

HAVERFORD COLLEGE

# Empty Eggshells

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There was a knock on Nishat's door.

“Hey, you need help with anything? I’m going to take a shower now, so if you need me to get you something, tell me now.”

Nishat rolled their eyes.

“Damn it, Ruya, I can handle myself.”

“Sure. I remember when you pulled down the pole thing from your closet when you were trying to get a hanger off.”

“Seriously, I’m *fine*.”

Getting ready to go out in the winter was always an annoying, but at this point Nishat went through them with an almost ritualistic calm. They sat on their bed in their binder and pajama pants and gazed first into their open closet, then into their overflowing chest of drawers, trying to find an ensemble that both looked good and was clean. They only sighed and slid onto the floor.

*I give up*, they thought, and crawled over to the dresser, determined to just pick an outfit randomly and go with it. In the end, it took four tries before Nishat felt fit to leave their room. Discarded blouses and trousers and crisp button-down shirts all settled into their new homes on the floor, doomed to be mistaken for dirty laundry and rewashed. Nishat rooted around on the cluttered floor for their bag, snow boots, keys, phone and wallet. Their walker was in the hallway next to their door, since the wheels stubbornly insisted on catching in the swamp of clothes,

dishes, papers, and lost tablet pens that populated the floor of the room. Hoisting themselves up on the handgrips, Nishat headed towards the front of the apartment.

The bathroom door was open and leaking tin music. Nishat's roommate, much taller than Nishat, but with a similar bone structure, was carefully applying eyeliner while staring at the mirror with so much intensity that it was a surprise the glass didn't melt and run into the sink.

"Ruya, I'm going out now."

Ruya's eyes flicked to Nishat, then back to her pencil.

"Uh, give me a minute. I'll help you out."

"There are only, like, *two* steps. I can handle it."

"Uh-huh. Remember that time you nearly got a concussion?"

"I was carrying a ton of stuff, and we forgot to salt the stairs. I'll be *fine*."

Ruya put the eyeliner down and picked up a tube of lipstick.

"Look. I don't want your parents harping on mine again if anything happens to you. My parents already weren't that happy about letting me live with someone who's not a woman, so it won't take much to make them force me back home."

Nishat scowled.

"I'm not a man, either, though. Why do people never get that?"

“They got it on some level, at least, since they let me stay here and don’t freak out about me leaving my hair uncovered around the house.”

“Mgh. I guess so.”

Nishat started to leave, but Ruya must have caught the movement out of the corner of her eye.

“Hey! I said wait a sec! I’m almost done.”

Nishat sighed theatrically and pulled down the little seat on their walker far more loudly than they really needed to. Isra, their sleek tortoiseshell cat leapt into their lap and started kneading their thighs. Nishat scratched him on the top of his head, cooing at him until he glared at them with amber eyes and sprang away. Presently, Ruya emerged from the bathroom, winding her hijab around her head in one fluid motion.

“Alright, I’ll help you out now. I’m working from home today, so just text me when you’re at the door and I’ll help you back in.”

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Nishat’s mind flared up in a storm of rage and annoyance while the Metrobus beeped its way into sluggishly kneeling and putting out its platform. The whole process of getting on the bus seemed to take longer each time, and Nishat’s temper grew shorter accordingly. They

ignored the impatient looks of the other people on the bus as they lowered themselves into one of the handicap seats and folded up their walker as primly as they could.

“Hey. Hey! You!”

There was a small child attached to the woman sitting next to Nishat. She was valiantly trying to get their attention, despite Nishat’s best efforts to ignore her.

“Hey! I know you can hear me. What are you?”

Nishat turned the volume of their headphones up a few notches. After the kid had started nudging their elbow, Nishat sighed and paused the song they were listening to.

“What?”

The girl glared at Nishat and let out a snooty breath.

“Rude! All I wanted to know what you are.”

“What do you *mean* what I am?”

“What *are* you? Girl or boy?”

Nishat looked at the kid’s mother in distress, but she was deep in a conversation on her phone.

“Do I have to pick?”

“Of course! My mom says God made men and women. Didn’t say anything about another option.”

“What’s the difference? I can be whatever I want.”

“I don’t think you should just keep it a secret like that. Did you cut your private parts off or do you hide them?”

*Well, no more of THAT*, Nishat thought. They turned to the bus driver, sitting in his spring-loaded seat in front of the huge wheel.

“Excuse me? Can you stop at the next stop so I can change seats, please?”

Nishat picked a seat next to a dozing elderly man, and tried to make themselves small and unobtrusive. *The things I do for a little socialization*, they thought, watching shop windows and sidewalk-strangled trees flick by. It was difficult to make friends when one was a freelance graphic designer, and despite only being a couple of years out of college, they were already out of touch with their friends. Nishat had to suffer the stares and indignities of public transportation to avoid becoming completely divorced from reality. Luckily the DC area’s Metro service was fairly accessible, exchanging punctuality for range, kneeling busses, and elevators. Through trial and error, they had found that the best place to go for some controlled interaction with their fellow humans in Silver Spring was one of the more popular used bookstores. The staff were nice but not particularly talkative, there was a café attached, and the door was level with the

**Commented [1]:** The joke is that there only ever used to be a Borders, which is long gone and was replaced with an H&M.

street. Despite the government's efforts, older buildings were not very accessible, and it was so easy to just stay at home to avoid it all.

After waiting for the extended process of getting off the bus at their stop and walking the two blocks to the store, Nishat stood leaning on their walker in the doorway, triumphant, if somewhat out of breath. This journey wasn't as bad as some had been. Only once or twice had someone said "Excuse me, sir, can you move over a bit so I can get by?" or "Excuse me, young lady" as they walked down the sidewalk. "Now and Then Books" was painted on the wooden that hung in the window, and the interior was warm and brown, shading to gold around the myriad of lamps scattered on tables, walls, and bookshelves. The glass turned into a mirror for an instant as someone in a black coat passed by on the other side, and Nishat's delicate brown face and dark silky hair briefly replaced a bookshelf. The worst part of the journey over, Nishat entered the store and looked around, feeling the warmth creep back into their fingers.

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In another place, inconceivably far away, candlewicks shone in the midnight blackness of the cave, specially ground powders making the flames green, blue, violet. Robed figures shifted, some of them moving their limbs stiffly, others with an otherworldly grace. Slowly, large, smooth stones are wrestled into the candlelit circles. The positioning complete, the robed figures commenced the ritual-dance, tracing a complex pattern of swirls and circles with their feet around and about the candles and the stones. It seemed to take a minute, but perhaps it took a year. One by one the dancers crumpled to the sandy floor, until the youngest dancer was left

alone to make the final moves with the swish of the small robe and the tracing of a last whorl with a little toe. At last, this young one joined her brethren as the spell completed itself and flashed blindingly bright. By the time the dancers awoke, it would be far too late to fix their mistake.

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Before them was a comfortable mess of bookshelves, neatly labeled and crammed full of beat-up books. About a dozen people wandered down them, eyes following titles. They were the usual granola-crunchy suburban crowd, mostly white people in athletic clothes, many of them pushing bicycles or trailing leashed dogs. The shelves nearest the door were devoted to recent acquisitions, and Nishat looked at the new old books, unable to keep herself from cheering up. They slipped one book that had come out recently, one with a young woman in chain mail holding a sword on the cover, and read the inside flap of the beat-up dust cover. Nishat liked to pretend that they'd outgrown swords-and-sorcery fiction books, but they kept on returning to the genre again and again. Perhaps it was a sign they weren't ready to grow up yet, no matter how much they wanted to. They twisted around to put it in the wire basket hooked onto their walker, then caught a movement out of the corner of their eye. A plump Asian woman in an undyed apron was pushing a small cart full of books along the row of shelves. When she caught sight of Nishat, she grinned and brushed some of her bright blue hair out of her eyes. Nishat braced herself in case they were about to be subjected to a rib-crushing hug. Their binder made things feel tight enough as it was.

“Nishat! I didn’t think you’d be back for another few weeks! Should I get out the party hats?”

Nishat smiled wryly.

“Cabin fever, mostly. My apartment got so stuffy I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I thought I’d risk the ice and stop by. Ruya’s thrilled, of course.”

“‘Stop by,’ you say, like it’s not a huge hassle. How many stops are we from where you live again?”

“Like ten. But at least I get a discount for the bus fare.”

Dahlia came over to poke Nishat in the arm.

“Speaking of discounts, how’s freelancing treating you? You must be rolling in it by now!”

“Ha. I finished up with my last customer a week ago. A month later than projected. They kept on switching things up on me and weren’t happy when I gave them what they asked for. Maybe I need to switch jobs again.”

“Lovely. Maybe I can hook you up with a job here? I have some dirt on the manager that I’ve been meaning to use before it goes stale...”

“Oh god, Dahlia! Do *not*. He’s going to make your life a nightmare if you do anything with that.”

“Fine, have it your way. It’s always an option if you really need it, though. But I’ll let you take a look around here. Tell me if you need anything.”

Nishat turned back to the shelf, and Dahlia started putting books from her cart on a nearby shelf. Nishat scanned the shelf in front of them. Atwood, Butler, Diaz, LeGuin, Vonnegut...

Nishat blinked, and the world turned green. They jumped, heart twisting with shock, and fell to the ground with an audible thump. Above them was a thick canopy of sunshot leaves, with dark branches spreading through them like roots through soil. Nishat’s brain turned to white noise in shock, refusing to let them process the change. They could hear heavy breathing nearby. Nishat crawled towards their walker and pulled one of their crutches free from its straps. They sat up and hefted their makeshift weapon, searching for the source of the noise. Their chest felt tighter than it usually did, and they they were starting to experience that distressing feeling of not getting enough air.

Dahlia was a few feet ahead of them, caught in the long, spiky stalks of a blackberry bush, having been shielded from view by a young dogwood. Her head whipped around, as if she was trying to look everywhere at once, but didn’t have enough eyes for the job. Nishat blinked, lowering the crutch.

“*Dahlia?*” They said quietly, afraid to raise their voice in the silence of the woods. Not even birds sang in the canopy, and the lack of noise was eerie. At the sound of their voice, Dahlia’s head whipped towards Nishat, and she stumbled backwards, hissing as blackberry

thorns dug into her skin. The bushes were laden with pink fruit, only a few blushing red or starting to turn black. It had been midwinter last time they'd checked. Nishat wished their brain would work properly. They were having a hard time believing any of this was real.

"I'm not dead, right?"

"Of course not! Are you alright? Do you know what happened?"

"Not at all. Is this the woods? How the hell did we get here? How are we supposed to get back?"

"I don't know. I don't know if we *can* get back?"

Dahlia's expression crumpled, and she looked away.

"I blinked and all of a sudden I wasn't in the shop anymore. What *is* this?"

There was a gloomy silence. Nishat slipped their phone in its bulky case out of their bag and tapped at it. Only when their eyes searched for the familiar bars in vain did the truth really sink in. Nishat had never been in a place with absolutely no service that wasn't underground. They let out a long breath, and rested their forehead on their knees, willing themselves back to the bookstore.

"You don't think we were drugged somehow, do you?"

Dahlia hadn't moved, but her voice was dull and lifeless. Even the teariness of a second ago was gone. Nishat sighed and turned their phone off. They had a feeling it would be a while before they'd have service again, and they didn't want to waste the battery.

"Why? Do you feel bad? Neither of us ate anything recently, right? There's no way we were gassed or anything since we're here alone—" Nishat caught movement out of the corner of their eye. "What's that?"

"What?"

"I saw something move. Do you think there are bears in this forest?"

"Wait, I see it, too." Dahlia pointed off behind Nishat's shoulder. They turned, and after a few seconds, someone emerged from behind a tree. She was a woman, younger than Nishat and Dahlia, wearing scale armor that was dark against her pale skin and an intricate metal circlet on her head, looking at Nishat and Dahlia under black, lowered brows. She took a few tentative steps towards the pair, then stopped and opened her mouth.

"What are you doing here? This is *my* place. Get out before I hurt you."

To Nishat's confusion and dismay, this strange person was baring brown teeth, and pulling a double-bladed axe from a strap on her back. They stood their ground, not bothering to turn the walker and try to escape. Behind them, Dahlia had wrapped her work apron in both hands and was pulling at a dead blackberry stalk, breaking it off near the base. Armed with this new weapon, she stepped in front of Nishat, holding the stalk like a baseball bat, and fixed the

armored stranger with a look as fierce as her own. *Damn! No way she can go up against an axe. She'll be killed!* Nishat thought, trying to shove Dahlia aside, and meeting stubborn resistance.

“Look,” they said to the girl with the axe, desperate. “We won’t hurt anyone! We didn’t mean to come here, and don’t know how to go back home.”

The wild-looking girl’s face twisted in a strange combination of smile and scowl, and the axe jerked, as if she couldn’t decide what to do with it. *She’s acting weird again. Did I do something wrong? Who knows what she’ll do if we make her mad.*

“We’ll leave as soon as we can, if you can help us get out of here.”

“The place people like you come from is very far from here. Too far for you to have come by accident. The only way to do such a thing is if magic was involved. But I don’t see how people like you could have that kind of magic. Yours is very powerful, but it shouldn’t be able to move you like this.”

One thing finally pierced the fog in Nishat’s mind.

“People like *us*? I hope you don’t mean what I think you do.”

If the strange woman picked up on the indignation in Nishat’s voice, she ignored it.

“I am Mirilat,” she said. “Daughter of Egat, warrior of the people of the Flowing Stone and ruler of this valley. If you will not leave, come with me and let me see how you will be made useful.”

Nishat considered whether their chances were higher following a dangerous-looking white girl who seemed at home here or trying their luck in the wilderness. There was no contest. They wrestled the walker around, and followed Mirilat as she turned and led the way through the forest. Dahlia behind, clutching her thorny branch and casting wary glances at Mirilat's armored back.

Nishat couldn't help looking at this back with some curiosity. They had always had trouble picturing what armor looked like in stories, so they couldn't help but take advantage of the opportunity. The armor was made of long green-brown metal plates a few inches high, sheeting down to create a hard but flexible buffer against sharp objects. Despite this protection, Mirilat was covered in scars, and her crude metal helmet had done little to prevent her nose from being broken at least once.

Mirilat noticed Nishat watching her and her expression softened, allowing a look of curiosity flow into her face and giving it a youthful look that matched her age much better than the strange stiff expression she'd worn before.

"You look like you want to ask me something," Nishat said. "You want to know why I can't walk that well, right? Or if I'm male or female."

Mirilat shook her head.

"No, I know well enough that you're a gift from the gods."

Nishat blinked.

“What?”

“When a child is born with a body that prevents them from working, it is a sign that the gods want them to exist for a higher purpose than physical labor. They are meant to be a great thinker, or healer, or storyteller.”

“What?” Nishat was having a hard time grasping this. “So it’s not a problem that they can’t work?”

“No, there are other people who can do what would be their job. They’re much too valuable to be herding sheep or chopping logs.”

Nishat lapsed into a distracted silence, filing this away for future contemplation. They didn’t remember that they had been halfway through a conversation until Mirilat spoke up again.

“One of my father’s advisors is a man, despite having a womb. You’re like that, right?”

Nishat couldn’t do much besides nod, not sure what to say.

They continued on, mostly in silence except for Nishat’s soft cursing when the walker snagged on something. Dahlia seemed to feel rather more comfortable around Mirilat, now that she didn’t look so grim. She eventually got to the point where she could start peppering Mirilat with questions about her armor. After about twenty minutes, the forest around them thinned out, peppered with chopped tree trunks. A while after that, the trees dropped away altogether, and they found themselves in a decent-sized village, huddled between the forest and a small lake.

One-room houses, some made of mud bricks and others from logs, surrounded a more formidable two-story structure like ducklings around their mother. Here and there a shaggy goat or wolfish dog was tied to a stake in front of one or another house, but there were few people on display.

“We should go straight to my father’s house,” Mirilat said. “We’ll talk to his advisors. They’re like you, so they’ll probably have an idea about how to get you back.”

*What do you mean people like us?* Nishat thought. Mirilat had used an expression like that earlier, and Nishat wasn’t too sure they knew what that was supposed to mean.

Presently they came to the entrance of this larger structure. The door was wider than those of its smaller brethren, and was covered in a patchwork of multiple hides. Mirilat pulled the heavy skins aside easily, letting Dahlia and Nishat through to the dim warmth.

Nishat had never been assaulted with such a fug of sweat, rotting meat, smoke, and refuse. Eyes watering with the stink, they peered around, waiting for shapes to swim out of the dark. Mirilat strode into the room, as if she had memorized its layout long ago. She walked up to a man sitting in the middle of the room. Nishat’s eyes could make out more now, but they still only got an impression of furs and a diminutive frame. Dahlia went past Nishat, brushing them, and picked her way to where Mirilat was standing.

“Nishat,” Mirilat called, “Come meet my father.”

Nishat propped themselves up with one hand and scrubbed their eyes with the other. This not being of much use, they sighed and made their way slowly across the room, hoping there wasn't too much to bump into.

Mirilat's father, Egat, had been seated in a semicircle of fur heaps, sharpening an axe somewhat similar to the one his daughter used. Sitting on one side of the pile Egat had been resting on was a figure who was staring at Nishat and Dahlia with unrestrained shock. They lifted a hand, and a flame appeared, nearly blinding Nishat in the dimness.

The person holding the light was a man whose babyface made his age a mystery. He was handsome in a boyish way, his skin a light brown, peppered lightly with darker freckles. His dark hair was short, but curly, and was currently ruffled so that it stuck up unevenly. Nishat couldn't quite make out where the light was coming from, but it was clear he was holding something that reminded Nishat vaguely of the Walkman they'd had as a child. He gaped at Nishat and Dahlia, but after a second his face sealed over into a carefully neutral expression, eyebrows drawn down in a way that was almost comical. He was the only person of color Nishat had seen in this village.

"It must be," he said, "You came here by accident, didn't you? Just like I did, right? I mean, you obviously must have come from different places than I did, since you look so different and your clothes are so strange. What countries are you from?"

"Countries?" I'm from Oregon, but my family is from Japan," Dahlia said.

“Huh. I studied geography rather extensively back home, but I’ve never heard of Japan. I thought you might be from Jiansuo. I met a merchant from there once who looked kind of like you. Their multitools are incredibly intricate.”

“No... Wait, what? Jiansuo? They don’t really teach geography in schools anymore, but that’s not familiar at *all*. Where is it?”

“Never *heard* of Jiansuo? It’s huge! Influenced the cultures of all its neighboring countries? One of the oldest empires out there, if not *the* oldest? All the borders are protected by either mountains, sea, or a huge wall?”

“Wait, you mean China? You’re not messing with me, are you?”

“*Look*. We can worry about that later,” Nishat said, cutting in before Dahlia started a fight. “Mirilat brought us here because she thought you might be able to help us get back.”

They looked at Tiy expectantly. He glanced at Egat, but he was off to the side, conversing with Mirilat in a low voice.

“Well, maybe they can send home when they do their spell for me? The people here promised they would to transport me to my country in return for advice and general aid. They have a particularly interesting magic, you know. They’re not all that good at it, and it’s extremely inefficient, but it *is* magic.”

Dahlia perked up.

“There’s magic here? I thought Mirilat was just messing with us. That’s *so cool*. I bet you have dragons and stuff, too.”

“Well,” said Tiy, “it looks like folks around here aren’t really overflowing with natural magical ability, but they managed to figure out how to get more out of dragon eggs. They need to collect a lot of eggs before they can do very much.”

“So there *are* dragons?”

“Yes, but they’re not like the dragons they have in most places,” he said. “They can’t fly, and they’re not very wise. The ones here are basically vermin, with their putrid stench and acid spray. They’re honestly not very magical, either. Just big, dumb lizards that will melt your bones if they spit on you.”

“Oh. Lovely. How are we supposed to find the things, then? By smell?”

To Nishat’s surprise, Egat joined the conversation here. He must have finished his conversation with Mirilat, since she was nowhere to be seen. He was so diminutive and so quiet that they’d nearly forgotten about him.

“Yes, for the most part. We have a dog trained to point us in the right direction, and we can usually smell them from about a quarter of a mile away.” said Egat. “The damn things breed so fast that there’s always a pretty good chance of finding eggs.”

“I thought Tiy have been here for more than twenty years. How come they’re still here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you’ve been trying to send them back since they got here, you would have been collecting eggs, right? You should definitely have enough by now.”

Egat frowned and shot a quick glance at the door as Mirilat reentered the house with a bucket of water in tow.

“Unfortunately, we cannot spend all our time searching for eggs. Getting them from dragons is extremely dangerous, and we simply don’t have the manpower. If Tiy wants to go home, he has to do most of the collecting by himself.”

By the time he finished, he was so red the color could be seen through his thin hair, and was breathing hard. Nishat was worried he’d pop a blood vessel or pass out, but Mirilat had come over and put a hand on his arm.

“Dad, it’s fine.” She turned to Nishat. “Sorry about that. He feels bad that he can’t repay his debts, so he gets kind of…” She shrugged. “Why don’t you two go with Tiy and take a look around? We can talk more about this later.”

She steered her father around and up the stairs in the back of the room, muttering to him under her breath. Nishat looked after the both of them in concern, but Dahlia turned to Tiy.

“What do you do around here when you’re not looking for dragon eggs?”

Tiy brightened up.

“Lots of things! I’m mostly in charge of the various machines lying around, honestly. In my free time, though I just kind of help people out doing everyday things. People here are pretty incompetent, so I end up with a lot to do. They rely pretty heavily on my knowledge of medicine and engineering, so I end up being in charge of building houses and helping sick people. They would never have been able to build a two-story house like this without me! Their old huts used to collapse after a few years, and they weren’t very good at making clay. My multitool is in high demand, since they still don’t have any kind of matter-transformation technology. It takes considerably less time to make clothes and tools than it would if they used their methods, and ours are better and last longer.”

““Multitools?” You mentioned those before. What are they, swiss army knives?”

“No, a *multitool*. What do you use when you want to make something?”

“I get stuff and put it together?”

“You said you were from a different world, but how do you not have anything to manipulate matter with?”

Nishat’s forehead wrinkled in confusion.

“Wait. Are you telling me you have some device that just... takes stuff and makes it into whatever you want?”

“Yeah?”

“Oh,” Dahlia said. “No wonder Mirilat thought we were magic.”

“I’m not actually magic, though. It’s just a machine. The people around here think that multitools work a little like how they use their magic. They think I have a ridiculous amount of innate magical power because of this thing. They’re not very technologically advanced, as you can see. They didn’t build the machines they have now. Those were all built by other foreigners like myself. I don’t think they can even really work them by themselves.”

“It’s a good thing they have you and your fancy tech, then. What kind of machines do they have?”

“Well, this whole place used to be the opening of a volcano, you know? It’s been dormant for centuries, which is why there’s a forest and lake and stuff around here, but who knows when the thing’ll erupt again? One of the most important machines I deal with is the sensor that’ll let us know if the volcano plans on doing anything funny. The other machines are mostly water pumps or refrigeration units.”

Nishat stared at Dahlia, suddenly frozen with terror. Dahlia’s face was practically radiating with excitement.

“We’re on a dormant *volcano*?”

“I’m leaving *right now*, Dahlia. And so are you, if I get my way. It’s *way* too dangerous.”

Tiy grinned and patted Nishat’s shoulder familiarly.

“Don’t worry, there would be about fifty different alarms going off right now if there was any chance of Mount Angling blowing its top. There’s an emergency spell circle in the center of town that’ll make sure we’re all miles away before anything starts happening. These people aren’t usually that great at most things, but when their lives are on the line, they get *really* competent.”

Nishat still wasn’t convinced, but Dahlia was already charging along with another question.

“They’re usually incompetent? Isn’t that kind of a problem?”

“Oh, absolutely. If they just had no technology of their own, that would be one thing. Plenty of people do fine without internal combustion or terraforming. These folks are also just really incompetent. They would probably have died out without me, considering how they are at most things.”

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That night, Mirilat had Nishat and Dahlia sleep near her. Nishat wasn’t sure if she was being overprotective, or if there just wasn’t anywhere else for them to sleep, but they found themselves agreeing without really considering it. Mirilat dragged most of the furs from her own personal pile and separated them into two, laying them down close to the much depleted pile. Nishat managed to make an excuse to slip outside and get out of their binder, making a note to ask Tiy for information on what people here used instead, as embarrassing as that would

probably be. These furs smelled rather less rank than the ones that pile of sleepers had been using, but Nishat was still reluctant to touch them, so they took a bit of coaxing from Mirilat and Dahlia. Lying on their stomach next to Dahlia, Nishat felt surprisingly warm and safe.

“We’re going to need to get some proper clothes for you two,” Mirilat was saying as she pulled a wooden comb roughly through her tangled hair. “We’ll take you to storage tomorrow and get you something nice.”

Nishat jumped when Dahlia poked them in the ribs.

“Hey, you can’t sleep already! How can you not want to talk at all about what happened today!”

“I don’t know. I feel like I’ll just get upset. Today was... a lot. I need some time to digest.”

“Would talking about it help?”

“Mm, not yet. After I process stuff, I’ll definitely let you know.”

“Okay. You know you can talk to me about anything, right? Tiy and I are the only people who aren’t white here. We have to stand up for each other.”

“Yeah. Funny, isn’t it?”

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The next morning, Nishat awoke to raised, excited voices.

“Where did you say you saw it?”

“It was near a cave a quarter turn around the valley as the sun rises. It didn’t seem to want to leave. There must have been an egg there!”

“Alright. Egat, how many fighters can you spare?”

“Only two right now. Go see if one of the youngsters wants to become an adult today if you need more hands.”

Nishat opened an eye in time to see Tiy rush towards them.

“Dahlia! Do you want to come dragon-hunting with us?”

Before Nishat could kick their brain into enough order to process this, Dahlia had bounced to her feet.

“I would *love* to go! I finally get to fight a real dragon with a real sword. I’ll get a sword, right?”

“Um, sure. No one actually uses swords, but I think we got one off a corpse we found in the mountains a while back. I can go check if you want.”

“Yes!”

“Wait,” said Nishat. “Can I go?”

Tiy stared.

“Well, you’re a gift from the gods, right? You guys are far too useful to be traipsing around in the forest somewhere bludgeoning a giant poison lizard to death.”

“Too bad. I’m going anyway. I want to see this dragon, and I just *know* Dahlia’s going to get herself in trouble if I’m not around.”

Nishat tried to be brusque about seeing the dragon, but their heart leapt with anticipation of seeing the creature they’d read so much about. *They said they’re smelly, but they can’t be that bad, right? A dragon is a dragon.*

“Alright, if you say so. I’ll get you something lightweight to defend yourself with, since you don’t have a multitool. I’ll try to tell people that you’d prefer to use common weapons to see how they usually do it. Hopefully they’ll understand that way. Dahlia, I can lend you some armor. I’ll see if there are any in the stores that’ll fit Sleepy.”

In an hour and a half, everything was ready, and the march began. The group stopped to rest and confirm their course often enough that Nishat was only half exhausted by the time they’d located the dragon’s cave. The group camped half a mile from it, far enough away that the smell wouldn’t bother anyone unless the wind completely changed direction. The next morning, they set off to capture their prize.

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Nishat sat on the ground by the mouth of the cave, shaking violently. They didn’t dare make a move towards their walker for fear that the dragon would catch the movement and spit at

them, or worse, slink towards them and crunch their bones between its teeth. They clutched the short staff Tiy had given them more tightly, knuckles pale. All it had taken was one look at the dragon for their sweat to turn cold.

Dahlia bowled past them, borrowed armor kicking up sparks on the stones. She scrambled to her feet again and charged back into the cave, sword raised and grinning. Biting down their feeling of uselessness, Nishat edged forward, hoping to get a clear view of the battle. The clear morning sunlight was shining directly into the cave entrance, so Nishat had a much better view than they wanted to as they inched towards the cave mouth.

The dragon had none of the sleek beauty Nishat was expecting. Its scales were mostly a glistening, dirty brown, flecked with burn holes and corroded spots, as if the dragon was not immune to its own acid. The body itself didn't really match with any of the dragons Nishat had seen in movies or books, but it was still undeniably a dragon. The ugly thing was as tall and gangling as a giraffe, with painfully skinny legs and a bulging belly, tight as a droplet of water. Its blunt block of a head was crowned in a jagged mess of antlers, covered with scabby skin.

Nishat arched their neck, and managed to get a glimpse of someone lying on the ground, screaming at what was left of his smoking stomach. One of the people Egat had sent with them. Nishat looked away hurriedly, guts twisting with nausea and pity. There would be no help for him. The acid would probably cauterize some of the wound, but there were plenty of big arteries that went through the stomach. If he didn't die of blood loss, the extensive damage to organs would provide a painful combination of starvation, poisoning, and more. Nishat bit back tears.

This person was dying for them. Just to get the stupid dragon egg. They tried to wrench their mind away from these thoughts.

Hopefully Mirilat and Tiy were okay. Nishat scanned the cave floor the best they could, but did not see anything that might look like an egg. The cave was quite craggy, so it was possible that the egg was hidden by shadows. *If not*, Nishat thought, *people are fighting and dying for nothing*.

Nishat couldn't help looking back at the person lying on the floor of the cave. As they watched, the dragon shifted its weight and stepped on him as it snapped its teeth at Ran Hua. Nishat's flesh was chilly to the bone, and cold sweat dampened the padding of their armor. Nausea and a strange muffling of their senses fought for their attention as they sat staring at the slowly dying man.

One more scream and Nishat knew that it would never be worth it. They didn't want to go home if it meant that there was blood on their hands. What made Nishat's comfort more important than the continuation of these people's lives? Not that Nishat thought they could stop this battle, or keep people from risking their lives for these dragon eggs, but they could at least boycott it. They hoped they could convince Dahlia to stay in this strange place, to not go home with lives on her conscience. At the very least, they refused to let people die on their behalf. They weren't worth it. They crawled to their walker, and headed back to where they had camped for the night.

Weeks passed, then months, and Nishat had learned to relax. Tiy had taught them how to use and maintain the various machines these villagers had hidden around town, and in the past few weeks, they had taken over operations, leaving Tiy more time to search for eggs. Nishat enjoyed their life as a gift of the gods, listening to the stories told by the older people in the town and telling their own in return. In the early mornings they sat by the lake and exchanged tales with the elderly folk as they washed clothes and tied fishing nets. Their face hadn't changed much since they got here: it was maybe a shade darker brown than it had been before, but their face was as finely boned and delicately featured as ever.

They were sitting one day, watching clouds scud across the lake, when Dahlia ran up. She went around in mail, breastplate, and bucklers these days, the way Mirilat did, hair tied back with piece of string. Now, it had grown and been cut and grown again, so there was no blue left. She'd gotten a few impressive scars, and quite a bit of muscle mass. She was, however, growing increasingly anxious to the point of being distraught. Nishat suspected this was homesickness, but wasn't sure enough to risk bringing it up. Dahlia had had enough close calls with the local dragons that it wouldn't be surprising for her to get too jumpy.

"Nishat! We did it!"

Nishat's heart sank, but they didn't turn to look at her.

"Hmm? Did what?"

"We got the last egg just now! We can finally go home!"

“Oh. Congratulations.”

“Come on! Mirilat and her dad and everyone want to say goodbye before we go.”

“Um.” Nishat looked away. They’d avoided telling Dahlia, but there was no way to put this off anymore. “I don’t think I’m coming with you.”

Dahlia stared.

“I mean, I wasn’t having all that great a time back home. My job wasn’t doing so well, and all my customers were difficult and rude. Ruya is great, but I know my parents don’t trust me. Why else would they have me live with my cousin? They could always make sure someone babies me. I bet they even pay her to ‘take care of me.’ I’m an *adult*, Dahlia. I need to be independant. And I’ll never be able to be over there, with all the stairs and the economy and my overprotective parents. Most importantly, I don’t want blood on my hands. People *died* for those eggs, Dahlia. I don’t want any part in that. Nothing would make me feel okay with letting people die for something I only just kind of want.”

“Wh-” Dahlia started, but then thought better of it, changing tactics. “But, you’re not going to miss *anything*?”

“Well, sure! I still really love Ruya, and my parents, too, I guess. But I’m not going to miss the rest of it. None of the nonsense and indignity that I have to go through every day just to live my life. It’s worth not having showers anymore and missing a couple people.”

Dahlia continued to stare at them, angry tears making her eyes fill with stars. *Oh god, I bet she feels so betrayed. She's been going full force for ages, always working towards getting back home.*

“Nishat, what about all the books? Think of all the new things you won’t be able to read while stuck over here. You won’t have new material for the rest of your life.”

“Look, Dahlia,” Nishat said, desperate. “I appreciate it, but you don’t have to try to convince me. I made up my mind. You’re trying to be a good friend, but you can just let me go. I don’t need the books anymore. I have a fantasy world right here.”

“Nishat,” Dahlia said, switching to a different tactic. “This place is full of white people! Once Tiy and I leave, you’ll be stuck here surrounded by them, without a person of color in sight.”

Nishat took a breath. That would be hard to deal with, but they had been trying to avoid thinking about it. They looked down at their hands, and realized they’d been tangled their fingers together. Trying to keep their composure, they placed their hands carefully on the grass on either side of them.

“They’re not really as bad, though. I feel like the context is different.”

“Yeah, but they still treat you as some kind of... curiosity. I’ve heard how they talk about you. ‘The gift of the gods,’ they call you, or ‘that sorcerer gift that is neither man nor woman.’ They don’t see you as one of them. They don’t even use your *name*.”

“They probably treated Tiy the same when they first got here. They’ll get used to me. Even if they don’t, I don’t mind being different if it’s the good kind of different. I’m *wanted* here, Dahlia. Can’t you understand that? This is the first time someone has actively wanted me to exist the way I am. I’m going to make the most of it!”

As Nishat turned back to the clouds, the breeze carried the soft sound of Dahlia’s sobs.

“Don’t *I* matter, then?” Dahlia’s voice was shaky, and the sound of it made Nishat’s throat start to ache. “I guess you didn’t think we were good enough friends for it to be worth it to go back for me. I would be a mess without you, you know? But even though it hurts to think about never seeing you again, you’re just completely fine with never seeing me.”

Nishat was sure they were going to start crying, too, if they didn’t put a stop to this as soon as possible. They took a shaky breath, hoping their voice would stay steady.

“Dahlia, that’s not—”

“Oh, *sure*. Don’t you ever get tired of acting like you’re always in control?”

“Dahlia, listen to me! Of *course* I’m going to miss you! You’re my best friend. But this isn’t going to change my mind. People still move away even if it means leaving their friends.”

“Oh, sure.” Dahlia let out a short, mirthless laugh. “Like *that’s* a good analogy. We can’t make phone calls across dimensions or whatever the hell they are. We might as well be dead for how much we’ll know about each other. But I guess that’s fine with you!”

She turned her back as if to storm back towards the village.

“Besides,” Nishat said under their breath, hoping to draw Dahlia’s curiosity without putting themself in danger of getting hit. “They’re the ones that brought us here in the first place.”

Dahlia swung around, blinking at them through her tears, face frozen with fury. Nishat was sure for a second that Dahlia would indeed hit them, but she stood stock still. When she spoke, her words were carefully clipped and full of venom.

“What do you mean?”

“Remember when we were talking to Tiy about what he does here?” Nishat asked in desperation. “It looks like he’s the one keeping this place together, keeping it safe. Without him and his knowledge and weird technology, the people here would barely chug along. We’ve *seen* that. The people here are completely dependant on him. They’d all die if anything happened to him. None of them know how to keep those machines running except him and I. They would never know if the volcano was going to erupt again.”

“And?”

“So Tiy has caught on, and is getting impatient. He wants to go back home. So how do you solve the problem while keeping everyone happy? You send him home, and bring some new people with the same attributes to take his place. Us.”

“What? But we don’t have multitools. How would we be able to help?”

“They treat us like we *do* have them, though. I think that since we’re not white and Tiy isn’t white, and all the people that came before him weren’t white, we must all have the same kind of magic.”

“I thought you said they weren’t like the kind of white people at home.”

“True. But from what I heard, they also always bring people from this world. Tiy has heard stories of people from traders near back where he came from about people just disappearing one day. A lot of stories here mention brown people with multitools, too. I think Mirilat’s dad’s mages messed up. They were supposed to get people from where Ran Hua and Tiy are from, but they must have made a mistake and taken us from our world instead.”

Dahlia frowned.

“If I’m understanding you correctly, you’re saying that Mirilat and her people summoned us here to get us to help them the same way Tiy does, then lied to us about it so we wouldn’t get mad and refuse? That’s ridiculous!”

“Fine. You don’t need to believe me.” Nishat glanced over their shoulder at Dahlia. “Just remember this after they send you ‘back.’ Don’t be mad at if you end up right back here.”

“Oh, so is *that* why you don’t care if I go? I guess I should be flattered. So what are you going to do? Wait here and see if they send anyone to replace me? You don’t have a multitool, you know.”

“I know. I’ll see if Tiy can give me his, in case they actually magic you two away. If he won’t, I’ll see how long I can make them think I can do ‘magic.’ And if they send someone new, you bet I’ll tell them what’s up, and let them make their own decisions from there. It wouldn’t be right to keep them in the dark about it.”

Dahlia was silent for a while, and then, words burst out of her.

“*Fine.* Stay here if you want. But I’m going to miss you, you asshole.”

The only sound that remained was the sound of Dahlia’s boots stomping furiously on the goat-cropped grass, gradually softening into silence. Only when they were sure she was too far away to see did Nishat let their own tears fall.

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Dahlia couldn’t keep Nishat’s words out of her head as she stood in the center of the cave, back in the clothes she’d worn when she’d arrived. Her heart squeezed every time she thought of them here, all alone. Nishat had been her greatest comfort in the time she had spent in this world, and she couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing them again. Dahlia’s mind was roiling in fury and grief, but enough time had passed that those emotions kept on getting pushed aside by excitement. She was going to see magic. Finally, *finally*.

All around her, people were sweeping the last of the dust out of the cave, placing candles around the room, and shouting directions at each other. Robed figures shuffled around her like children in a play before the curtain is lifted, searching for their spot to stand. In this bustle, only

Dahlia and Tiy were still, standing in the center of the cave. Tiy was wearing a piece of cloth, wrapped skillfully around his body, covering him to the ankles and draping over his shoulders. He looked uncomfortable being inactive in a room full of busy people as she felt.

“Hey,” Dahlia said, trying to dispel the awkwardness. “Do you know how these things work?”

Tiy looked up from chewing on his nails and glanced around the room.

“The people wearing those robes draw the magic circle with their movements,” he said. “The Egat’s chief spell writer designed it, and they’ve been practicing it for years. Each of them has an innate magical ability that’s been in them since birth. The line of royalty here have a long tradition of recruiting from a very young age and training them to do all sorts of useful spells, but since their magical ability isn’t actually very strong generally speaking, they need the dragon eggs to boost their power.”

“Okay but, how do we tell what the spell does?”

“I haven’t really had the time to learn how these spells are put together in any meaningful way.”

“Oh.”

Before Dahlia could start worrying about this, the busiest of the people in the cave started filing out, and the robed figures stood still. A stone was pushed over the door, and despite the

dozens of candles, the cave was plunged into the kind of darkness that breeds more shadows than light. Too late, Dahlia realized how dangerous this could be.

“Maybe we should –” Before she could finish, the dance began. In one complicated step, the robed figures took off, and their magic froze Dahlia’s bones into immobility. There was to be no escape.

## Analysis and Reflection

The first real book I read on my own was *The Tin Woodman of Oz*, in maybe the third grade, when my father was on a business trip. I grew up reading mainly fantasy stories, and while my lesser interests in historical fiction and animal stories have drained away, my love of fantasy remains strong. I have always loved fantasy for the excitement and wonder of it, all so different from my painfully boring life. I still have a hard time understanding the point of reading a non-educational book that's about real life. To me, books are supposed to be different and interesting, grand feats of creation to get lost in.

This, of course, is a problem if one intends to be educated, especially if they are to be an English major. It has made nearly every reading assignment I've had to do painful and unsubstantiated. I read them anyway, of course, because I'm a coward. I always saw reading assignments that were important for other students, since I felt they were intended to get young people comfortable reading, and raise their reading skills. I didn't particularly think I needed any help in this department, since I had a new book under my arm every week during middle and high school.

When I reached college, I knew I wanted to be an English major, because I like reading. I know that that's the absolute worst reason to become one, but I couldn't really think of anything else I was good at. If you look at my course history, you'll see how hard I tried to avoid boring, lifelike books. I managed to take a couple classes that, while not dealing with the fantasy genre, still focused on texts that were not heavily bound to reality. I also took some classes that fall

under the umbrella of Africana Studies, both because I am interested in my heritage, and that I knew I would not read about anything too close to my life.

The problem of heritage also comes up in terms of the books I have no trouble reading, however, as most fantasy books are white spaces, with white characters and European spaces. This did not create conflict until I was in late high school, for as a child I had consumed enough white media to see whiteness as a norm and to want to be white myself. It was only after I had reconciled with my identity that I even noticed that all the characters in the books I was reading were white, or appreciate the sparse scattering of color where I found it. By that time, I knew I couldn't afford to be picky. I couldn't allow myself to discern enough to make sure the books I would be reading next were good, after all. I needed an escape from my boring life, and the details don't matter when being bored feels like your skin is slowly being peeled away from your flesh.

This way of portraying boredom may sound extreme, but ask anyone you know with Attention Deficit Disorder how they feel about boredom. Their reaction will be similar. It's difficult enough to concentrate on things you like, so when I have to concentrate on something that doesn't hold any new information, it feels like a betrayal. The fantasy genre has a much greater chance of being novel, even guaranteeing it at times, and is therefore the best thing to read.

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In my thesis, the first technologically advanced people to visit Mirilat's "traditional fantasy" village installed life-saving machines to monitor the more dangerous aspects of their

fertile home. When they continued on their way, these people used their rudimentary magic to summon people from the same region to maintain this technology. For centuries after, they have continued this trend, transporting one or two to their part of the world and cajoling them into staying. This technology is advanced to such a degree that they view it as a type of magic comparable to their own. The story begins when, due to a mistake in the spell, Nishat and Dahlia are brought from our world to theirs and expected to be able to maintain the machines as well.

In writing my thesis, I considered my friend, the fantasy genre. What made it the way it is? How can I change it to be something that could have helped me when I was younger, lost to the messages white people were sending through the pages of my books and the screen of my television. In trying to separate the genre from its lack of diversity, and had to think about many main aspects of every text, including setting, audience, and authorship. I discovered, ultimately, that I wanted to mix some of the aspects of my non-fantastical readings with the genre closest to my heart.

Fairy stories are set in Northern Europe because they are inextricable from the cultures and lore of the area. Common Western rendition of fairies, whether they be tiny pixies or cruel, mischievous fey, stem from the lore of this area, especially of the British Isles. This is not to say that similar creatures do not exist in other mythologies, but those we commonly see in Western fantasy stories stem from these.

Knowing that I would have to conform to the laws of academia, and therefore unable to write anything simply for fun or with no deeper meaning, I tried to write my story to include commentary on exoticism. A class I had taken on the history of science had confirmed what too

few people in this white man's world seem to know: it was only recently that Europe caught up with rest of the world in terms of technology and knowledge. China and the Byzantine Empire far surpassed the squabbling Europeans, building astrolabes and writing treatises centuries before Europeans stopped poisoning themselves.

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What excuse is there for a paucity of fantasy books set somewhere besides Europe? Naturally, it is important to think about our definition of such books. It would be shameless to require authors conform to the European standard, creating a million stories confined to a *Dungeons and Dragons* framework of knights, wizards, and bards of human, dwarven, elvish, or orcic stock. Would we travel in the opposite direction, requiring stories to be devoid of European elements? We would then need to turn to the handful of countries that have suffered from no more than minimal colonization and kept their cultures intact. Even then, many books have been published in the past century romanticizing European brands of fantasy. *Alice in Wonderland*, for example, is wildly popular in East Asia. There are still many of these "pure" fantasy book. Curiously enough, they are rare sights at Barnes and Noble.

Some fantasy books are, of course, original, not drawing from the traditional format. Still, these fantasy worlds exist in the European biome. They are full of oak trees, snowy winters, and ravens. It is easy to say that this is what the author is familiar with. Such a setting is extremely restricting. Imagine *The Golden Compass*, a story of a little girl in a world where everyone's soul lives outside their body in the form of an animal, set in Chile or *The Wizard of Oz* in Sudan.

We must therefore turn to those who are familiar with different settings but write in English. We come across another problem, as can be seen from Amos Tutuola's experience in getting published, as written in the introduction of his book *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which I read in an African literature class at Bryn Mawr. "When my script got to them they wrote me in about two weeks saying that they did not accept manuscripts which were not concerned with religion, Christian religion," he wrote of a magazine published by the government of Nigeria, his country of origin. His book, a series of modified Yoruba tales written in dialect, it brought forth the ire of Nigerian academics, who were horrified that it had not been written in "standard" English. There was pressure on all sides to conform to the European literary norm, for people from the African continent berated him for misrepresenting Africa as childish and inferior, and European critics were politely scornful. There is no respect for writers from previously colonized countries if they do not assimilate to their colonizers' modes of writing.

It is clear, of course, that literary academia does not readily accept fantasy books as literature. It seems as though such a genre is only considered "literature" if they are attached to an author that has also written more suitable material. Consider *The Faerie Queene*, a long, episodic collection of tales of various knights, maidens, and chivalry in the world of the fairies by Edmund Spenser. This was one of the most enjoyable readings I did for a class on Early Modern sensations at Haverford. His reputation as a master of verse combines with the age of the piece and its reception by Queen Elizabeth allows the poem to become literature, despite the cast being users of fairy magic. It is, of course, excruciatingly British, being an ode to the queen and filled with quaint European feudalism and chivalry. A similar example would be William

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which I had to read twice in middle school and once in high school. Fairy mischief leads to the resolution of a human love quadrangle and the complication of the lives of the fairy king, Oberon, and his queen, Titania. There is nothing Shakespeare could have written that would not be considered literature, for he has paid his dues in historical drama and tragedy, all properly set in Europe.

There may also be a selectively temporal element to this classification. Perhaps "literature" takes half a century to marinate. We know books written after the second world war, and some even written around the Vietnam War have been considered "literature." If this is the case, *The Amber Spyglass* the conclusion to the story *The Golden Compass* commences or *I, Coriander*, which tells of the trials a young girl faces when Oliver Cromwell comes to power and her escapes into the fairy world, could one day be deemed "literature" and close reading and analysis will be deemed respectable and noteworthy.

Taking into account this hypothetical temporal aspect, the lack of non-"traditional" fantasy stories are explained. As the books that continue to be read decades after they are written must have been popular when published, as they would otherwise cease to be in print, it must be concluded that the fantasy genre has become increasingly popular in recent years. Additionally, as levels of outright colonialism and blatant racism have started to diminish, more writers from non-European settings have emerged.

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My criticism of this pseudo-European setting is done in a number of stages. In selecting such a setting, I was juxtaposing it and its inhabitants with our perception of such a space. I

stripped away the romanticization that so often exists in such stories. There are no heroic knights or sweet, simple wenches. Without external influence, they would live in filth and ignorance, small of mind and unable to understand or defend themselves from their surroundings. The dragons are not sleek, majestic creatures caught halfway between a fish and an angel. They are ugly and smell of the vile acid they vomit at their foes.

Featured in these fantasy stories are brave adventurers. Brave, white, male adventurers. There was no limit to what they could do or where they could roam, not even a family to feed. They interact with their world like water: passing without a sound or decimating a town at a whim. Their existence is understood and expected by all, at least on a fundamental level. What, then, would happen if the main characters of this story strayed from this mold? This is not a story of white people falling into a fantasy world and seamlessly assimilating to their environment. The existence of the main character of my thesis, Nishat, in the tribal European setting provides a break in the system and an opportunity to examine the way both elements react to the tension.

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The *Earthsea* books are one rare exception to this unspoken rule of straight white men. While Earthsea has a temperate climate, it is an archipelago, replacing the traditional backpacking and ship voyages with three-day jaunts on small sailing ships to get from place to place. Additionally, in the first book, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the only white characters were barbarian invaders from outside Earthsea, used as a plot device to demonstrate the skills of Sparrowhawk, the main character. (I purposefully refer to him as ‘Sparrowhawk,’ despite it

being his use name instead of his true name. That is not information that is given out lightly.)

The archipelago is sprawling enough to provide a range of browns but retain the same language.

The part of these books that made the greatest impression on me was the date *A Wizard of Earthsea* was published. 1968. Ursula K LeGuin, a white woman, wrote a book with full non-white cast in 1968. I read that first book while watching the farm of some family friends over the summer, and that thought bounced around in my head as I collected eggs, harvested green beans, and cleaned up after their incontinent, elderly beagle. In my copy of the text was a statement by the author. She wrote about how publishers refused to depict Sparrowhawk true to his description on the cover, whitewashing him in the most tragic fashion. His brown skin was lost for years before the times changed enough to allow him to be on the cover in his true form.

It was these books that let me know that one could indeed write a traditional fantasy story without sticking to the confines of Europe. Not only were they filled with brown wizards and dragons and name-magic, but they inspired an entire generation of fantasy novels.

One shortcoming of the series is the abundance of male characters. *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Farthest Shore* contains about three female characters, and they all have either minor roles in the plot or only appear briefly. The school of magic Sparrowhawk attends does not appear to have any female students or faculty, and female magic users are generally not considered true magic users. The second book, *The Tombs of Atuan* seeks to remedy this, nearly all the characters, including the main character, being priestesses. It does, however, take place in the lands of the white barbarians, and the only person of color in the story is Sparrowhawk. *The Farthest Shore* is set in the archipelago again, but again features few women. One added feature

is the heavily implied queerness of the second main character. Arren, in his love for Sparrowhawk. This love is a main feature of the text, and is emphasized to the point where it is unlikely that it is platonic.

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In addition to criticizing homogenous fantasy settings, I used this background to bring light to exoticism in a starker setting. The villagers have had limited exposure to people of color from their own world, only seeing a handful in a lifetime. In their world, the technological disparity between regions is a more pronounced version of that which exists today. This disparity is not a direct mirror of the current state of events, but a what-if scenario examining the technological discoveries before the past five or six centuries. In such a world, Europe would continue its slow growth, bolstered by trade with other continents, and the rest of the world would expand and innovate to far surpass them. People from these societies have normalized advanced machinery, and are capable of replicating it to some extent.

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If fiction is not to be considered literature, it must be entertainment. What is most entertainment if not escapism? What does it therefore mean that so much of escapism is full of straight white cis men? There are a couple different things to consider when answering this question. Should we treat this as a power fantasy, or an act of self-erasure? Or is it simply that we have been trained by society to think of those in the highest position of power are the default?

Our society is certainly in a sorry state if our ideal world is one in which the vast majority of the Earth's population does not exist in any real capacity. It is often implied that fantasy races like elves and dwarves provide the same level of diversity as real races do. This creates situations like those that exist in much Sir Terry Pratchett wrote, where he would make witty commentary on racism with a completely white cast in a city that has been described as so diverse that "black and white gang up on green."

This problem also exists in science fiction and apocalypse stories. Perhaps a white person wouldn't notice the cast of a book or movie being all white, but the people of color always wonder what kind of genocide took place to make a starship's crew that homogenous. Did the zombies eat all the black people first? These stories seem to be saying that the future as denoted by white people has no space for people of color.

If these all-white male stories are to be seen as power fantasies, that creates an unlikely change in audience. Science fiction and fantasy stories have stereotypically been the domain of white, socially inept nerdboys. If we are to now decide that they are power fantasies, that implies that these stories are actually for women and people of color. If so, that would align more with superhero comics, as they provide said nerdboys with fantasies of muscles, female objects, and glory. If they are indeed power fantasies, they let the reader or watcher into the world of the privileged as a person with said privilege. The heady feeling of flexibility and freedom of mobility that does not exist in reality is a potent draw, indeed.

If it is an act of self-erasure, these fantasy stories have a more sinister feel, as they are generally written by white people. They would be written to compel readers towards self-hatred

with this overt statement of an ideal world. This would, again, imply that fantasy books are written for minorities. Nothing is made expressly for minorities.

No matter the reason, we know what the result of an abundance of such straight, white, male media. Self-hatred among minorities. This is especially problematic when it comes to children's media, for the amount of damage a child can do to their body and mind because of a poor self-image is depressingly large, as well as permanent. As much of children's media is of the fantasy genre, it is extremely important that this whitewashing be stopped.

I had a lot of trouble as a child because of the whitewashing I saw in media. From what I watched and read, I came to the conclusion that beauty was white skin, straight hair, and blue eyes. I hated my hair, eyes, and name, and loudly rejected any compliments I received on my appearance. I grew up in the diverse suburbs of D.C., but that never factored into my worldview, as I thought that only beautiful people could become actors or characters in books. The lack of diversity in what I read and watched inspired a trend of hatred for my appearance that did not dispel until my senior year of high school. The rejection of my black heritage caused my mother great pain, and kept me from learning things like how to properly care for my hair or cook flap jacks.

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Ultimately, this thesis is a reaction to much of what I've had to read in classes, especially those in the English department. Outside of the readings for specialty English classes, I have read precious few books that are either of the fantasy genre or contain a diverse cast for school. I have tried to avoid classes that specialized in the dry, realistic fiction of the *Middlemarch* ilk, all

middle class white people and their desire to marry each other, beelining instead towards classes that focused on drama, mythology, or race.

Despite protecting myself from the majority of the books that bored me to tears and rage, there was only so much I could do. I *am* an English major, after all, and that comes with *Ulysses*, *Paradise Lost*, and Shakespeare. Not that I mind Shakespeare, as long as I won't be forced to read anything I've been forced to read three times already.

*Paradise Lost* and *Dante's Inferno* are not at the *Middlemarch* level, especially if one reads them with the idea that they're Bible fanfiction, but *Paradise Lost* is nearly as slow to read, despite all that happens. They both also contain the same nugget of intrigue. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve is attracted to her reflection, and has to be instructed to be with Adam. Dante's overt idolatry of the old great poets like Ovid and Homer is more than platonic (especially with all the swooning in their arms).

In general, I learned from the courses I took in the English department that if one does not seek out specialty classes, they will consume an endless line of white books by white authors, all from the same two genres. So many of the courses are centered around England or America, and while some specialize in a certain era or style of writing, many of the stories amount to much of the same thing.

Seeing this, I wanted to rebel from the English class norm. I focused on the content of the other classes I took in the English department: one on African American satire, another on Caribbean literature, and two creative writing courses.

The former two cemented the importance of writing about race, and the way that transforms society. These books drew light to the suffering of black people at the hands of white people, with an emphasis on the everyday indignities. The Caribbean literature class especially helped emphasize the need to educate people, especially white people, on how colonialism has affected the region.

The creative writing classes exposed me to a large volume of short stories. A few of these still dealt with all the intricate and unique workings of the bad marriages of middle class white people, but many more showed me ways to deviate from the norm. From *The Semplica Girl Diaries* by George Saunders, an unconventionally written story about a society in which Southeast Asian girls were strung up by their heads as luxury lawn ornaments to *Bloodchild* by Octavia Butler, where a black boy learns exactly what his symbiotic relationship with aliens entails. These are some of the only genre stories I have read that gave more than a passing mention to the fact that races other than white exist.

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I will continue to write genre fiction with diverse casts until EuroAmerican societies stop thinking that all-white is the norm. I will not only write people of color, but queer people, disabled people, overweight people. Everyone deserves to have more representation that I've had. I will write books for teenagers, not only because I want them to continue to read, but because I want them to see characters who look like them not suffering from racism, but free to do what they like and wield great power. Recently, the number of diverse fantasy books has risen

a great deal, but I always worry that they will fail to reach others, the way most of them failed to reach me.