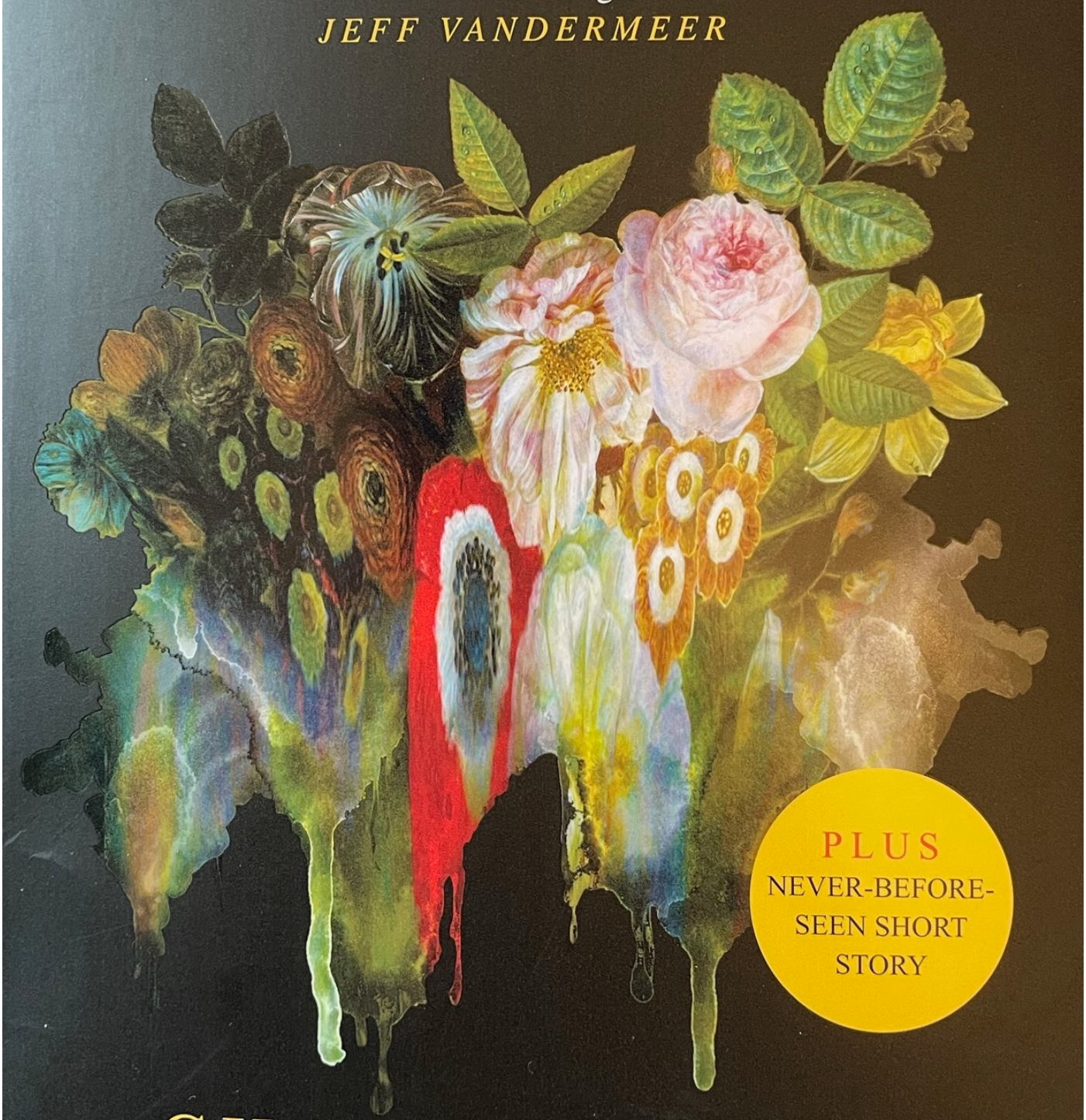
THE SEEP

"Mesmerizing"
JEFF VANDERMEER



PLUS
NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN SHORT STORY

CHANA PORTER

AFTER DINNER, THE women lounged on the floor and got a bit stoned. And then someone decided it would be fun to take a bath. They would soon realize that The Seep had already infiltrated their city's water supply. They were already compromised, already bodily hosts to their new alien friends. It was through that connection they could hear one another's thoughts, feel the same emotions, overlaid with the all-consuming adage that Everything Will Be All Right, No Matter What. The softest invasion had begun.

2.

Eventually, everyone understood that those who had already made contact with the aliens felt fine about the extraterrestrial invasion, while those who had not felt no shortage of panic, despair, rage, and powerlessness. There was talk of launching a war, but on what? Those who had been touched by the alien presence simply felt no fear. When connected with the aliens through water or bodily fluids, it

was impossible to feel anything except expansive joy, peace, tenderness, and love. But were humans still human without their worries? Or were the aliens placating them with these good feelings for some other, darker purpose?

The answer was—as these things so often are—all of the above. It's never how we want it, clear-cut and shining, a perfect moral center leading us all back home. The Seep did love us, and it wanted to help us to create a perfect world. And this destroyed life as we knew it.

AT FIRST, TRINA cherished the invasion, the casual overthrow of everything that had felt codified but broken for so long. In the past, she had rejected the concept that the world was becoming kinder. There had always been scapegoats and underclasses, no matter if they were locked away in prisons or working in factories in other countries. And on top of that, she was broke! She was in a fair amount of debt and her apartment was near a Superfund site, yet she felt grateful to be close to the subway. Her multiple jobs didn't pay her enough, she was stressed-out and tired all the time, her artwork was suffering, and the government couldn't decide if they

wanted to take away her healthcare. The aliens changed all of that. You could hold a product in your hand and feel its history, feel people's attitudes and emotions as they'd processed the materials. Struggles that had felt impossibly uphill were now suddenly so clear, as if everyone had awoken one morning from the same dream. It was insanity to poison your environment to save a dime. It was insanity to build bigger and bigger bombs to keep the peace. Guns were melted down into scrap metal. Police officers put their uniforms away.

Trina's inner and outer worlds expanded and merged. Her city became a tangled nest of permaculture, no separation between living, growing, making—a forest, a garden, a farm next to a coffee shop, a museum, a hospital, a school. All debts were forgiven. The student-loan people threw away their phones. After years of struggle in the old scarcity paradigm, Trina finally had freedom to think about what she wanted to do with her copious time. That first year, she didn't do much of anything. She, like most people, was just really high on The Seep, watching her own miraculous hands as they moved, touching her wooden coffee table to connect to the essence of the tree it had once been (pretty boring

to watch, but pretty fun to experience). She spent one full summer understanding her body as a convenient container for her immortal essence.

Deeba was first to shake off their hazy elastic stupor. She went back into her film work, finally shooting her first feature. This got Trina out of her daze. She returned to painting. Eventually, her work was shown in galleries and museums around the world. And because art was no longer a commodity (nothing was), some lucky people had Trina's paintings in their homes. Deeba started making documentaries about The Seep's new emergent subcultures—the yellow-meeks, the decomposers/living dead, pain cults, pearl houses, that kind of thing. Trina moved into performance, both sound and video, involving her own body in the practice. She got a little bit famous and had some minor love affairs, made Deeba proud of her celebrity wife. Then she got bored of the art world; of its pageantry, its emphasis on personality. Trina went back to school and became a doctor. How proud her mother would have been! (Too bad she killed herself when the aliens came.) Trina and Deeba lived and thrived, grew and changed, amongst their constantly shifting, abundant world, for years and years. Until one day, when Deeba

looked at Trina from across the breakfast nook and said she wanted to become a child again.

THE NIGHT BEFORE, they had been at a full-moon party in Bernal Heights. Among the guests were their old friends Emma and Mariam; Peaton and Allie, therapists who were both heavy into Seep meditation practices; and the musician Horizon Line, a rather famous Seep artist with whom Trina used to tour during her brief stint as a rock-and-roller. Emma was showing off her newest Seep modifications, her scratchy cat tongue and retractable claws, licking the neck of anyone who volunteered. Mariam was seriously considering getting hooves, which she explained were excellent for rock climbing, making devilish jokes at sex parties, and, apparently, relieving pressure from your knees. When Deeba said casually that she might want to be parented again, Trina thought she was joking.

"I saw a video of someone turning into a baby," Deeba said. "It was on someone's transformations channel on the Electric Spirit. You know, there are people who are busy becoming everything, and recording it all for us to watch."

Trina shuddered. "To think, we've lived long enough

to be in a future where everyone is a fucking performance artist." She drank a little off the top of her punch glass and frowned. The front taste was Cara Cara orange juice, made fizzy with carbonation, cut through with something acidic and bright like lemongrass. But the unmistakable metallic tinge of The Seep was there at the end, an oily sensation that snaked down her throat like blood. "Say what you want about the old days," she said, pushing the glass away. "The art was better then."

Allie looked like she was about to cry, as she had lately when anyone said anything remotely controversial. "You can't be serious, Trina. You're not actually one of those people who believe you need suffering to make great art!"

Trina shook her head. "I'm not, I swear. But I do think there's a lack of rigor at the present moment. And these kids, you know, these Children of the Seep—they seem so unmotivated, so disorganized. They hardly get anything done!"

"These kids today!" joked Mariam, wagging her fingers.

Horizon, however, nodded. "Trina, I completely agree. Things were different when we all thought we were going to die, when we had no knowledge of our immortal souls, so focused on these temporary

containers." He sipped deeply from his punch. "But of *course* the things we made were different when we thought we were mortal. How could they not be?"

"Right, but I don't think it's terrible to say that a little bit of hardship, a little tension, makes for more interesting art." Trina looked around the table. "When was the last time you saw something that really moved you?"

Peaton made a sweeping gesture with his punch glass. "I experience moving works of creation all the time!"

"But are you high on The Seep when you're experiencing the art?"

Peaton shrugged. "Well, of course."

Trina leaned back from the table. "My point exactly. We don't make things that can stand on their own anymore."

At her side, Deeba giggled. "Hey, Trina, the Compound called. They want you to interrogate your scarcity mentality."

Trina laughed and gave her wife's round thigh a squeeze.

"Ouch, Deeba!" said Peaton. "That's not a very nice thing to say."

Allie touched Trina's hand from across the table. "Do you want to pause and process your emotions? We can go into the other room."

Trina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. When had

everyone stopped having a sense of humor? "No, no, it's a joke—an inside joke. We've been saying it for years." She looked around at her oldest friends. Their faces suddenly seemed horribly alien with all their Seep modifications: Allie's angel wings, Peaton's bejeweled forehead, Emma's cat tongue. Even Horizon, who looked exactly the same as he had when they were on tour together all those years ago, looked eerie because he had not changed at all. Not a single wrinkle around his dark eyes or crease next to his full mouth. His smooth, tan skin was flawless, unmarked by time, the face of an eternally young man. Even his hairstyle was exactly the same, the long, dark hair reaching down to his waist like a curtain.

"Hey, the Compound called," said Deeba in a silly, high-pitched voice. She sipped more punch. "Which is funny in itself, since no one uses phones anymore!"

"The Compound called," growled Trina like a monster. Deeba shrieked with laughter. Peaton relaxed, but Allie was still frowning, her eyes big and wet. Trina went on. "They want you to come live with them, Trina, because you're a buzzkill, an old fuddy-duddy, a has-been. The Compound called, and they think you should just give up!"

Everyone laughed. Even Allie smiled a little. Trina stood

up from the table. She went into the kitchen to find some wine. No more weird punch, thank you. She poured a glass at the counter, her bare feet sinking pleasantly into the squishy, moss-covered floor. She found most New Order–style houses a bit tacky, like something from a low-budget B movie about a pleasure planet, but Peaton and Allie had good taste. She watched bright schools of fish swim to and fro in the floor-to-ceiling aquarium wall, sizing up her own reflection in the glass. Old Levi's, hoodie, ancient leather boots. *Hey, the Compound called to say they like your outfit,* Deeba liked to say, hooking her finger through a belt loop of Trina's worn jeans. Nowadays, everyone wore gossamer hoods and collars of lace, feathers and leaves sewn into elaborate dresses. That could never be Trina's style. What was a diesel butch to do?

She sipped her wine. *The Compound called . . .* she thought, *and they want their phone back.* When The Seep had first come, the idea of joining the Compound had been laughable to Trina. How insulting, how repugnant, that some faction had decided the status quo was worth protecting.

But maybe there was a kernel of truth buried under all of Deeba's good-natured barbs. *The Compound called . . .*

Lately, everything Trina could think to say was a complaint. That art wasn't good anymore, performance or otherwise. That most new music was meant to be listened to on The Seep, which made for an amazing experience, sure, but how could you accurately judge the artistry if you were high? No one Trina asked could answer that question. Like Peaton, they didn't seem to understand why she would ask it at all. No one read books or watched the great cinema of days gone by. Trina and Deeba had met at a Derek Jarman screening so many moons ago. Jarman would have liked the aliens. But would he have continued making films? Or would he just have enjoyed life, tended to his garden, and lived out his days happy and healthy? And if so, was that so bad? Trina didn't make art anymore; she was a doctor. It wasn't a betrayal of her old self to change. And yet these questions kept her up at night in her mostly happy bed with Deeba, little thorns in her side.

Still, for the first many years of living with The Seep, joy was all around her, like a cloud, a mist. From the kitchen, she could hear Mariam telling a long joke in what sounded like Arabic. Everyone laughed. Emma started singing a folk song in French.

Trina poured a little more wine into her glass and stayed,

watching the fish swim lazily across the long wall of water. And all the emotional processing! It wasn't just Allie and Peaton, either. Nowadays everyone expected you to talk about your feelings all day long. Not just lovers or close friends, either. Joe Shmoe on the street wanted to show you his dream journal. Trina had learned long ago (through the patience of a very loving Deeba) to open up about her feelings, her childhood, all that ancient history. But now, it seemed like everyone wanted to share their innermost emotions as casually as if asking for the time. At her last volunteer shift at the food co-op, Trina had spent two hours processing a random woman's latest past-life regression while shelving cans of chickpeas. It was too much.

TRINA READIED HERSELF and went back to the dining room. The party had moved to the living room floor. Everyone was trading foot massages, reclined on colorful pillows, the punch bowl in the center of the room.

"We're doing a toasting ritual, Trina!" called Peaton. "What do you want to toast to?" He poured from the punch bowl and held the glass out to her.

Trina gestured with her wineglass. "I'm good, thank you."

COMPLEX BODIES CREATIVE WRITING EXTRACT 2:
Chana Porter, *The Seep* (London: Titan, 2021)

3.

"That's better," said Horizon Line. They stood in the garden and looked up at the sky. Next to the bench was a little stone sculpture of an angel covering her face. The moon was full and bright. "I fear I have lost my taste for crowds."

"I almost forgot this was a full-moon party," said Trina. Everything was vaguely Wiccan nowadays, lots of tracking of the moon cycles and nature worship, but without all

that deity stuff. Trina liked the emphasis on ritual, and how you could approach spirituality as a choose-your-own-adventure. Religion was low-stress and low-maintenance, just like everything else. She tugged on Horizon's glossy black hair. "Hey, thanks for saving me back there. Do you think Peaton's going to push for an orgy?" She thought back to Deeba's plump little feet in her lap, her smiling round face, drunk on The Seep. It wasn't as nice as her own bed with ice cream to follow, but Trina could get in the mood to fool around a little in the company of old friends. Especially if it would stop all that circular, boring Seep talk. Conversing with high people was not how she wanted to spend a Saturday night.

Hey, Trina, the Compound called, and they want their paradigm back.

She gazed up at the bright full moon. Suddenly, the old joke stung a bit. Maybe she really was living in the past.

Horizon shook his head. "No orgy tonight, my sweet. Word on the street is that he and Allie have both taken vows of celibacy."

Trina nearly spit out her charcoal water. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, but don't ask them about it or they'll never shut up. Apparently, they're directing all of their 'lower

energies' into their Seep meditations, having orgasms that last three hours, seeing God, that kind of stuff."

"Huh," said Trina. About fifteen years ago, Allie had spent a weekend tied to her and Deeba's four-poster bed. Trina had forgotten how fun that had been. Allie used to be fun too, and sharply weird, a little neurotic in a way that felt totally rational. Now everything made her spacey and weepy. It couldn't be good for your emotional health to have transcendental experiences every single day. No wonder Allie was coming apart at the seams. "Celibacy, eh?" Trina sighed. "The world will never stop surprising me." She took a cigarette from Horizon and lit up. She inhaled and choked. "What is this?"

He laughed. "It's just sage and raspberry leaf. Allie's right, I can't do tobacco anymore. When I'm Seeped, I can literally feel my cells dying. It sucks!"

"Well, then don't Seep so much. Come over to my side." She deeply wished it was a real cigarette, and that she hadn't left her wineglass inside.

Horizon looked up at the sky, the angles of his face accented by moonlight. "I do wonder if we're using The Seep in the best way we can." He took a long drag. "I mean, we've been given this amazing gift, and we're using it to,

what, grow unicorn horns? There has to be more."

Trina considered this. "I hear you, man, I really do. But the work we do with it at the hospital is beautiful. There's so much happening—probably a lot of Seep tech we don't even know about." Just yesterday Trina had used The Seep to erase a tumor from a woman's breast. No cutting, no incision, no radiation or chemotherapy, just the power of Seep consciousness speaking into this woman's cells, telling them how to die gracefully, to let go and become something new. The procedure took twenty minutes, and then the woman went to a hula-hoop meet-up in Golden Gate Park. There were ways to use The Seep that were productive and healthy and didn't make you high for hours on end. One just had to be a little thoughtful.

"Yes, yes, yes," Horizon said. "I know The Seep improves our lives in a million big and small ways. What I mean is that we've gotten lazy. We're using the things we used to care about as a rubric for success."

Trina smiled. "Well, old friend, you could use The Seep for something other than keeping your wrinkles at bay." She brushed his smooth cheek with her fingertip. "Or shall I call you Dorian?"

He blinked at her. Did she have to explain the reference?

"Trina," said Horizon slowly. "I'll tell you a secret. This is something that no one else knows. But you're my oldest and dearest friend, and I want to share this with you." He took a big breath and smiled. "This isn't my real face."

"Excuse me?" Trina had only ever known Horizon looking just this way, for the past twenty years.

"This is the exact replica of my boyfriend, Tomas, who died in 1993. I modified myself to look like him as soon as I realized it was possible." His voice carried a hint of smugness. "I think I might have been the first person to use The Seep in this way. It was rather rudimentary back then. If I were to do it again now, my merger with The Seep would be far more sophisticated. So now you know the secret. This face will never wrinkle or age, because it can't. It's more like a mask than anything else."

Trina rubbed her arms. She felt suddenly cold in the night air. "You took this man's identity? Is that what you're telling me, Horizon?"

He tilted his head. His beautiful face, unmarked by time, now looked ghoulish in the moonlight. "Oh, I'm sure you understand," he said.

"Understand what?"

"I know you never got any Seep mods, but you must

have had something done, back in the day. Taken hormones or gotten surgery?" Trina raised her eyebrows. "Never mind, it's none of my business."

"No," she said. "It's not. And it's not the same thing at all." She shook her head. "Horizon—what did you look like before?"

He shrugged. "Like a million other people. You wouldn't have noticed me at all."

Trina's eyes grew big. "Hold up—were you a white guy? And you took this brown kid's face?"

Horizon raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"You didn't! Horizon!" She looked around, almost expecting there to be hidden cameras in the bushes, as if this were all some retro prank. "You can't—you can't take other people's faces, their races, and wear them like—like a suit!"

"Oh, race is a construction," he said, waving his hand. "Everyone knows that."

"That might be, but it's still meaningful. Constructs mean things."

Horizon grew impatient. "Trina, everyone who has been joined even once with The Seep knows that we're all the same. We're all of the same essences, all layers of identity are just that, layers, and you can play with them

just as we play with our appearances—"

"Some things are too far. You can't—"

He stood up a little taller, flipping his long black hair over his shoulder. "But I can, Trina. I did. With The Seep, anything is possible. Our bodies are just containers for our immortal essences. And that's my exact point. We've become too narrow in our thinking. Remember how intense it used to be, when you first Seeped? Now we drink punch at a party and barely feel anything!"

"I feel things," she said slowly. "Our bodies may be containers, but they still carry specific histories. And those histories are still meaningful. Of course The Seep doesn't understand that—they're amorphous beings with no physical bodies! But I won't let you stand here, looking like that, and tell me that my history is interchangeable with yours."

He shrugged again. "Well, you can feel however you want about it, obviously."

"Horizon, listen to me. You're being so color-blind it's racist!"

He looked stung, as if she had struck him. "I can't believe you would use that word on me. How long have you known me?"

"Clearly, we don't know each other very well at all. I

don't even know what you really look like!"

Horizon threw his cigarette butt to the ground. The grass swallowed it up instantly, taking it back to the earth. "This is what I look like, Trina, and that's my point. Our bodies are completely malleable. We haven't been given this gift to just grow gills, or to sprout angel wings. There has to be something more, something greater to achieve, through The Seep—"

Just then, Deeba's round, shaved head peered out of the door. "Everything okay out here?" she asked. Then she giggled. "Allie wants to show us pictures of her trip to India. My love, should we call it a night?"

"Yes!" Trina stomped out her cigarette. The ground started sucking up around Trina's shoes. "Hey, watch it!" She wrenched her feet up from the ground.

Horizon breathed deep. "I forgive you, Trina, for calling me that word. I know you didn't mean it."

Trina rubbed her forehead. She was suddenly so tired. "Horizon, I do mean it. If you can't acknowledge that what you're doing is fucked-up, I don't know what to tell you."

His lovely face was blank with surprise. "I have made my whole career as a memorial to my dead lover. What is more thoughtful than that?"

"Well, he didn't get a say in it, did he?" Trina took her wife's hand and turned toward the door.

"You can't judge things based on the way the world was thirty years ago, T. Everything has changed!"

Trina turned back toward him. "You know, I'm going to tell people about you. That they're looking into the face of a dead boy who never gave you his consent. That every person you fuck is fucking the mask of a dead person. How can you not see how creepy, how violent that is?"

Horizon looked at her gravely. "I'll tell people myself, Trina. And when they react with pleasantry, or with boredom, or when they try to show me pictures of their trip to India, you'll see just how mired in the past you are."

She laughed, but the sound was hollow, joyless. "If you're right, I don't think I want to live here anymore. Good night." Trina and Deeba left the garden. They made their apologies to their hosts and walked out into the quiet, lush street.

4.

"Can you believe him?" asked Trina later that evening, lying in bed with Deeba. Their home had very few Seep modifications, but Deeba had insisted their ceiling be a huge roof window open onto the sky. The moonlight was so bright, Trina couldn't see any stars.

"I can," said Deeba. "Peaton and Allie make a big show of how much they Seep, but Horizon is dosed practically

all the time. And I agree with you. It's dangerous, all that 'nonseparation, we're all the same, there is no good or bad' stuff. Makes accountability very slippery."

Trina rubbed her eyes. One couldn't really blame The Seep for the inability to make distinctions like race. Before they were joined with life on Earth, they didn't have corporeal forms, a concept of linear time, or even emotions. But that made it so humans needed to be even more thoughtful, more nuanced. "That's exactly why The Seep needs us, maybe more than we need them. And I'm not one of those Keep Earth Human people holed up in the Compound."

Deeba snuggled in close. "Hey, babe," she murmured. "The Compound called. They're sad you don't want to join them."

Trina was too shaken up to laugh. "I really can't believe Horizon would do such a thing and compare it to my transition."

Deeba practically yelled in her ear. "He did *what*?"

"Oh yeah, I didn't even tell you that part." She leaned over and propped up on her elbows. "And then he acted all high and mighty, and tried to *forgive* me! The nerve." In the darkness, Trina could hear Deeba swallow.

"What did you mean when you said, 'I don't want to live here anymore'?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Trina lightly. She gave her wife's soft waist a squeeze and affected a cartoon voice. "Sometimes I think, hey, stop the world, I want to get off." But Deeba didn't laugh. She let Trina's statement hang in the air like fog.

IN THE MORNING, Trina was cooking oatmeal when Deeba brought up the channel on the Electric Spirit, the one with the video of the woman becoming a child, for a second time.

Trina cringed. "Ugh. Why do you want to watch that?"

Deeba pressed her head into Trina's shoulder. "I thought maybe we could watch it together."

Trina turned off the stove and doled out two bowls. "Why would we do that?"

"It doesn't look painful at all, it looks cathartic."

"I don't think it would be painful. Deebs, what are you saying?"

Deeba added dried cherries and chopped walnuts to her oatmeal and stirred. "Ever since I saw that video, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it." A high, airy laugh

escaped her throat. "I think I'm losing my mind!"

Trina stood very still. "Oh?"

She looked up at her wife. "Isn't it amazing, Trina? To think about going back to the beginning? All those years of therapy. The old wounds never really heal, do they?" Her eyes were large and strange. "I could do it all over again. With good people this time. Get the parenting I deserve."

Suddenly, Trina was nauseous. She pushed her bowl of oatmeal away. "What are you saying? That you want to die? Now? At forty-six years old?"

"Oh, no sweetheart, no—" She took Trina's hand in hers. "I'm saying I want to live. Without all these memories. Without that old pain. Don't you see the difference?"

Trina spoke very slowly. "Without me, you mean."

"Well," said Deeba carefully, "you would make a very good mother."

Trina's eyes grew wide. "Are you joking, Deeba? Wait." She grabbed the medicine bag she kept by the door and took out her flashlight. "Are you still high? Let me see your pupils."

"I was afraid of this. I'm not high. Get that thing out of my face."

"Who would understand this? You want me to be your mother? I'm your *wife*!"

Deeba tossed her head. "But we've all been everything to each other—mother, father, lover, sister, brother, endless lifetimes of cycling through roles and reversals."

"That's philosophy, that's spirituality—"

Deeba's face was sad. "That's the truth, Trina, and you know it. Through The Seep."

Trina held up her hands. "Fine. Yes, if you think about it, we've all been everything, but that doesn't mean I'm going to go become an earthworm, does it? Of course not! I'm a human being!"

When Deeba spoke next, her voice was low and serious. "We have a choice about when and how we move on to the next lifetime. That's so amazing! I don't see why you wouldn't want to be connected to me, to love me in a new way. I think it's sort of romantic."

Trina shook her head hard. "I can't believe this. You're talking about leaving me."

"No!" said Deeba sharply. "You're not listening. I'm talking about becoming a child again. And I would do that with you, if you're open to it. You're the one talking about leaving me, Trina. Not the other way around."

* * *

TRINA FELT LIKE screaming, felt like ripping out her own hair, like punching a wall, but she just sat on the kitchen floor and cried. She didn't get up for almost a day. For a while, Deeba sat next to her and held her, when Trina would allow herself to be touched. But eventually, Deeba got tired of sitting on the floor. Deeba got up. She came back periodically to ask if Trina wanted tea or anything to eat. In their wedding vows, they had made no promises about forever. It was bad luck to make promises you were unable to keep, and forever was a long time, especially now that death was an opt-in procedure. Trina had imagined they might grow apart in all their years together, or take other lovers who filled them with more passion, or perhaps melt into a kind of friendship, as so many other couples did. But none of those things had happened. Trina loved Deeba now more than ever. She loved her more than on their wedding day. She loved her even more than at that dinner party so many years ago, when she looked across the table and realized that if the sky were to turn green and fish to walk on land, the only thing she needed to make sense about life was being with Deeba. And through The Seep, that wonderful, terrible Seep, Trina knew that Deeba felt

that deepest love for her, too. Through The Seep, Deeba understood that Trina would stay with her for another lifetime or maybe more, as wives and roommates, lovers and best friends, through cooking and dinner parties and career shifts, through the boredom and the freedom of unexpected immortality. Through The Seep, Trina knew that Deeba would cherish being connected to Trina for another lifetime or more, but in another role, if only Trina would let her. They could cycle through together endlessly, learning how to love each other in different permutations of being, in something bigger and grander and stranger than pure romance. Love as a verb, an action, an adventure in knowing. But Trina just couldn't hack it. She was old-fashioned that way. Simultaneously, this broke both of their hearts.

ONE NIGHT DURING all of this, Trina dreamt that Deeba was on a floating island, and Trina was on a separate floating island, and it was nighttime. The water around them was very dark. Deeba and Trina looked at each other while they floated slowly yet steadily apart. It was a stupid and obvious dream, and Trina was angry at herself for having it.

TRINA AND DEEBA enacted the same circular argument until it felt like they were actors in a play going through the same performance night after night, their words hollow, their crying choreographed. There was nothing more to say, and they still couldn't see each other's perspective. Neither would bend or budge, and they both felt horribly wronged.

Deeba went to a healer. She made it clear that she did not just want to look like a child; she wanted to actually *be* a child, with a child's sense of wonder and capacity for growth. She wanted to learn how to speak again, perhaps in another language, in a land far away from the wounds of her past. She wanted to dream in another language, to grow a new mother tongue. She would become a perfect little baby. Deeba contacted a party planner who specialized in these kinds of events. The party planner helped her pick a venue, a theme, a motif. Deeba would have her transformation at the beach, near her favorite part of Golden Gate Park. The theme would be the Transformational Nature of Water, with an ice feature and a fog machine. The colorscape would be blue and gold.

"Please don't do this," said Trina on the morning of her wife's transformation. "Please, please, please reconsider." She laughed from pain, a terrible, broken sound. "I'm literally

begging you. Stay with me, Deeba. I know you still love me."

Deeba shook her head. "I really thought that you would do this with me." She had found a nice Persian couple living in the South of France. They were very excited to parent her when she was ready. "There's still time to change your mind—"

"Please, not another word. I can't even hear you say it again."

"Listen to yourself! You can't even hear it? How is that remotely helpful?" Deeba's eyes filled with tears. "I don't want to leave you either! Don't you see how sad this makes me?"

Trina made an ugly sound from the back of her throat. "Then don't do it! It's so fucking simple."

Deeba looked at the floor. "Will you come to the ceremony, at least? Will you hold my hand as I move on?" Trina watched as the tears streaked her wife's soft, beautiful face. "I'm scared."

Trina turned away. "Will I go to your funeral, you mean?"

"It isn't like that! You're looking at this all wrong!"

Trina stared at her hands. The thin gold wedding band glinted back at her. "I can't see it any other way. I'm sorry."

Deeba looked at her in disbelief. "I am standing here asking you to love me in every way possible. I am asking

you to walk through life with me in whatever form I take. I'm asking you to be my everything, Trina!" She squeezed her hand. "Isn't that worth considering?"

Trina crossed her arms. "You're holding my life hostage."

"That may be so." Deeba brushed the tears away from her face. "You think you'd be happy with another thirty years of watching old movies and eating ice cream with me, but you can't fool me. You aren't happy, Trina. You haven't been happy for a long time."

Trina shrugged. She was too tired to lie. "So?"

Deeba exhaled. "I love you, Trina FastHorse Goldberg-Oneka. Thank you for the sweetest years of my life."

"Please. Please, please don't leave me."

Deeba smiled sadly. "Go figure out who you are without me, babe." She gave her wife a sweet, short kiss. "I hope you find some joy in this weird new world. I really do." And then she left. Trina didn't know if Deeba turned back for one last look. She was too busy crying.

her. Had Trina driven Deeba away? If she had been better, kinder, softer, perhaps Deeba would have stayed, and they would have been happy. Her eyes glazed over, hot with tears. She needed to cry but she couldn't, wouldn't. She couldn't stay here anymore. This place was not her home. She was drowning in filth and memories. Trina ran to the back of the house and located the never-fired gun. It had been living in the top drawer of a forgotten cabinet along with ticket stubs, rubber bands, broken vibrators, and other things Trina didn't know how to throw away. She put the gun in her bag, then ran out the front door; away from the blue sign, away from the woman and her dog, away from her messy yard, away from her problems, for they might swallow her whole if she stayed even a minute longer.

COMPLEX BODIES CREATIVE WRITING EXTRACT 3:
Chana Porter, *The Seep* (London: Titan, 2021)

TRINA HAD JUST edged around the corner of the park where the excellent Philz Coffee still stood, proud and extraterrestrial-free, when some kid called out to her.

"Hey," the kid said. He was a pretty boy, young looking with dark brown skin and curious eyes.

"Hey yourself," said Trina, firming up her gender identity through gesture.

The boy stared down at a booklet, some kind of Seep tech that claimed to hold all the answers. These things never did, not about anything that was actually important. The Seep had the nuance of a golden retriever. All the kid seemed to want to know was a good place to stay tonight that didn't run on credit. The Seep loved giving you everything you wanted, in exchange for information about being human. The green flash of a credit stick, at a coffee shop or a bookstore or any number of places, was a marker of where you were and what you wanted, a little dot in a vast, ever-evolving data set. Trina had resigned herself to using credit years ago, to being a little dot in the aliens' matrix, but she respected the kid's wariness.

"Well, you could sleep in the park," she suggested. "But it's going to get chilly, and the grass does get dewy. There are quite a few communes who'd take you in for a night or more."

His eyes lit up. "Which commune has the most undesirable, unsavory characters?"

Trina tried not to laugh. "House of Maybe gets pretty unsavory, or at least, they used to on a Friday night. That's in Venice." Her long hand, dense with chunky silver rings, pressed into the side of a building and a blue screen appeared as if from nowhere. The boy gasped like he had never seen an Electric Spirit console before. She quickly pulled up a map and showed him which public transit lines to take to get there. "You might need a password or something—they're pretty showy—but if you bang hard enough, they'll let you in. You can say Trina Oneka sent you, but I'm not sure if my name will carry weight there anymore."

He wrote the directions down in a little notebook, real paper and all.

Trina raised her eyebrows. "You're really not from here, are you?"

He shook his head.

"If you ever have a question, just ask the pamphlet out loud. It will tell you whatever you want to know."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, I have one, too." She took out the pamphlet that busybody Blane had given her. Its title had now become SO, YOU'VE DECIDED TO RUN AWAY FROM ALL OF YOUR PROBLEMS . . . Ha, very funny. It must have overheard her conversation with Blane. "It's Seep tech. It creates a link with you, so whatever you need to know, you can find right away. It responds to verbal commands. But be wary of what you say around it—it can't always tell the

difference between a question and a private conversation."

The boy stared at his pamphlet. Trina glanced at the cover. His read so, YOU'VE BEEN EJECTED FROM THE COMPOUND . . .

Wow, thought Trina. *And I thought I had problems*. She softened her tone.

"Hey, I'm going to a diner to get some real grub. It's called The Shtetl. It doesn't use credit, either. Do you want to come?"

"No, thank you." He smiled at her, revealing shiny, straight teeth. "You see, I'm looking for something other than kindness."

"Ah," she said. "Well, maybe try Instructions? That's a commune over on Fifth." She gestured to the map. "You could walk. They're not interested in kindness, either."

"Oh, thanks a lot!" he said brightly. Then he paused. "Sorry. And what do I do with this?" He held out his coffee cup. "I can't find any trash receptacles."

Trina wrinkled her brow. For someone who wasn't interested in kindness, he sure was polite. For the past twenty-five years, every temporary container had been made both edible and compostable; you either ate it or buried it in your garden. Even toddlers knew that. Trina thought for a moment of Deeba being raised in this new

paradigm. She wouldn't remember another way of living. Trina had to save her empty packets of gum in a mason jar to have them processed once a year on Old Objects New Objectives Transmutation Day. (In her former life, she might have used the plastic packaging in an art installation about the permanence of impermanence, but now that kind of thing made her want to punch a wall.)

Trina made a big gesture of eating the cup, hoping to get a smile out of him, but he only looked more confused. Oh, well. She told him to consult the pamphlet for little questions like that. Her gum was starting to taste like old glue. She needed a coffee. A drink. To go to sleep and never wake up again in a world without her old lady.

The boy gave his thanks and wandered off in search of Fifth Street.

AS SOON AS he left, Trina regretted sending the kid to Instructions, a truly torturous commune that attracted the most vigilant, inflexible types looking to drop in and zone out. She wandered around the park for a while longer, frowning at the perfectly clear sky and drinking a beer in a brown paper bag. On a great open lawn, there were several

yellow-meeks standing in their filthy version of prayer. Their hair was matted in clumps, faces streaked with lines of grit, necks circled in grime as they sweat and urinated on themselves in the hot overhead sun. Trina hung out with them while she finished her beer. Man, they stank! Of course, they paid her no mind, nor did they interact with each other or anyone else in the park. Over on the next field of grass, parents played with children, a teenager strummed a guitar, a middle-aged woman sunbathed in the nude. If you ignored the yellow-meeks, it was paradise. But The Seep taught us that true paradise included all of us—no matter what, no matter what, no matter what. (There was a huge living mural of this exact sentiment in the Tenderloin, depicted by hundreds of flowers and vines.) All the yellow-meeks held still, almost motionless, standing and sweating and even shitting in place when they had to, like grotesque half-alive statues. Outrageously, Trina felt sad that there were no more drunks in the park, no more homeless people except for those who had renounced housing by choice, like the yellow-meeks, who had renounced everything, even their names.

Then she berated herself for thinking such a thing. The world was better now, of course. And of course she didn't

want people to suffer, unless they wanted to, even as some silly path toward divinity. She was so fucking selfish. But in that moment, she would have brought back late capitalism if it meant she were married to Deeba again. *Goddamn it,* she thought, swilling her beer. She splashed a little on her jacket and wiped it off with the back of her hand. Then she smiled. *I guess there's still one drunk in the park after all. Be the change you want to see in the world.*

Then she decided to walk to Fifth Street to try to give that Compound boy some better advice. On her walk over, Trina got more and more excited about actually talking to someone from the Compound. Was life there really free from all Seep influence? What did people tell their children about the world outside? "Hey, the Compound called," she muttered to herself as she walked through the paradise city of flowers and trees and animals with ascended consciousness. "They want their kid back."