimps can name. But skies are blue as of now. So Dawn will carry on with writing.