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Speculative Fiction Portfolio

Contents:

- Science Fiction Short Story, 'Prime': 2,098 words
- Magic Realism Short Story, 'When Pigs Fly': 1,113 words
- Fantasy Short Story, 'Mycelium': 1,349 words
- Reflective Essay: 1,480
- Bibliography

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Prime

The headstone was an ornate little thing, military commissioned, that Jidun would never have chosen for himself. His ghostly reflection glared back at him – hollow eyed – from the whorls and divots in the gleaming black marble. As he crouched to lay a single red rose in the mud, the reflection's lips curled into a sneer.

'It can't be easy, your family leaving you behind,' said Captain Daio, placing a delicate hand on his shoulder. She'd offered to escort him to the location of his grave, compassion smouldering like flames in her dark eyes. Despite her friendliness, Jidun knew she wouldn't have offered unless she was under strict orders from above. He was to be watched, monitored, handled. He'd seen it before under admittedly different circumstances; turncoat prisoners of war working under the wary eyes of their ex-enemies.

'They didn't leave,' he replied, brushing dirt from his stiff new uniform, 'I did.'

Jidun remembered his death in brilliant detail. The oppressive heat that had closed in on him from every side, the acrid taste of ash coating his tongue and tickling at his nose, the child he had pushed to safety seconds before the hospital roof had collapsed in an explosion of wood and flame and buried him alive. Even then he remembered the pain. His legs had shattered like twigs as the debris shrouded him in a blanket of death. He had lain there for what had felt like hours, time becoming as malleable as the soft peach candy he'd enjoyed as a child. Slowly, the air thickened around him and his throat spasmed. Thrashing his broken body, Jidun attempted to inhale a lungful of air to no avail. It was only as the flames danced towards him and began to lick at his exposed skin that his memory went black.

In contrast, his resurrection was a mystery. He'd opened his eyes to a world stained neon, with buildings so tall they punctured the sky. In this vast living metropolis, which in his youth could barely have been called a town, great silver ships sped like blood vessels down the veins and arteries of the city while he floated adrift – a cancer that tainted everything he touched.

Jidun trailed his hand across the cool marble a final time before squaring his shoulders and forcing his body to turn away. 'I'm done here,' he said, addressing nobody in particular. Daio answered him anyway.

'Does that mean you'll do it? The rebels are running riot and Grandfather invested a lot to bring you back. It would be a shame to have to...' she trailed off, colour flooding her cheeks.

She didn't have to continue. He would be decommissioned, switched off like a faulty machine. It didn't matter who he was, and who was he really when the bones of Jidun prime lay in a casket beneath his feet?

'Give me twenty-four hours. That should be enough time for me to decide.'

Twenty-four hours for him to decide who he wanted to be. Did he honour the bones of the man whose memories had made themselves at home in his skull – a man who both was and wasn't himself- or did he attempt something new? He slipped his hand into his pocket and ran his finger across the blade of his old service knife. It was dull, practically unusable, and still stained with the blood of the last person he'd killed. Daio had obviously seen no threat in reuniting him with it.

'To remind you of where you came from,' she'd said as she swooped into a ceremonial bow and presented it like an offering, 'In the hopes that you favour us with the same unwavering loyalty.'

Daio let him walk away without any resistance. It wasn't a surprise. Her grandfather's bloodhounds had dogged their steps all the way to the cemetery, and the sharp ozone reek that indicated their invisible presence still wafted behind him. Jidun kept his gaze pointed forward and his steps even as he headed towards the heart of the city.

People stalked by on the metal walkways that passed for a pavement, their bodies so studded with metal they appeared more machine than human. They stared at him with the same bewilderment he spared for them, as though they didn't believe the sight of his dark, untouched skin was real. Jidun's heart clenched, a sudden longing for home overtaking him. What had happened to his wife and daughter after he'd left? Had they had a good life? He stopped his thoughts dead before they could go down a path he was unwilling to follow.

Despite the winding route Jidun took through the city, his stalkers didn't let up. To make matters worse, he was a stranger in a strange land, and everyone knew it. Flying vehicles screamed at him as he tried to squeeze through them. The other pedestrians seemed to have memorised the complicated dance of navigating the roads whilst he was left to flounder. Still, when he spotted an opening, he darted across the road and up onto the walkway before he could be squashed. Again.

Increasing his pace, Jidun jogged down an alley and clambered over a surprisingly old-fashioned chain-link-fence. Alley after alley he darted down, until he was sprinting flat out. Adrenaline pounded in his veins, and he knew nothing beside the fact that he needed to get away. The smell of ozone grew fainter with every step. Only when he could smell it no longer did duck into the shadows of a crumbling bridge and pause for breath.

‘What’re you doing, *modem*? This is my pad.’

Two large black eyes blinked up at Jidun, creased at the edges with barely contained fury. A girl no older than twelve stood in front of him, fists balled, face filthy and hair cut into a ragged, unflattering bob. Until that moment, Jidun hadn’t believed in ghosts. He felt what little breath he had flee his lungs at the sight of that oh-so-beloved face. ‘Mirinae?’

The girl’s seal-dark eyes blinked at him once more before hardening. ‘Who? You sick or something *modem*? M’name’s *Yura*.’

Jidun opened his mouth to reply, to question, to do something, when not-Mirinae’s callused hands crashed into his collarbone and pushed him off balance. He fell backwards, landing hard on his arse.

‘What was that for?’ said Jidun as he heaved himself into a sitting position. The floor was sticky, and he tried not to think too long about the unknown substance clinging to his new clothes.

‘You was lookin’ at me weird. ‘Sides, how does I know you ain’t with them Vultures? You’re dressed fancy enough.’

Somehow Jidun didn’t think Yura was talking about large carnivorous birds. ‘I’m by myself,’ he said softly, ‘and I’m in need of some help. You don’t happen to know somewhere I can go to be alone for a while, do you?’

‘What’s in it for me?’

Jidun slid off the steel ring Daio had presented him with before they’d headed out of town. The blue chip in its centre let off a weak glow, highlighting the deep

hollows beneath Yura's cheekbones. 'There're four hundred credits on here. You get the whole lot, but only after you help me.'

Yura's eyes trailed up and down his body as though she were trying to read a hidden message carved into his skin. Then, she sniffed and offered him a grubby palm. 'Deal.'

Shaking the girl's hand was akin to thrusting his own into a stinky, slightly damp garbage can. Before Jidun could recoil, Yura released him and scurried off to a dark corner of the bridge. In the dim light from his ring, and the beams from the occasional overhead ship, he could just make out a battered futon pushed flush against the abutment. With practised movements, Yura rolled up the futon and pushed it to the side. Then, she disappeared.

Jidun's heart skittered in his chest. He crept towards the place Yura had vanished, images of the walls consuming the girl whole invading his mind. Instead, he was greeted with a scowling face peering up at him from a cleverly disguised sewer hatch. Jidun wrinkled his nose.

'You comin' or what?' said Yura, her hands coming to rest on her waist.

'When I asked for somewhere to think, *this* wasn't what I had in mind. You'll catch a disease down there.'

'Course I won't, *modem*. The lambs have cleanin' teams all over. Unlike the bloodhounds, *they* look after us.'

Indeed, after a closer look, Jidun could see no sign of algae or sewerage. Though the grate was rusted and peeling with age, inside the passage itself was surprisingly sterile. Even the brightly coloured graffiti decorating the walls had a

performative feel to it, as though it was only there to warn off the uninvited. An idea of what exactly was brewing beneath the city was beginning to build in Jidun's mind and he found he wasn't opposed to it. He clambered down into the sewer, replacing the grate behind him.

Yura guided him on sure feet through a series of tunnels and winding passages. To Jidun's surprise, after a few of these twists and turns he found that he could stand upright. When he mentioned this to Yura she only scoffed and said, 'What, you think everyone's gonna just crawl around down here? The Wasteland's made to help people, not turn 'em all into braindead slaves like up in the Eyrie.'

As they continued, the tunnels widened until they were standing in a giant man-made cavern. The air was cool down here, carrying the scent of woodsmoke and spices. Walkways and arches, houses and winding paved streets stretched out in front of him like a patchwork memory of his old town. Jidun's heart clenched and he had to lean against the cool brick for a moment to regain his composure. Yura stared up at him with those dark eyes that reminded him so much of his daughter, a hand coming to rest on his elbow. 'You still wanna be alone, *modem*?' she asked in a quiet voice.

Jidun found that he didn't, at least not completely. Mutely, he shook his head. A grin curled across Yura's face. 'Great! Come with me, I know somewhere we can eat.' She glanced pointedly at his ring and Jidun felt his own lips twitch reluctantly into a grin that mirrored hers.

The teahouse was a wooden shack that looked like it had stepped right out of Jidun's memory. The warming scent of ginger tea and spiced dumplings curled through the air and Jidun found his shoulders immediately loosening. The proprietor

was a bubbly man called Roha. No augmentations adorned his lithe body, and when he spotted Yura he winked and slipped her an extra dumpling.

‘Yura did it again,’ he said as he reached over to fill Jidun’s cup. ‘That girl’s got talent. No wonder the lambs employed her. Where’d she find you?’

‘She didn’t,’ said Jidun, taking a sip of tea. Heat trickled down his throat, melting the ice that seemed to have engulfed him since the moment he’d awoken in another time. ‘I came across her under a bridge. She kicked my ass then said she’d help me.’

Roha chuckled, ‘Sounds about right. Ain’t many you can trust up there in the Eyrie. They call us rebels, try to take us down, but they’re the ones who’ve betrayed everything that once made them human. Eugenics, modifications, mind control; you’d be amazed at what goes on with the true elites. Girl must have seen something in you to bring you to the Wasteland. And, truth be told, the Lambs need all the help they can get.’

Jidun turned to Yura, but she was faced pointedly away from him, her face obscured by her mug. She wasn’t the only one busy drinking. Customers sat on plush beanbags around him, both part of his world and distant from it. Their bodies were lean, their faces drawn, but they spoke with a passion he envied. When they smiled the whole room seemed to illuminate with their joy.

These were the same people Daio’s grandfather wanted him to help destroy. His old self wouldn’t have thought twice about it. The people in charge held the money and knew what they were doing, who was he to argue with them? But things were different now. He was different. Jidun Prime was dead, and Jidun the Second had made his decision.

‘Tell me where to find the Lambs,’ he said in a voice loud enough for Yura to hear, ‘I want to help.’

When Pigs Fly

It was rush hour, on the morning of October the 7th, when I found my usual route to work blocked by a sounder of giant, bewinged pigs. They occupied the road in one ambling, snuffling mound, wet noses twitching and feathers bristling.

I was the only car on the road, but even so I slammed on my breaks, tires squealing and pig shit flying in every direction, until I came to an abrupt halt in front of an ancient sow. She appeared unbothered by the reek of burnt rubber drifting from my tires, her rheumy eyes drawn immediately back to the vegetation cluttering the asphalt.

Cleanup was still ongoing after the latest storm had torn through the countryside and I wondered if the pigs had escaped from a nearby farm. Either way, it was an inconvenience I couldn't be arsed with today. I glanced at the digital clock blinking on my dashboard. 8:27am. I was expected at work at twenty-five to.

Bracing myself for an adverse reaction, I jammed my palm against the horn. A shrill beep echoed down the empty lanes, causing a couple of the pigs to start with a squeal, their wings beating until they were suspended like bloated pinatas in the air. Their airborne display lasted all of a few seconds before their trotters were once more planted firmly on the ground. *Damnit.*

As I sat there, debating my next move, my solitary vigil was disturbed by more cars pulling up alongside me. A mother with an overly excited toddler in the backseat swerved to avoid a group of piglets, their downy feathers just growing in. As the car rolled to a stop, she swivelled in her seat to check on her child before switching on her hazards and stumbling out onto the road.

‘Didn’t mention this on the radio,’ a smartly dressed businessman grumbled at me after I’d cranked down my window. ‘There’s no alternate route to the city for miles. How’d we get them to move?’

‘I tried the horn,’ I said with a shrug, ‘It didn’t seem to bother them much.’

‘You’re lucky,’ said the woman with the child, shaking pig shit off her shoe as she approached us, ‘if they were startled it could’ve caused a stampede. Pigs can be nasty when provoked. I doubt the flying kind are any different.’

‘You know pigs?’ I asked, looking her up and down. She was the sleek working-mother sort, dressed in woollen tights, chunky boots and a stylish winter coat. No wedding ring. A desk job seemed more like her area of expertise, not animal husbandry.

‘Dad’s a farmer,’ she said, raising an eyebrow at my pointed glance, ‘and you’d better keep your eyes to yourself if you want my advice.’

The businessman in the car beside mine chuckled and it took all my willpower not to march over there and punch him in his smug face. ‘Please, enlighten us,’ I said instead in my most magnanimous voice.

It was, I had to admit, a clever plan. ‘Pigs are escape artists,’ the woman had explained, ‘try to steer them in one direction and they’ll inevitably run the opposite way.’ We would use the cars to form a press tight enough that the pigs could not spread their wings, whilst another car drove behind and herded them through the press to the side of the road.

More cars had arrived by now, and they too were caught up on the plan. A bit of careful manoeuvring, engine revving and one almost – crash later the pigs were

rooting happily on the side of the road, and we were free to go on our way. I checked my clock and was pleased to see that, if I put my foot down, I could still make it to work by quarter past nine.

Nearing my office, I was struck once more by the distinct lack of cars on the road. I'd noticed it on my drive in, but it was even more stark now, as though the entire city had declared a national anti-automobile day. To make matters worse, the bright autumn day had turned dark, and the sky had bled a burnt orange.

I turned onto the road that led to my office only to face my second roadblock of the morning. All the vehicles that had been missing on my journey through the city seemed to have congregated here. Sleek electric cars and shabby vans, police cars and ambulances and fire trucks with their lights staining the buildings red and blue. I pulled over to the side of the road, climbed out of the car and double-locked it before wandering over to the nearest police car. A uniformed officer sat inside, his glasses perched on the end of his nose as he typed rapidly onto a tablet balanced on his protruding stomach. I knocked lightly on the window, taking a step back as he swung the door open. 'Can I help you?'

'I hope so. I need to get to my office down the road, but there's a blockade.'

The officer blinked once, and then again. His drooping eyes trailed lazily across my face before sharpening. 'You work in the Mansfield building?'

'I do,' I huffed, impatience getting the better of me, 'and I'm already late.'

The officer lowered his tablet and pushed his glasses further up his nose, as if he wanted to ensure he could clearly see the impact of his next words, 'I don't think that matters anymore, son. The building's gone. Gas leak. The whole place exploded about half an hour ago. There's nothing left but ash.'

‘Gone?’ I felt the weight of his words settle on me, bowing my back and turning my legs to jelly. I braced myself on the side of the police car, the heat of the metal a comfort against my suddenly freezing skin. ‘What about my colleagues?’

The Officer’s grim expression was enough to tell me what I needed to know. I cursed, feeling heat prickle behind my eyes. I wasn’t particularly fond of anyone I’d worked with but none of them had deserved such an ending. An ending I would have shared if not for the pigs.

The officer offered his condolences, and I wandered numbly back to my car. I couldn’t see the place my office had been but there was a bitter taste to the wind that I hadn’t noticed earlier. I was surprised to find that my face was damp, and I tilted my head up towards the sky to let my tears trickle salty trails down my neck. Between the clouds, dancing and twirling like plump ballerinas, a sounder of pigs flew steadily south.

Mycelium

By the time she reached her twelfth birthday, Ivia had given up on ever learning to walk.

Hollis had managed it in only five seasons, springing through the grove as though he'd been born with working limbs. The vines supporting his legs were thick and flushed a healthy green and the leaves were tipped with an autumnal red that matched his hair. When he'd first struggled upright and stood, panting, Ivia thought the vines would shrivel and die like they had every other time. Instead, he'd fumbled forwards. One step. Then another, until he was prancing rings around her. That was four years ago.

While Hollis had graduated to study under the grove's primary Healer, she was still sat with the little ones, curling her hands in the patterns she'd been taught and speaking ancient words that felt heavy on her tongue.

'Our talents can ebb and flow across the seasons of our lives,' the Matriarch assured her, brushing leaf litter from Ivia's tangled hair. 'Start small and I'm certain gentle Hyphae will show you the way.'

'What if she doesn't?' said Ivia, 'What if I'm not worthy?'

'Everyone is worthy in the eyes of our Mother. Each of us is connected and each of us has our part to play in the vast network of life. Trust in that, and in yourself.'

The Matriarch had a habit of speaking as though she was a font of knowledge, but Ivia had seen her on her knees in front of the great glowing fungi in the centre of the grove, begging Hyphae for advice. Still, her council was not

useless. Start small, she had said, and Ivia meant to. Once class had finished, she slipped her bone whistle from its cord around her neck and gave it three quick peeps. Then she laid back on a bed of moss, the scent of damp earth cocooning her, and waited.

The grove where the Matriarch took her lessons was not far from the village proper. As she watched the light trickle in through the treetops and dapple the floor, Ivia could hear the villagers going about their daily duties. The slow creak of the vast treetop bridges as people crossed back and forth had been her lullaby since she was a small girl. She missed the heights, and she missed the people, but most of all she missed the sense of belonging.

The earthquake startled Ivia awake. She flailed, disorientated, feeling a pressure on her chest. Had a tree collapsed on her whilst she'd lain there dozing? She made to push the tree off her when her fingers brushed thick fur. Ivia blinked the sleep from her eyes, realising that the tree was a massive jaguar, and the earthquake was his rumbling purrs.

'Brenin!' said Ivia, throwing her arms around his thick neck, 'How was your hunt?' The cat slowly blinked at her with bright amber eyes, his purrs deepening into a continuous rumble. Ivia took that to mean that his hunt had gone well, and that he wouldn't be disappearing into the depths of the forest any time soon. She knew it was necessary, but she missed him when he was gone.

Aided by a nudge from Brenin's massive head, Ivia clambered onto his back. It took only a tap to the cat's flank to get him moving, with further taps on his corresponding shoulders to change direction. Together, Ivia and Brenin padded

silently to the far side of the village, where the remains of a hollow, lightening-struck tree sat pressed against the cliffside like a squat little man.

A gaping hole bisected the centre of the tree, forming an opening just big enough for a girl and a jaguar to squeeze through. Once inside, the wooden walls became stone and a vast, echoing cavern was revealed. The sounds of trickling water and faint animalistic snuffling echoed in the large space. Brenin appeared unbothered, but Ivia felt the hairs on her arms stand upright.

‘Hello?’ she called out into the dark. Her own voice answered her back, echoing off the walls. ‘Hello, hello, hello?’ Ivia was about to leave when a raspy voice hissed from a side tunnel that had gone unnoticed.

‘Why are you here?’ The voice suggested a cold wind whistling over old bones. Ivia shivered and this time Brenin’s low growl rumbled through her.

‘I want-.’

The icy voice rang out, whip-sharp, before she could finish. ‘I did not ask what you required. I asked why you are here, child?’

Despite her clammy palms, Ivia felt oddly calm. She wove her fingers into Brenin’s fur, inhaled and turned to face the dark. ‘I know what you do down here. I am here to offer my help.’

‘Why?’

‘I hear that, despite your... oddities, you’re a good teacher. If I can start small and learn from you, my skills might improve enough for me to help myself.’

Silence smothered the cavern like the first snowfall after a balmy autumn. Ivia felt sure that she was about to be rejected. Then, there came a rasping chuckle and the owner of the voice stepped into the light.

It was like looking into the face of the Matriarch if she'd been dead in the ground for a year. Wrinkled yellow skin stretched over the old woman's skull-like face, made even more unnerving by her toothless grin. 'My sister finally sent me an apprentice then?'

'I'm here for myself.'

'I remember saying the same, when I was a girl. Come now, follow me and let's see what you can do.'

A tap was all it took for Brenin to trail the old crone down the side tunnel. The air was musty, and the sound of animals louder. The tunnel opened onto a smaller cave lined with wooden cages. The Crone pointed to one, 'I haven't treated him yet. Show me what you can do.'

Brenin padded over to the cage at Ivia's signal, his fur bristling. Inside was a tiny bat, its wings bloody and shredded. Without help, the poor thing would undoubtedly die. Ivia ran her tongue across her upper lip and, making a quick decision, swung herself off Brenin's back. 'Give me some space,' she whispered in his ear.

Ivia reached into the cage, pulled out the bat and placed it gently on her lap. It was cool to the touch, and trembling. Closing her eyes, she moved her hands in the motions she'd been taught, the old words spilling from her lips. When she opened them again, the bat's wings were whole, threaded through with a fuzzy root-like network she didn't recognise. She almost dropped the bat in surprise.

‘Mycelium,’ said the Crone to her unasked question. She seemed unsurprised at Ivia’s success, her eyes dancing with a girlish joy that looked odd on her corpse-like face. ‘It seems Hyphae has blessed you with a gift of a different kind – the gift of connection. If properly channelled, the little creatures of the world will flourish thanks to you.’

Ivia thought of the vines Hollis had called into being, and of the thick branches the Matriarch had twisted into lofty homes for their people, and felt only disappointment. ‘And my legs?’ she ventured.

To Ivia’s surprise the Crone hobbled over. She eased herself onto the hard floor, her spine crackling. ‘There may indeed come a time when, after years of practise, you will be able to reclaim the use of your legs. However, such a large channelling takes up a great deal of energy. Plenty enough for the little ones of the world, or for a single human, but not both.’

‘So, I have to make a choice?’

Images of running through the forest with Brenin, of effortlessly climbing the winding stairs that led to her treetop village, and swimming in the deep pools her people fished from flooded Ivia’s mind. Then she glanced at the Crone’s other cages, filled with helpless creatures, and finally at Brenin’s beloved, trusting face.

‘What sort of a person would I be, if I didn’t help,’ said Ivia, and reached for the next cage door.

Reflective Essay

My portfolio contains three short stories exploring the genres of science fiction, magic realism and fantasy. Within this essay, I shall discuss how I chose my narrative point of view, themes investigated and how each story adheres to their chosen genre. I shall also discuss workshopping advice that I took and decided to include. Ursula LeGuin emphasises the importance of show vs tell within a story, stating that an overload of exposition is common within the work of sci-fi and fantasy writers but that, 'Crafty writers don't allow exposition to form Lumps.'¹ I emulated this approach in my pieces. The themes in my three stories differ, however I did explore character wants vs needs throughout all. As Will Storr establishes, what a character believes they want 'is the antithesis of what he actually but unwittingly needs.'² I took inspiration for my portfolio from texts in the corresponding genres – such as Gibson's Science Fiction novel 'Neuromancer'³, fantasy author Sanderson's 'The Final Empire'⁴ and Márquez's magic realism novel 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'⁵ - with the aim of crafting three stories with a full narrative arc, realised world-building and genre-specific themes. I also worked on crafting compelling hooks which I will

¹ Ursula.K. LeGuin, *Steering the Craft* (Glasgow: Silver Press, 2024) pg.85

² William Storr, *The Science of Storytelling* (London: Harper Collins, 2019) pg.131

³ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (London: Gollancz, 1984)

⁴ Brandon Sanderson, *The Final Empire* (London: Gollancz, 2009)

⁵ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2014)

expand on within this essay. Indeed, Deborah Chester emphasises the importance of grabbing a reader's attention within the first sentence, calling it 'the most important one you'll write.'⁶

For 'Prime' I crafted a dystopian Science-Fiction world. Gibson's 'Neuromancer' is a perfect example of this genre, melding technological advancement with the gritty realities of corporate control. I gave my piece a definitive sense of place, with the upper high-tech 'Eyrie' contrasting with the lower, more familiar, 'Wasteland'. Gibson's rich descriptions inspired the appearance of the 'Eyrie', with his 'hologram sky' reflected in my 'world stained neon.'⁷ However, when it came to the 'Wasteland', I wanted to invoke more of an enclosed naturalistic environment. Brown's description in 'Red Rising' did just this, and his 'hivelike cluster of homes carved into the rock walls of the old mines' inspired my description of 'walkways and arches, houses and winding paved streets stretched out in front of him like a patchwork memory of his old town.'⁸ Both places have significance to my protagonist, one reminding him of home, the other of the strange world he's found himself in. Earnshaw emphasises that a setting, 'thwarts or facilitates their [characters] actions.'⁹

⁶ Chester, D., *The Fantasy Fiction Formula*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) pg.7

⁷ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, (London: Gollancz, 1984) pg.165

⁸ Pierce Brown, *Red Rising* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014) pg.16

⁹ Steven Earnshaw, *The Handbook of Creative Wiring* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007)

In 'Prime' I used fire as an extended metaphor, emphasising Jidun's arc to leave behind his past self; being reborn from the flames like the mythical phoenix. Mythemes, such as rebirth, are part of the deep narrative structure that 'underlies every myth' and is therefore present in many works of fiction, including speculative pieces such as science fiction.¹⁰ My ideal reader is for an adult audience as the themes and tone discuss more mature topics such as death, rebirth and the dystopian nature of a future society. To highlight the distance between Jidun's past and present, as well as the discrepancies between the place he came from and where he now finds himself, I wrote in third person limited. According to Yen Cabag, with third person limited, 'you get to develop the character more fully,' which were my aims with the piece.¹¹ It was suggested during workshopping that I should work more on show vs tell, especially when it came to Jidun's previous life. Rather than 'Despite his renowned reputation Jidun wasn't, hadn't been a good person.' I chose to replace it with, 'He slipped his hand into his pocket and ran his finger across the blade of his old service knife. It was dull, practically unusable, and still stained with the blood of the last person he'd killed.'

'When Pigs Fly' is a magic realism story based on the idiom of the same name. I opened the story with an immediate sense of the bizarre, both to capture the readers interest, and establish that this is a normal, though not regular, occurrence within the context of the story. Chester recognises that writers often '...combine more

¹⁰ Shlomith Rimmon – Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (Routledge: Oxon, 2002) pg. 11

¹¹ Yen Cabag, *T.C.K Publishing, Third Person Limited Point of View: The Advantages and Challenges* (2020) <<https://www.tckpublishing.com/third-person-limited/>> [Accessed 23 October 2025]

than one hook together to achieve a unique effect.’¹² Márquez's opening in 'One Hundred Years of Solitude', where he discusses ice as something abnormal, and huge white stones 'like prehistoric eggs,' as part of the everyday mundane, struck me as an interesting literary device.¹³ I was inspired to emulate this dichotomy by having my protagonist driving to work – an everyday activity many people undertake – only to have his way blocked by flying pigs. Not only is this image bizarre, it is also humorous, made more so by the protagonist being only mildly irritated by the delay, rather than baffled at the sight.

I chose to have a first-person narrator as it better conveys the protagonist's thoughts and feelings about the world. Storr emphasises, 'causes and effects should be *shown* rather than told; suggested rather than explained.'¹⁴ With a first-person narrator, their reactions to their world adequately show what is considered mundane or abnormal without relying on exposition dumps.

Though, on the surface, the beginning of the story appears humorous, I wanted to invoke a sense of urgency creeping up throughout the prose. I achieved this by making the narrator preoccupied with time, 'I glanced at the digital clock blinking on my dashboard. 8:27am. I was expected at work at twenty-five to.' The narrator's urgency is a metaphor for the way humanity rushes through life, whereas if

¹² Deborah Chester., *The Fantasy Fiction Formula*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) pg. 9.

¹³ Gabriel García Márquez., *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2014) pg. 1

¹⁴ William Storr., *The Science of Storytelling* (London: Harper Collins, 2019) pg. 55

we slow down and stay in the moment it may just save our lives. While workshopping, it was suggested that the report of the pigs would be more widespread if it was such a common occurrence; 'You might like to think about how if 'pigs cause traffic jams' is a likely (if not common) scenario in this world then the event itself would be reported slightly differently.' Candy emphasises that the actions of creation '...rarely take place in isolation and without some form of reflection prior to, during and after the process.'¹⁵ I did consider having a traffic report broadcasted over radio but ultimately decided against it as it took away from what the narrator was witnessing.

'Mycelium' began as the thought, 'What would it be like to use nature magic as a medical aid?' I originally planned to have Ivia master the magic that would heal her legs but believed it would be better to have her character arc **be one** of reconciliation with who she is.

Within a fantasy world, magic must have its own set of rules to allow the reader to suspend their disbelief. This also gives the characters of the world nuance and depth by not allowing them to easily achieve their goals. As Chester states, 'All fantasy stories...operate within parameters set by their authors.'¹⁶ These rules help with worldbuilding, raising questions for the author on why these limits are in place and what they mean for the characters. As my magic system is nature based, it

¹⁵ Linda Candy., *The Creative Reflective Practitioner* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020) pg. 62

¹⁶ Deborah Chester., *The Fantasy Fiction Formula*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016)

made sense that the people who use it are very in tune with natural cycles, live high in the trees and tend to the animals in their care.

In Brandon Sanderson's 'Final Empire', his magic system revolves around the consumption of metals, 'burning' them to use their powers. 'The tin sat with the other Allomatic metals within his stomach, swallowed earlier, waiting for him to draw upon them.'¹⁷ Each metal has different properties and once burned that magic can no longer be accessed, even if you are about to plummet to your death. In a similar manner I wanted Ivia's magic to be difficult for her to access, 'she was still sat with the little ones, curling her hands in the patterns she'd been taught and speaking ancient words that felt heavy on her tongue.'

Within philosophy there is the Jungian view that tropes can be reduced to 'archetypes'. Joseph Campbell, and later Christopher Booker, furthered this by saying the same is true of stories, with prominent archetypes like the mentor appearing throughout the world, who 'may appear at critical moments to offer advice.'¹⁸ I chose to use the Crone to fulfil this role, gently opening the possibility in Ivia's mind that, though she might want to master her magic to heal her legs, she could instead use it for something greater. The Crone helped further illustrate the themes I wished to portray within the piece, namely the acceptance of self.

¹⁷ Brandon Sanderson, B., *The Final Empire* (London: Gollancz, 2009) Pg. 11

¹⁸ Christopher Booker., *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London: Bloomsbury: London, 2024) Pg. 297

In conclusion, I present stories in three genres of speculative fiction. I explored the use of hooks that engage the reader and keep them invested in the story, as well as experimenting with the importance of showing not telling and avoiding exposition dumps. In the future I will ensure that my plot is tighter as, in my science-fiction and fantasy stories, the prose became stagnant instead of moving the story along. I considered advice from my peers during our workshopping sessions, amending some of my work to correlate with their suggestions.

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