

KIM TRAINOR

The Four Species of Sorrow

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT HAD declared a war on Terror. Helicopter gun ships strafed desert roads; troops circled Kandahar. People had been picked up by the secret service in New York, in Washington, in Toronto and Ottawa, and had simply disappeared. No one outside of their immediate families seemed to care; it was sufficient that they were under suspicion. There was talk of issuing identity cards with fingerprints and photographs to all citizens, and few protested. On the television news I watched a stream of images: brilliantly coloured burqas, cyan blue, that covered the women from head to toe, and only the sense of a presence, of movement behind the cloth grate that masked eyes; crates of army rations floating down on tiny parachutes, drifting ludicrously into a desert already seeded with land mines from the Soviet war; an exodus of refugees across a dust-soaked plain. But what stays with me is the burqas, that intense blue burning against the darkness of the time and a flicker of life from the hooded, glittering eyes.

All of this—the millions of starving refugees running in advance of the US storm, the ghostly parachute drops, the gun ships—felt like a surreal backdrop to my own descent, the despair that began to wrap me so tight I couldn't breathe. I know it isn't the same. How can I compare the life of a refugee, of someone daring a mined stretch of land for a crate of macaroni and cheese, with my own private darkness, a time when I began to feel that life was precarious, a soft, ruined creature in the palm of my hand. But the two are inextricably linked in my memory, so that I can no longer separate them. I watched the evening news, the sound turned off so that I could concentrate on the ghostly, lucent images that floated down from above or blossomed in a brilliant flash as a missile hit its mark. The images followed me as I travelled to my night shift at the Biomedical Library, flickering always at the edge of my vision.

Sometimes, as I stood at the end of a long row of books, I felt a brief moment of redemption, as if the pages were alive with flower mantids swelling in their paper cocoons, with trumpet-shaped freshwater cells swimming through kelp forests. And I'd hear, faintly, the *pop pop* of the tiny budding hydra. The books clasped themselves around me like a second skin as I wandered alone through the crammed stacks, past the rows of plastic-sleeved dissertations written in the 1950s and the heavy cloth-bound monographs, past sun-faded spines and gold stamped titles. *A Flora of Southern California*. *Radioecology of the Mojave*. *Early Uses of Plants*. *Poisonous Dwellers of the Desert*. Words multiplied, resilient, filled whole volumes, shelves, pooled on the tiled floor. I felt their weight in the stacks overhead, a familiar pressure as I returned books to their ready-made slots. I would stop at a shelf, open a book at random, and read a sentence or two for reassurance, running my fingers across the soft fibres and the lines of crisp black ink.

Often I found small forgotten objects between their pages. A pressed cherry blossom that still bore the faintest rain-washed scent. An ultrasound image of a twelve-week-old foetus. Once even the expired passport of a woman called Claire Cam Thi, left in the section of *Gray's Anatomy* that dissected the human heart. It was around this time that I found a fragment of a page—ripped out of an old religious text by St. Thomas Aquinas—with a heading in ornate letters, “Whether there are only four Species of Sorrow?” His answer had been torn away.

What were the four species of sorrow? How did you define and classify them? Was there a catalogue of suffering? Sapphire, kingfisher, cyanic, electric blue. The sad musical modes of the night music of West Sumatra: Pakok Limo, Malereng, a fourth mode (*whose name, unfortunately, we don't know*) is sadder still, and the devastating Lambok Malam, where a voice rises alone, high above the modulating husky flute until even the flute dies away. I thought of the exodus of refugees. This was the darkness that was seeping into me, the darkness of the fourth mode, the one without a name.



Enumerated in forensic detail, my patrons of the night shift.

Dr. Sinclair, Professor Emerita. She came every evening, a knapsack hung slack over her frail shoulders, pushing with small, deliberate steps a trolley laden with books I'd pulled from storage at her request. Monographs on the tetravalence of carbon, on chitin and moulting cicadas, on adenosine triphosphate. A disintegrating copy of *Tristes Tropiques* in the original French, its front cover torn away. Always the same words. *I have scratched*

out my meagre paragraphs for the night. She described the book she had been writing for the past twenty-two years as a comprehensive history of human origins, said that she had written a thousand pages and not yet reached *Australopithecus africanus*. *I am afraid that I will die first.* Papery dry skin stretched taut across the bones of her small brown fingers. A scent of dust and rose, too sweet, the sweetness of decay.

A woman whose name I never learned, who would grab a book close to hand and photocopy hundreds of random pages, her face bathed in the radioactive green light of the machine. One night, distraught when the photocopier jammed, she approached the front desk to shout that she was desperate for this information, why didn't I cooperate, it was the missing clue essential for her research, why had I sabotaged the electrical system. *You are a government agent paid to stop me. I am writing a book.* Waving a grimy notebook over her head. Waiting at the bus stop, I'd see her curled up asleep on a bench, or on the steps of one of the lecture halls, her wild hair tucked away in a tuque, her notebook crammed into a pocket.

The flasher on the third floor, who tattooed his lymphatic system with fine red markers across the surface of his skin.

The priest with long sharpened fingernails and a mouth slowly caving in.

Others who slipped in from the psychiatric ward next door seeking a cure for their nameless diseases.

Mira, who stared through me, saw through the skin to my bones, thin blood shunting through veins, the beating heart. Mira, who tried to steal a book. A rustling of pages, a small insect fluttering against metal, burning in the fluorescent light. She ran through the turnstile, setting off the alarms, and ran out into the wet night. *I need this book. Please listen to me. Without it I will die.* I found the book later, just outside the front doors—a volume on marine life with a muddy brown splotch on the cover; the ink ran on the cheaply printed pages, staining my fingers. She never returned.

I missed her gentle presence. Before, Mira came often to distribute handbills to the medical students who studied there—two-for-one pizza in the Village, discount coupons for the Dairy Queen. These were interspersed with her own stick-figure drawings of Kannon, Goddess of Mercy. Underneath she'd copy out various quotations in hollow, looping letters. *When a single bee sucks honey, all beings in the myriad universes suck honey; when a worm is crushed, all beings in those universes are crushed.* I'd sweep them up later along with the gum wrappers and discarded papers. The handwriting was uneven, wobbly stems of h's and b's drawn in large careful loops. Yet they held a sense of urgency in their forward sloping motion, each letter

leaning into the next, as if the letters contained an energy of their own.

Perhaps this is what drew them all to the library, some urgent sense of the generating matrix of words, words like atoms, like seeds.



Sometimes, with my fingertips, I thought I could detect the faintest pulse in the inked pages. During the long quiet nights I rescued the discarded books—multiple copies, volumes too damaged for general circulation, medical texts whose information was out of date; I couldn't bear to toss them into the blue recycling bins in the basement.

Basic Course in Pitman Shorthand. Toronto. 1948. "Our system is based on the fact that 700 words and their simple derivatives comprise 80 per cent of all the words used in current English speech and writing." The symbols looked to me like a distant relative of Arabic or the elegant tracks of a katydid, an unknown system of graceful hooks and loops. I practiced translating the sample sentences into Pitman: "Since these signs are used so often, it is very much to your advantage really to master them." "Please ship to us, as soon as you possibly can, a thousand feet of wire."

A Handbook of Broadcasting: The Fundamentals of Radio and Television. 1957. Chapter 7. Pronunciation. "*Chic* (smart) is pronounced *sheik* (Arab) not *cheek* or *chick* Foreigners in the day's news are best introduced in their native pronunciation."

Possible Life in the Universe, a lecture by O. Gunnarson. 17 October 1974. Portland, Oregon. "The universe teems with local stellar noise and cosmic background radiation, an ocean of sound that drowns out our own tiny human transmissions." She agreed with Sagan and Shklovskii that intelligent life might use radio frequencies at which the universe is quiet, perhaps the 21 cm radio frequency line of neutral hydrogen:

It is a small range, a narrow window by which we listen for signs of extraterrestrial life throughout the universe, and we can only hope that a more advanced civilization will have the technology necessary to broadcast a signal strong enough, direct, monochromatic, for us to receive, as we are not yet able to transmit. And so we wait and listen for a radio message, possibly a mathematical sequence, which has for thousands of light-years been travelling from an ancient civilization now long dead, through interstellar space.

She concluded with the myth of Oannes, the god with a fish-shaped head and the voice of a human, said to have taught the Sumerians letters, science, astronomy, how to sort the seeds of the earth, how to establish laws. Each night he dove into the sea and each morning he emerged radiant with the

sun. One day he warned the people of a cataclysmic flood, instructing them to record the knowledge he had given them on cylinder seals, to bury the seals deep in the earth, and then collect all their seeds and creatures and families together and sail to the gods. Gunnarson read sailing to the gods as code for a space journey. I read it as a metaphor for human culture, of how we attempt to carry on: collect the seeds—genes, words, ideas—and ride out the storm. Carry the seeds with you through the long dark age, hoping for the light to return.



The US troops captured Kandahar. The newspapers later carried a grainy photograph of a row of prisoners; the night vision camera used star light to capture the greenish glow of their bodies. The men stood hooded and handcuffed, chained together at the airport. From here they would be flown to Guantánamo Bay. The Americans still refused to honour the Geneva convention for prisoners of war—there had been no war. Ripple effects. Refugees gathering, trapped, on the borders. A high-level security alert generating panic in the States. Tiny television people ransacked hardware stores for bottled water, flashlights, shovels, duct tape. Soldiers gave a demonstration at a kindergarten on how to seal off windows and doors in case of an airborne biochemical attack. Children in surgical masks looked on. A doomsday plane circled Washington. I watched from a distance, the world telescoped into an electric blue pond, strange fish with their mouths gaping open in silent o's.



The hominid species—so many to choose from.

Australopithecus afarensis. Existed 3.9 to 3 million years ago. Bipedal, with an apelike face, bony ridge over the eyes, no chin. Their hands were similar to humans, but with longer curved finger and toe bones, possibly for climbing trees in order to gather fruit or to seek shelter from predators in the night. This is Lucy, also known as AL-288-1, found in the badlands of the Afar Triangle near Hadar, Ethiopia by Dr. Donald Johanson who spotted a portion of her arm bone sticking out of the ground. She died roughly four million years ago. She was three and a half feet tall, between twenty-five and thirty years old; her bones showed signs of arthritis. She was on her way to becoming human.

Kenyanthropus platyops. Australopithecus africanus. Australopithecus garhi, robustus, boisei.

Homo habilis. “Handy man,” for the tools found with his remains. Thought to have lived 2.4 to 1.5 million years ago. The bulge of Broca’s area indicates they may have been capable of rudimentary speech. We’re coming along.

Homo erectus. Homo ergaster. Homo antecessor.

Homo sapiens neanderthalensis. Flourished 230,000 to 30,000 years ago. Skeletons of thick heavy bone with powerful muscle attachments. Specimens discovered with multiple broken bones indicate they endured lives of brutal hardship. The first people known to have buried their dead.

Homo sapiens sapiens. Forehead rises sharply, eyebrow ridges very small or absent, prominent chin, gracile skeleton. In 1868 in the French village of Eyzies workmen found the skeletal remains of three adult males, one adult female, and a small child. They had been buried along with stone tools, ivory pendants, carved reindeer antler, and shells. These are the Cro Magnons, of no formal taxonomic status, known for the development of ivory carvings, clay figurines, musical instruments, the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux. Virtually identical to modern humans, later to develop the clavichord, Tupperware, the microchip, the cluster bomb.



Margaret worked at the desk next to mine. She had been in the Biomedical Library for ten years, and before that, in the tiny two-room library in St. Paul’s hospital. *Take the elevator down to the basement. Turn right for the library, left for the morgue.*

One day she arrived two hours late wearing her leopard skin coat and a pair of dark sunglasses, sitting down with a flourish at her desk. From her knapsack she pulled out a large day planner and slapped it down in front of her. *It’s a question of timing, of stellar organization. Don’t you think I’m capable of that?* Words had broken loose and found some subterranean escape passage, blood spurting out of a nicked artery. *You see this has been my problem all along, why didn’t anyone tell me? I was talking to my brother yesterday and he said I was always late when I was little, always messy, always unorganized. This is why I’m stalled. This is why I can’t go on. I was up all night thinking. And then it came to me. Of course, of course, it’s a simple matter of mapping out the day, each hour each minute. I’ve been squandering time. And then the bigger units. Weeks, months, years. I just can’t see where we’re going.*

She appeared to see me for the first time. *You're number twelve. Let me look at the schedule and see if we're compatible for coffee.* She ran over to the grey felt divider where the daily schedule had been pinned up, employee numbers neatly penned within an hourly grid. *It won't work for us this week. But maybe next Friday. I'll write you in for next time.* She opened the planner at random and scribbled in the numbers six and twelve, then turned away to discuss her new plan with our supervisor.

I left for a training session where I learned how to stitch together signatures that had separated from a spine, how to graft strips of Japanese tissue paper onto torn pages.

When I returned to my desk after lunch, Margaret was gone.



Draw a circle. Use any scrap of paper, a return slip, an overdues form, a bus transfer. Subdivide the circle into quarters. Take each quarter and dissect into three equal parts with lines radiating out from the circle's centre to its circumference. Number like a clock face each of the twelve identical triangles that span the circumference of the circle. Use a pencil to shade in a triangle every five minutes. Use coloured pens for variety. An anatomy of time.



The smell of long-term care units, of stale coffee and eggs. Margaret sat at a table in the common room, a plastic ID bracelet loosely tied around her wrist, stirring her mashed potatoes and gravy into a brown mush. She offered me her apple juice but I refused. The small television set mounted to the wall showed tanks driving through a dry mountain pass.



Plutonium, Americium, Curium, Neptunium: the transuranic elements that glow in the desert night. The four directions, the four seasons, the horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The four worlds of the Hopi.

Tokpela, Endless Space: the First World, destroyed by fire.

Tokpa, Dark Midnight: a frozen globe of ice that spun through cold and empty space.

Kuskurza: the Third World, destroyed by water.

Túwaqachi: the Fourth World, World Complete, the world in which we live. In the previous three worlds humans didn't follow the plan of creation; it is our own choice whether Túwaqachi will also be destroyed.



Once Dr. Sinclair asked me if I thought we were alone in the universe, if intelligent life had developed on other planets. I said I didn't know. Something occurred to her; she lifted one hand to her ear, listening. *Some would argue that technologically sophisticated civilizations only evolve to a certain point before they destroy themselves—that is why we never hear from them. They have turned to dust millennia ago. I prefer not to believe this. I would rather believe that we have heard nothing because we are the first of such civilizations to evolve. Our earliest radio broadcasts are now only sixty, seventy light-years away, travelling off into space, and they will still be there when the earth is gone, waiting for someone to hear.*



Nitobe Gardens in the late afternoon. The ground is damp. I take a path that curves along the edge of the still water; a stone lantern floats weightless like the husk of an ancient crab, leading me into the shade. At a bend in the path I find a bench and drape my rain jacket across the avocado-streaked slats. As I sit there, my fingers wrapped around a paper cup of sweet orange tea, a woman walks past, her face obscured by the hood of her raincoat. A small child trails behind, squatting down to peer at the blanket of emerald moss at my feet. She reaches out her tiny left hand and presses it against the swollen green mass. It leaves a slight impression.

Her mother calls—*Hana*—a faint voice further down the path.

She looks up at me, only now aware of my presence, staring as if I am some alien species indigenous to the gardens. Then she jumps up and runs after the fading ribbon of sound.



I sit at the front desk. Somewhere in the basement a machine pumps air through ventilation ducts. It grows louder as I listen, a steady roaring. A transistor radio broadcasts the latest news: a renewed bombing campaign in Afghanistan, allegations of torture at Guantánamo Bay. Across the wide foyer I watch my reflection in the glass display case, a thin figure with dark

smudges for eyes, surrounded by colour facsimiles of a medieval Anatomy. The figure mimics my movements as I tilt my head, lift a hand to my face, as I turn aside to pull a trolley of books up beside me. I sit and read the dog-eared pamphlet on radio astronomy. Its pages open to two tightly crammed columns of print offset by a photograph of a funny little creature with a large oval head on top of an amorphous body, stick arms radiating circles and wavy lines. "Yellow and Red Ochre Fresco, Tassili-n-ajjer in the Central Sahara c. 6000 B.C."

I read a few lines, but find I can't decipher the meaning; the columns appear yellow and washed out beneath the fluorescent light, a dissipated light so dim it is almost a kind of darkness that makes it difficult to see the sharp contour of things. My eyes feel clouded by the dark as if I've been staring directly into the sun, and there at the edges are the flickering green bodies, retinal afterimages that track across my field of vision and draw me further into the darkness. It is the last hour before closing and I am alone in the empty building. The weight of the books in the stacks above presses down.

I ring the closing bell. A few reference books lie scattered on the nearby tables and so I reshelve them, straightening the chairs and tossing discarded bus transfers in the garbage.

I turn out the lights on the upper floors, but no one appears. The ventilation system shuts down.

Ten minutes pass. Fifteen.

I am waiting.

Cool, damp air drifts through the main reading room. Imperceptibly a shift has occurred, a sudden drop in air pressure as a storm front moves in. It is then I feel the first words, their letters sifting, separating, falling; and I lift my face, mouth open wide, to the words coming down like a fine rain.

