

The Wipe

Life is good, says the Priest. The surface beneath our feet glows like Bro Fischer and his offspring.

It's a miracle, the congregation replies in unison.

I'm sat next to my sister, she prods me and asks who Bro Fischer is. The Priest overhears and casts his gaze in our direction.

The Fischers, he says, are a legend of the seas, and Bro is the father of them all.

What are the seas? Lucy-Mae asks.

The seas are something we can only imagine, says the Priest. They are like droplets, only immense and never ending; billions upon billions of droplets.

Not true, I whisper to Lucy-Mae.

I'm tired of pretending the Fischers are only a legend and that the seas exist in our imaginations. Our ancestors didn't invent fictions, they provided us with records about a reality beyond the parochial limits of our homestead.

They are *real*, says Lucy-Mae, her eyes widening.

On the way out of the Church, I am stopped by the Priest. He wants to know what I've been telling Lucy-Mae because she's been upsetting the other children in Sunday School.

Nothing outside the teachings, I say.

He lets me walk on, as he stands to scratch his chin.

Tobacter, says Lucy-Mae when she catches up with me, let's make the most of the light.

The nights are long, close and humid on The Surface of Many Faces. They are followed by a sudden freshness and the light beneath us illuminates over the roughly-hewn icosahedrons that make our landscape. It is day, and then night. Our sun comes to life then fades away, sometimes within an instant, and at other times it lingers.

Can we Tobacter? she asks.

My little sister is the only person not to call me Toby. The friendly deference makes her impossible to refuse.

We walk home through the centre of town and before long encounter a storyteller entertaining on the street. He calls himself The Scientist.

Lucy-Mae stops to give him change.

Humans are a type of craft, says the man, they are coated in skin.

What is skin? asks Lucy-Mae.

It's a wrapper, he says, which we come into contact with when our planet is raised upwards and our orbit is tilted.

The skin surrounds earlobes, fingers, and lips, which are terrains of great variety, all swarming with life. They contain refugees from internal systems. These internal systems can be found when you peel back the wrapper to reveal muscle and bone, places where alien lifeforms are harboured.

Really? asks a teenager from the crowd in a sarcastic tone.

They are vast worlds of unimaginable size and there is not simply one of these human bodies, The Scientist continues. There are billions, who live for millions of years.

Millions of years? responds the teenager in the same tone as before.

In our timeline, yes, replies The Scientist, because everything is relative. To the humans it is decades and to them our lifespan is in comparison the shortest of times, a day long.

Lucy-Mae stands transfixed and I watch her, enjoying the naivety of her youth. He is an utterly brilliant and absorbing storyteller. For my sister, the fanciful world being created by him is utterly real.

When our world moves or vibrates, he says, shifting his focus away from the teenager, what are we asked to do?

To close our eyes, says Lucy-Mae.

That's right, we are told to seek shelter and to close our eyes tight. But what should we do?

Keep them open, Lucy-Mae tentatively responds.

Right again.

She beams with joy.

It takes courage, he says, and goes against everything you've been taught, but you must keep them open.

Nonsense, says the young man in the crowd.

It's the only way to learn the truth, says The Scientist, when we close our eyes, we close them to the truth.

The young man scoffs.

Lucy-Mae's imagination is now running wild with this fantastical world being drawn in front of her. One built on ancient myths, where Atlas holds our world in his hands. It gives her pleasure and I can't deny her that, even if I think the young man is right.

Lucy-Mae tells the young man to be quiet. I apologise to him for her forthrightness. He waves it away like it's not a problem.

The storyteller is still going and has plenty more to share. It's a hot day and I'm not able to stand any longer, so I find a nearby bench from where I can continue to listen and keep an eye on Lucy-Mae.

When the storytelling is finished, she walks over to me.

Howdy micrope, she says.

Micrope? I ask.

We are small, she says, microscopic to humans. This means we are micro-persons and I call us micropes.

You have a lovely imagination, I say, smiling at how she is still caught up in the story.

Halfway home the ground starts to vibrate. It is one of the frequent earthquakes, which sometimes precedes the light. There is a repetitious alarm of immense volume.

I'm going to keep my eyes open, says Lucy-Mae, and stay outdoors.

You can't, I say, we must seek shelter. It will deafen and blind you.

The Scientist said –

This is real, not a fiction, ignore the storyteller.

It's not fiction, she says, stamping her feet, Bro Fischer is fiction.

Bro Fischer is different, I say, his journals are in the library archive. They were transcribed by the monasteries prior to their collapse. He lived in a time and place when there were no days, only night.

Nonsense, she says.

There is no time to argue. I push her into the nearest shelter.

*

Our population is swelling in the poorer areas; the ones worst hit by frequent diasporas.

Those in the south are thrown turbulently north with increasing frequency and those from the west are shunted east. These migrations are involuntary and lead to toxic skirmishes, creating no-go zones on The Surface of Many Faces.

Tomorrow, I pack my things and in the dark of night slip away. Not to escape the chaos; for our own tribe, the Baumannii live contentedly alongside the Staphylococcus. It is for others that I begin my search. Life will no longer be sustainable for the regions beyond our own without this adventure.

I pray for the safety of my family.

The journey to the edge is long and filled with strangers. I push through them and make my way with determination. There is a ravine to cross. I see many faces trapped below. The leap is a cautious one.

There is a steep climb downwards where the light fades to dark. I feel my way, searching for signs of bioluminescence. After several days, I meet The Soothsayer, who is not unlike the storyteller at home, albeit a scragglier, darker-eyed version. His companion is The Historian. She invites me to talk with them.

I have been travelling a long time, I say, please will you show me the secrets of bioluminescence.

There is no bioluminescence here, says The Soothsayer, laughing.

This is not the Region of the Seas, says The Historian, that place lies well beyond.

But where? I ask.

We cannot tell you where, says The Soothsayer, or how it is possible to travel there.

I beg you.

Listen, says The Historian.

We fell into a passage to the Seas once, says The Soothsayer, and lost a number of our kind.

The Great Bleaching, says The Historian, some call it The Near Flushing. You must've been a child then, or perhaps not even born. Do they not speak of it on the other side?

It is not taught by our elders, I say.

They truly might've forgotten, says The Historian.

I want to be introduced to one who has been to The Region of the Seas, I say.

Impossible, says The Soothsayer.

Why?

None have returned, says The Historian.

Are they lying? A pair of priests turning me away from the truth? Or mad, full of stories, like The Scientist. The journeying might be impairing my judgement but I feel they are telling the truth.

I stumble in the dark, deflated by all that The Soothsayer and The Historian have told me.

On my way to find lodgings, I am cornered by attackers. They spray me with a toxic substance. I fall into despondency; no one can rouse me. Days pass, perhaps even weeks. It is only when a familiar voice whispers in my ear that I am reanimated.

Tobacter, says the voice.

It is Lucy-Mae, she made it her quest to follow me. She looks older, more serious than before, she tells me there has been a wipe.

It was horrible, she says, I ran to escape.

You saw it coming? I ask.

I kept my eyes open, she says, don't be angry, others were not as fortunate, nor as fast.

She hid in the deep ravine that I had crossed. She thought she might be stuck there forever.

Tobacter, she says, you must return home with me.

The Soothsayer visits before our departure. He tells me about preparations inspired by my journey.

They are being made in the hope we might slip into the passage to the seas once again, he says. It will require sacrifice as it did before, but in the search for bioluminescence it'll be worth it.

This is brilliant news, I say, thank you for sharing this, and for the hospitality and care you have shown me, I shall work equally hard to fulfil the dream on my return to our community.

*

The toxicity across The Surface of Many Faces has not reached the Rear Surface when Lucy-Mae and I depart, and we are hopeful they will be saved the destruction. Already the population of the ravine has dwindled, and across the broadlands, the numbers has thinned even more drastically. Our path is less troubled than on my journey out. The wars between some clans still rage but are lessened. The old are gone and the young are learning how to enter into negotiations over how to live alongside one another.

On arrival home, theories of our existence in an ever-expanding universe are taking hold. The Scientist, who I watched with Lucy-Mae all those years ago, now sadly deceased, was right about many things.

Micropes need to change, I say, we must be prepared.

There is a teenage voice in the gathered crowd. *Rubbish*, he shouts.

The Wipe will occur again, I say, growing more emphatic.

My brother is right, says Lucy-Mae, we must continue to keep our eyes open.

I struggle against the voices of dissent and scepticism. It is Lucy-Mae who is the more convincing orator. She becomes the one who guides our community from here onwards. Her word spreads first among the students of the street, and then into the institutions.

My time is spent in research for the next Great Bleaching and in finding faithful followers who will venture to The Region of the Seas. I am too old now to make the journey myself, and this dream must no die with me. One day the light will go from beneath us; thinking of our world turned completely to darkness saddens me greatly, and so I must continue this research to the end.