

<Nature>

Carol Roh Spaulding

The chiggers and ticks had taken over as far north as Saskatchewan when people began to wise up: no more going <outside>. This is not to say that a nostalgic parent didn't manage now and then to drag his or her offspring away from their screens and into the sunshine for a game of ball or even a hike to the former <waterways>. A self-defeating prospect, of course—think: aridity, dust, sun rashes, then the wheezing. The re-entry scrub-down, alone, meant you had to take a whole day off work or school. Now, no one even thinks about Exposure. That's why it's not forbidden.

I'd be lying if I said I was going to miss Earth, at least not this version of it. I'll miss nothing except Jakob and Skye, my own kids. They worry about how I'll manage, since it's not like I'm being transported to a fabulous vacation resort on one of the Black Moons. If I'm lucky, I'll get—I applied for, anyway—Primordia. It's the “practice planet” of some former humanoid species, which I personally would take any day over one of the Cloud colonies, no matter how scorched and swampy they say it is.

Franka Burth?

Of course, my personal device clatters to the tile when I stand at attention. As if that doesn't elicit frown enough, the guard, a shapely intersexual named TriLLe, eyes my baggy flight suit acidly.

“Present.” I shrug under TriLLe’s gaze. I’ve lost weight in the Canopy.

We used to say, quaintly, *today is the first day of the rest of your life*, which is a lot of pressure to place on a single outcome. But I wouldn’t trade what’s happening now for the best life anyone could imagine. Because in that case I wouldn’t get this chance.

The victim and his family got to have their say.

This is my say.

After denial. After Big Oil. After irreversible damage when they discovered exposure of layers too close to the Earth’s core, finally, someone said let’s put the out-of-doors *indoors*. It wasn’t the structures, themselves, that were novel. We’d seen decades of more-or-less successful bio-domes. The switch came with huge private investment in realism, starting with screens that blacked out the real outdoors and then imitated the rising and setting of the sun.

Almost instantaneously, people understood. <Outside> was over.

Time collapses into a kind of heaped blanket. A Recursion, it’s called. Think: the door standing open; the one you already passed through. We know there’s more, that there are others, separate, simultaneous. A Recursion’s something you sense is happening, like collective *deja-vu*, a natural disaster of connected human consciousness. Except it’s not time, exactly, that gets us there or gets us out.

So, the folds in our proverbial blanket: I can start out talking about my husband, Thom Hudson, and we’ll end up back at Michael Michael Michael, my seventeen-year-old accuser, a pierced, pale skinhead, Dome-raised from birth and in every way Thom’s polar opposite. It happens when memory clings in some cognitive

backwater. With too much emotional residue to achieve a complete shift, they overlap. Not their physical selves, just some neurological rut.

The kids were still in grade school that autumn. Thom had worked very late into the season. At that elevation, the pass had long been closed due to the wildfires. Knowing Thom, he simply re-routed the trail and kept clearing. An elegant solution, were it not for the shock-storm. Before anyone knew what a shock-storm was, Thom got caught in one. First, he collapsed from thirst and hunger. Then his fingers and toes split open like overcooked sausages. Then he curled against the trunk of a <redwood> and got ready to die.

About my gig, the one that got me into this mess: Circa early 21st century, people would have understood it as a kind of direct, intuitive blogging. I'd been working for Corporate and making good money, but I began to notice sloppiness that left them open to and eventually resulted in a totalizing breach. I got out before the finger-pointing started, with a good enough reputation and client base to freelance. My job was to have thoughts for people with content dependence—people who had spent too much time watching people watch people do actual things.

We used language solely as therapy, no visuals, because it'd been found to sharpen and even restore overall cognitive function. In other words, the brain is not a closed circuit. There has to be input, and for that there has to be, well, an opening.

So, long before I found myself on the loading dock of a C-Class Transport, this kid, Michael had been downloading my stuff. We did not enter into a therapeutic relationship. With freelance, you don't need a diagnosis as long as the client can direct-pay. I worked via gray-net, known only as Blogger #045584, which meant that as long as I stayed economically inconsequential and didn't require <cash> I could subsist under the radar with nobody paying enough

attention to bother with me. I made sure to use angle brackets around a list of “post-diction” that would otherwise trigger surveillance protocols.

Michael and I had established a decent context flow, or baseline, for him to work with, using “forest,” “mountain,” <wilderness>, “open-sky,” and what have you—all, of course, modified for significance based on age, intelligence, and experience. Some very workable narrative, there. Mount Everest, for example, in all its snow-capped glory, had once been the ultimate destination for people who needed to create their own adversity in life, and not the giant brown stump of its current iteration.

You have to imagine how meaning worked before all the downloads, when most reading still felt like a private experience. Number of re-posts and high flow rates helped you make a name for yourself, but for a certain oddball type of kid, the idea of <original> content seemed fascinating, edenic. Like vinyl to digital sound, or a Smith-Corona to a computer pad.

So, Michael. What I know: he was one of those MQ-9 Reaper kids recruited straight out of 8th grade to sit inside an air-conditioned cubicle in an armory somewhere in the cornfields of Iowa, working a joystick, death metal blaring, Pepsi and Doritos on the console as he conducted overseas flight missions to “gather intelligence and imagery about enemies.” Until he snapped. Whether this was from working too hard or from the sudden realization that his job was to regularly eviscerate entire villages on the other side of the globe, I couldn’t say.

Michael resurfaced a year later at a Google warehouse, where he’d held down a job for the better part of a year. He had started actually logging off regularly, taking breaks, paying more attention to bodily functions. Pretty soon he was out of gamer’s diapers. There was even a material girl he said he liked, whom he met in

treatment (where else?). He said he preferred to read in Long Form (Standard) even if he couldn't write it very well because it reminded him of his grandfather, a <Luddite>, whom he credits for teaching him to think in whole sentences and to pronounce vowels the Long Form way.

One day after a little piece I did on my blog about rain showers (people used to stand in them and not burn) this Michael wrote back using the customer feedback form:

I-wnt = "2" C a rl nt sky.

My heart knocked around in my chest a bit. Always a kid who had to see for himself if it was really all that forsaken. But knowing you could exit the Domes or Auto-Trans was a far cry from actual Exposure.

How to play this? *You'd be disappointed*, I messaged. Still, a weed of doubt sprouted in my gut: who was I to shut curiosity down? My Thom would have been just like this Michael kid—insistent, inclined to see for himself, had he grown up in this.

Wy =? from Michael.

The Night Parks are actually more beautiful and convincing than the “real” night sky. Even in the Middling Domes. Trust someone old enough to know the difference.

I-kno + [h o n e y b e e s] = / usd-2 R-prduce.

So what?

I-kno /= wht-a “s u n b u r n” z.

So? I logged off. I had stuff to do. Jakob had been home on leave from Interspace, I remember. And I'd agreed to watch Skye's pet crabs while she was off on one of her atmospheric retreats.

I didn't tell Michael, but the vibrancy of a real night sky is a thing you can feel in your teeth, your spine, your lungs. World without end, the stars and stars. Two days later, Michael wrote to remind me I was late with his most recent contracted download.

You almost wanted a less predictable story. That long-foretold asteroid shower, for example. Cataclysm. Apocalypse. Earth become Ocean. That way, it could be over once and for all, instead of again and again.

Floods and drought and sinking coastlines became the norm, environmental degradation *du jour*. The melting of the <permafrost> brought about the exponential momentum that caused the Browning. The too-late. Suddenly it didn't matter what you believed; a lot of ingenious stopgaps and legislation and engineering happened very quickly. Almost as though they'd planned for it.

You wanted those who had brokered away our future to pay somehow for the mess they'd gotten us into, but turns out they were the only ones with the resources to get us out. It's not like you could eat the ashes or drink the sea, until even that became possible, with advanced recycling and filtration systems. Eventually, communities built Domes big enough for things like bike trails through municipal woods, edible gardens with clinical bee colonies, beaches with sand and surf and video sunsets. The projections covered over the apparatus—something like the old IMAX theaters—and almost made you forget you weren't <outside.>

Most convincing of all was the star-studded sky of the Night Parks. There was still environmental management, although not what you

might call <stewardship> of the Earth, which implied taking *care*, a partnership. This was mostly just maintenance of the Arteries (pipelines), transport of goods and the people who had clearance on Auto-Trans, drone deliveries, and Enforcement. There were <Domeless>; no one knew how many. But the average person mainly spent time trying to figure out how to get admission to a bigger and better Dome.

Not a surprise: when I didn't respond for a week, Michael hacked into my personal account. *I knw yused 2 liv <outside>. Ulasted longr thn mst. Cn Ushow me?*

No.

Wht's <nature>?

Takes too much post-diction to explain. They'll just redact it.

Nt wrds. SHO ME.

Why do you want out?

Bc I thk I rmnbr it, Fr a n k a.

Michael knew me only as #044584.

I put my hands in my lap, straightened my back, and shut my eyes, heart pounding. *Thom? Is that you?*

The door standing open; the one you've already walked through.

Time collapses into a kind of heaped blanket. Just like everyone else, I had been made to watch the two of us, our limbs coiled, our mouths forming pornographic oh's of someone's version of pleasure on the unnervingly convincing footage during my trial

proceedings. Michael's homemade tattoos of dreary symbols of hate and demise. His girlish limbs and supple fingers.

It's not like it absolutely didn't happen. It might have happened. In some version of my Michael encounters perhaps the two of us somehow ended up that way, one another's temporary solution to skin hunger.

But that wasn't what anyone was witness to. What you're seeing when watching Enhancement is something between entertainment and evidence. The sheer volume of surveillance footage in shops and plazas and public transport eventually became pointless and unmanageable. Instead, whole Hollywood production studios rose up to create these visual depictions of your alleged crime; the more heinous of them even got serialized. That's why there're so many convictions. Plus, the Enhancements are paid for by taxes; you have to pay serious money to produce testimony in which nothing happened.

I remembered how distasteful I'd found the accusation, apart from the injustice of it. If I was going to sneak out and get naked with an underage boy, I like to think I could do a little better than Michael. They provide the footage for your own personal viewing pleasure on the screen that's used for entertainment on commercial flights. There are five of us exiles on this space-dock, the others—laser violence, drug trafficking, human-trafficking, and suicide bomber—rubber-neck in the direction of my screen.

Some over-achieving government official added this bonus to the footage: an updated Enhancement on Michael, bare to the waist, his chest bedecked in menacing, unreadable symbols, his jeans slung low on the white sockets of his hips, hurling himself at an invisible barrier. His eyes are wild, bandaged orbs. Again, then again, and yet again, his cheek squishes against the Plexi-glass like the underbelly of a squid. Even my hardened fellow exiles recoil.

Did you exhaust all your appeals, Burth? TriLLe's light musk lingers in a cloud at my temples. S/he messages this question to my device, which transposes the words into sound. S/he'd had hir voicebox neutralized during one of the reactionary <Spasms> as they came to be called, when they punished those caught undergoing the process of gender transition. Not easily reversible, even once rights were restored.

Everyone gapes at me, so I give them the stink eye. "That's family money you're watching," I tell them. "Primo Enhancement footage. He's got retinal implants, now, for God's sake. He's going to be okay."

TriLLe smirks. *Then why do they want you gone?* S/he'd spread sparkly gold iridescent eye shadow thick under each brow.

I look hir straight in the eye. "If you mattered, you'd already know the answer."

The drug trafficker, her hair in long rainbow colored panels, sucks air in through her teeth. "You must miss the Canopy or something cuz that is exactly where that back-talk is gonna get you."

TriLLe lowers hir scanner to the next Offender, pauses, and aims the device at the right hip pocket of my flight suit. *Out with it.*

I reach in and pull out my souvenir-cum-bargaining chip.

S/he takes it from me, eyes shining, fingering the wristwatch with delicate appreciation. *Analog.* S/he slips the wristwatch into her inspection bag. *What does a Recursionist need with a timepiece?*

"I know where you can get top dollar for that," I say, but TriLLe ignores me. Frustrated, I turn to Rainbow Girl. "They ticked," I

say. "You had to wind them to keep them telling time and put your ear very close to the clock-face—that's what it was called—to hear it. Like a heartbeat."

Even TriLLe stops and looks at me.

I make a tiny motion with my thumb and index finger. "See the little knob? You had to keep them wound," I say.

"You're looking for a concept," I'd told Michael. "There's no such place as the <outside> you're imagining." He would see for himself that controlled environments could out-<nature> <nature>. The whole production a fake of the real that was so real it had to be fake. I'd thought that would be the end of it, and he'd go running back for the Domes. But it only made him hungrier for the *real* real, whatever that is. Was.

Zinnias grew at the front step of a house I no longer remember. I'd pinch the wings of the thumbnail sized moths that frequented that flowerbed. The cruelty of a child's detached curiosity. I'm ashamed to confess that the actual moths, didn't interest me; it was the gold powder on their wings, which I had fancied enchanted fairy dust that could make me fly, or at least get me airborne. I'd figure out the rest from there. I loved the shimmer of it on my fingertips. I had no idea that removing the dust would disturb the creature's aerodynamics, grounding them.

Perhaps that house with zinnias was the last place I had lived with Thom. Recursion is tidal; leaving spume and scuttling creatures in its wake. You're always looking over your own shoulder. You're always part of your own re-do. No need to say goodbye. And I'm thinking mainly: two more seasons and Thom will be home, when, in fact, he was already gone. And also: that's a lot of wobbly moths.

Generally, you remain inside the Tubes and Auto-trans. A mile-long sealed entry point along the side of the Dome contains a walk-through exit inside yet another sealed chamber, along with a few caution signs and instructions for re-entry if you've undergone Exposure. Michael and I took the walk-through exit and found a wooden corral fence way out in the Hollows—either a vestige from a ranching operation from back in the day, or a vestige from a film set of a ranching operation from back in the day. Real dusk was just ending, leaving the sky a used-up shroud of ochre. The air tasted burnt and faintly chemical from a recent cloud seeding, but the stars shining their immutable best did not disappoint.

I spread my palm in the general direction of the <Sierra-Nevadas>. “Think of a night sky studded with stars. Like in the dome. Except not footage of stars—actual stars.”

Michael threw his head back, blinking. When his eyes began to water, I thought it meant he was moved.

I thought it was awe.

“My dad used to take us up there,” I swallowed, “several thousands of feet, backpacking, for weeks at a time. We’d lie back, dizzy with stars, their light bathing us, breathing on us.”

He drank it in, like his very first fix, the pale moons of his shoulders heaving. That’s what should have clued me in.

“If you could see into the source of the starlight,” I continued, inspired, “you’d be seeing back through time into the future.”

You’re the gaze, and you’re the star. The light traversing the conduit between them is simultaneously backing into itself and moving forward, becoming itself at the same time that it’s dying off. Loves you, and very much wants to let you go. The door

standing open, the one you already walked through.

Imagine lacking the retinal capacity to see *into* a thing—not blindness, *per se*, or rather depth blindness. Who knew that true apprehension of the chthonic heavens could cause the cones lining the back of your eye to collapse from too much stimulation, from too much hunger to see? Who knew the moon could forsake you, that <nature> could render you blind?

Zinnias grew at the front step of a house I no longer remember. Grief practice, I see now. In my earliest dreams as a child, wrenching sadness and despair with neither cause nor resolution would wash over me. I was not an unhappy child. I learned to have the grief in doses I could measure during 24 hour cycles that I could more or less control. Other people's grief. So it helped to stand there and focus on something. On, I guess, moths.

Thom and I had dreamed of erecting a cabin set way back on one of the old logging roads, a place with its own aquifer. A place where tree seedlings floated down shafts of quiet sunlight, alighting in your hair, on your cheek. We'd have solar. Battery back-up. And geo-thermal. The forests had become tinder in the summer and fall, but the dead of Winter could blow in overnight.

He wasn't gone when they found him; it was just too late. We brought him home. We stitched up his fingers and toes. We propped him up and took him out and drove him places. We followed his gaze to try to see what he was now seeing.

TriLLe looks up when Jakob and Skye enter the bay. *Fifteen minutes*, s/he instructs.

My heart is crazy with love for them, but regret, at the moment, is the stronger emotion. I could have chosen differently. I could have used my head.

My kids' faces hover like sympathetic moons. "Stop looking so troubled," I tell them.

Each takes my hand and squeezes.

"Remember when I used to take you to the grounds around Cloud-Tech or Mandate and spread a blanket under the trees on one of those perfect, chemically-treated lawns? The Suits would walk past and look at us funny, but I couldn't believe everyone wasn't out there just to spend time in a green space with the sound of running water."

"The ponds had that inky murky indigo water," says Skye.
"Chemically treated."

"I remember open-sky," Jakob muses. "You could watch the geese disappear into it."

"It was called migrating," she tells him in her big sister voice of very long ago. "In the time of climates."

"Listen to me," I say. "With every chance you're given, take care of one another."

Somewhere, a great churning kicks in under the flight deck, rumbling in the bowels of the ship. Internal combustion, our eternal savior and downfall.

"If my great-great grandmother could board a ship for this country when she was only a girl, knowing she would never see home again, I can do this. I'll be fine. We'll meet at the Space Station for Christmas or something."

That's when TriLLE steps in on us. *Time, Birth.*

“You know, TriLLe, when I tilt my head at you in just the right way, and squint my eyes a bit, I can make out a shred of sympathy in your expression.”

My kids hold me tight. “See you some time,” Jake, his beard moist, says into my neck. He’s not going to weep for an audience.

Skye can’t meet my gaze until I hold her chin. She blinks, her tears brimming.

“It could be literally moments,” I tell her. “You know that.”

“Why does it seem so final, then?”

“Because it is final. Every time.”

She presses a <buffalo nickel> into my palm. “A souvenir for the journey,” she says. She backs away slowly, her face a pinched oval. “We love you, Mom.” Then she touches her index finger to her opposite palm and mouths, *look at the year*. The door slides shut with my children on the other side.

“Last child in the woods is a Dirty Dinky!” Thom would say, joking, mournful, looking out at the actual skyline when the equipment workers began executing the <Shut Down>. People made bad jokes about Deconstruction theory, but there you had it. The sun had reached the most dangerous level of ozone factor that precipitated the migrations and the first serious investment of resources to the Space Station.

Anyone would have thought that outer space would be the destination of the privileged, leaving behind our scorched earth. Instead, the Cloud colonies are the dumping grounds for the criminal element. Meanwhile, the wealthy build their own domes,

or join a Disney dome, and continue with the lifestyle they would have lived anyway. They take excursions to space resorts. Their kids go space-tripping to new, hip destinations.

The only reason I stand a chance to get to Primordia or some other planet, rather than the Cloud colonies, is because they figure the risk is punishment enough. They let you “conduct research” knowing you’re running on only the chance of coming back. No one is even sure how old you’d be if that happened.

Yes, we knew about the oceans’ rise. The polar bears in Cuba. The iced-over moon. Yes, we saw it coming. What the grand narratives had not prepared us for was the mundane. It wasn’t saving the earth, but it wasn’t leaving it behind, either, both of which held more poetry as options. That’s the problem with grand narratives. All the doomsday stories that preceded the state we find ourselves in failed to prepare us, not because it wasn’t in fact doomsday but because people needed practical solutions for the piece of the <elephant> they could see.

You almost wanted a bigger story. Cataclysm. Apocalypse. Or the earth become ocean. Crisis we who survive can get used to. Enduring, by contrast, is just an everyday experience. It’s not just that everything is so much messier than oblivion. It’s that nothing is complete. No one’s vision runs things. Just temporary barons of one ilk or another, whose law masquerades as vision in the minds of enough desperate people to make a go of it, for now.

Thusly, we lurch forward.

At his Victim Restitution Session, Michael’s mother spat at me. His sister wept. Stupidly, I had tried to send some audio for Michael’s contracted input, figuring without it he’d be in a bad way. I had imagined his fingertips drinking the keyboard, stroking the screen during the wait of seven long months before they would know if

the retinal implants were successful. How hungry he'd be for content. If I threw in a song for sentimental reasons, that was my husband I was trying to get through to. *Give me all your lovin'. All your hugs and kisses, too.*

My state-appointed attorney hung his defeated head. "ZZ Top? Are you for real?"

Yes, the attempt to send Michael audio content contributed to the evidence against me. His mother sought, and received, a no-contact order stating that I had willfully blinded the poor child through Exposure, and then demonstrated that I couldn't stay away.

Inspired by the Enhancement footage, the victim sported big fat bandages over his eye sockets at the Session. He rocked his head from side to side as if in a vain search for a way out of the dark. It's not like I felt anything but horrible about what I had allowed to happen to a child. That, I grieve. But two things: first, when I saw him, some things seemed familiar—a searching sweep of his head, the puffy fists of gauze now covering his eyes, the chest caved in suffering, heaving. Second, we all understood that ultimately this particular exchange was transactional; it would produce a bigger settlement for Michael and his family.

But it did something for me, as well. That's when I realized why Thom must've picked Michael. His theatrics reminded me of Thom's end.

"You ever seen one of these?" I whisper, showing off my nickel to the wide-eyed failed suicide bomber. She looks at me like I'm crazy. I try not to notice her mottled skin, the burn seams. She has no eyebrows or eyelashes.

"It's a five-cent piece. Beautiful, right? On the front, here, is an <indigenous> man, an American Indian. On the back is a

<buffalo>—what you may know as bison. They used to roam the <prairies> of the American West. It was only in circulation a few years before they retired it.”

“Why?” she indulges me, probably taking pity on me due to my age and fate.

“The date stamp,” I say. “Usage kept rubbing it out.”

“What’s that one say?” she asks.

“Right now, the date says 1931,” I tell her. “Next time I look, I bet it’s gone.”

Yes, we knew about the oceans’ rise. The polar bears in Cuba. The iced over moon. Controlled environments did <nature> way better than <nature> did. No one thought it strange anymore, least of all the children, when people stopped going <outside>.

That autumn, Thom worked very late into the season. By the time they found him, he’d lost consciousness. But his subsequent recovery seemed to be complete. Memory intact. No apparent PTSD. That was why his later attempt to sever his own head from his body—he succeeded in death but not in deed—could be seen as an act of cruelty to those he loved. But perhaps it wasn’t cruelty. Perhaps it was a sign. Michael had inadvertently helped me to believe it was possible to communicate with Thom. But for that I’ll have to wait for the heaped blanket, the bend in the road.

Before s/he leads us away, TrILLE puts a hand out for my nickel.
Out with it.

“We’ve been through this, right? Trade you for my watch back,” I place the nickel with its profile of the American Indian face up in her palm.

“Last year of circulation,” I say. “1931.”

She balances the coin atop her thumbnail, index finger behind it like a trigger. *If you can't make out the date, you're free to go. If there's 1931 or any year at all, you're mine.*

“As if it were up to you,” I say.

Call it.

Think of the lifetimes hanging in the flipping of a coin: Fluttering. Winged. And in TrILLe’s face this time, refracted again, and yet again: iridescence, compassion, my face, your face, awe.

“Last child in the woods is a Dirty Dinky!” Thom would shout, Jake and Skye bounding after him through the Sequoias. Abandonment happens in stages. A timepiece. A seedling. A doorway. A firmament. A coin. Words that, somehow, you were still allowed to think, and write, and say. A re-run might become a re-do.

There’s supposed to be a way out, but you have to know you’re in it. No self-pity, okay? And for God’s sake don’t mourn. What really happened—is happening—is always nostalgia’s foil. The trick is to just be kinder on the reboot. To imagine better. Different. More.