

“Again I see before me the usual street. The canopy of civilization is burnt out. The sky is dark as polished whalebone. But there is a kindling in the sky whether of lamplight or of dawn. There is a stir of some sort—sparrows on plane trees somewhere chirping. There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn. What is dawn in the city to an elderly man standing in the street looking up rather dizzily at the sky? Dawn is some sort of whitening of the sky; some sort of renewal. Another day; another Friday; another twentieth of March, January, or September. Another general awakening. The stars draw back and are extinguished. The bars deepen themselves between the waves. The film of mist thickens on the fields. A redness gathers on the roses, even on the pale rose that hangs by the bedroom window. A bird chirps. Cottagers light their early candles. Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again.



The School
for Living Futures

WHAT MAY COME & HOW SPECULATIVE FICTION

Fall 2023

Mary Margaret Alvarado

And in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!"—Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

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“Then, perhaps in the late 1980s or the early 1990s, I saw for the first in my mind's eye Henry Townsend on his deathbed. And, again, I don't know what happened to me on that day I saw him dying. Maybe I was cleaning my apartment. Perhaps I was walking down a supermarket aisle. Maybe I heard about some event, tragic or otherwise, in some foreign land whose name I have difficulty spelling. It is enough that I saw Henry and from there I began to give life to him and all the other people in the book. I have said with as much sincerity as I can muster that if I were thrown into a dungeon with a sentence of one hundred years, with my only company being an illiterate guard who came twice a day with meals but who never spoke, I would still write—on coarse toilet paper in the dark if I could spare it. Or scratch the words onto the dirt-encrusted walls with my fingernails. I would have no choice...We are doomed to it, even when we know we will be our only readers. We are doomed but perhaps we also tell these 'lies,' these tiny fictions, with some hope that at the end of it all, we will have one piece of the larger truth. And we are not noble, just human. We get up to our day, however wonderful, however horrible, as they have been doing since before there were white blank pages, before the blank computer screen, when there were only grunts and hand gestures, and we tell stories. Some of us talk to God, and some of us talk to the mountains and the wind. We cannot help ourselves. People come into our heads and they begin to live, or die. We begin: 'Once upon a time, there was a woman, a dying woman, a childless woman, who believed in a man far more than he believed in himself.'”—Edward P. Jones, “We Tell Stories”

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“Cloud 9,” Lauren Haldeman and Jesse Nathan, *Jubilat*

“The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the psychological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination; yet, in assuming it as the basis of a work of fancy, I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors....It is a subject also of additional interest to the author, that this story was begun in the majestic region where the scene is principally laid, and in society which cannot cease to be regretted. I passed the summer of 1816 in the environs of Geneva. The season was cold and rainy, and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands. These tales excited in us a playful desire for imitation.”—Mary Shelley, “Preface,” *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

“Predicting the future is a mug’s game, anyway. If the future can be predicted, then it is inevitable. If it’s inevitable, then what we do doesn’t matter. If what we do doesn’t matter, why bother getting out of bed in the morning? Science fiction does something better than predict the future: it *influences* it. The science fiction stories that we remember...are ones that resonate with the public imagination....The fact that a story captures the public imagination doesn’t mean that it will come true in the future, but it tells you something about the *present*.”—Cory Doctorow, “I’ve Created a Monster! (And So Can You)”

“Oh, Catherine, wait till you see this. Shining lawn, shining rabbits, shining world. The rabbits are out on the lawn. They’ve been waiting for him, all this time, they’ve been waiting. Here’s his rabbit, his very own rabbit. Who needs a bike? He sits on his rabbit, legs pressed against the warm, silky, shining flanks, one hand holding on to the rabbit’s fur, the knotted string around its neck. He has something in his other hand, and when he looks, he sees it’s a spear. All around him, the others are sitting on their rabbits, waiting patiently, quietly. They’ve been waiting for a long time, but the waiting is almost over.”—Kelly Link, “Stone Animals”

“The world crawled with wickedness, but it was also full of wonders. Stars in the sky warred and swallowed one another. Comets foretold catastrophes. A child was born with a tail; a woman grew scales and fins. In India, fakirs stepped barefooted on red-hot coals without being burned. Others let themselves be buried alive, and then rose from their graves.” —Isaac Bashevis Singer, “A Crown of Feathers”



WELCOME TO CLASS, DEAR WRITER.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Perhaps you sense an *end*. Perhaps certain possible resolutions to that end (Elon Musk live streaming in your veins e.g.) are unsatisfactory to you, a person of care and vision who delights in the real (actual streams, the look of a field of thistles at dusk, coffee, her smell). In this fiction workshop, students will bring together the grave and happy labor of dreaming another world, with the labor of learning a craft.

We are done with the either/ors (we're doomed/everyone keep shopping). We are here for the and/ands, the visions, the sentences so exquisite they kill us, happily. Having dispensed with optimism, we will commit to the discipline of hope.

Good writers are good (and various) readers first. Students will have weekly readings and prompts. Class will be part seminar, part workshop, with occasional correspondence by mail, and a few drawing prompts. We will write from hopeful experiments, from our watersheds, from ways so old their new. We will write fiction of ideas, which is not fiction from a thesis. We will follow our most vivid, feral visions, and this may be a consolation, and then we will do the craftwork of making those live.

WE ARE IN THE BUSINESS OF:

Craft, and writing as craft;
Becoming readers, which is counter-cultural work, and becoming *better* and more various readers;
Community;
Intergenerational solidarity;
Visions and consolations and other ways;
Thinking about our means (technologies, etc.);
Messing with the way we live, including the time given to us;
Cultivating interior quiet;
Strengthening the spirit;
“Decolonising the mind,” h/t Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o;
Being rangy (from the old to the new, the canonical to the 'zine);
And what else?

WE ARE NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF:

“A.I.,”
Despair (though, if you are despairing, please reach out to me stat, human to human);
Clichés of thought;
Half-assing it;
The merely or reductively anthropocentric;
And what else?

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR THE NEXT SIX WEEKS?

TO CLASS, PLEASE BRING:

Your notebook, pen, the week's mail and your annotated readings.

CONTACT & MEETINGS:

I'm Mia. (I publish under my given name, go by my nickname). In addition to our weekly meeting, I may be reached here: marymargaretalvarado@gmail.com, 719.313.7828, and here: 521 N. Institute Street, C/S CO 80903. You've received an invitation for the standing Sunday Zoom from me (which happens at 5, 4, 3 or 2pm for you). That meeting's ID is: 862 9051 3452.

READINGS:

1) October 8th: What has been lost

“The School,” Donald Barthelme
“A Tale of So Much Love,” (“Uma história de tanto amor”),
and
“One Hundred Years of Forgiveness” (“Ce manos de perdão”), Clarice
Lispector, translated by Katrina Dodson
“Manus,” Anjali Sachdeva
“The Way We Live Now,” Susan Sontag

2) October 15th: What do we live in

“Jon,” George Saunders
“Machine Stops,” E.M. Forster
“The Monophobic Response,” Octavia Butler

3) October 22nd: Where are the animals & where are the plants

Open Throat, Henry Hoke
“The Raspberry Worm,” Z. Topelius
“Roots,” from *The Overstory*, Richard Powers

4) October 29th: Make a magic/what’s your door

First chapters & prologues from:
The Children of Men, P.D. James
Alexandria, Paul Kingsnorth
The Plot Against America, Philip Roth
Kindred, Octavia Butler

5) November 5th: Rewild

“The Cavemen in the Hedges,” Stacy Richter
“A Temporary Matter,” Jhumpa Lahiri
“Robert Greenman and the Mermaid,” Anjali Sachdeva
“A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,” Gabriel García Márquez, translated
by Gregory Rabassa

6) November 12th: What may come & how

Your work
“The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Ursula K. Le Guin
“Hero Exercise,” Blake Snyder
Solarpunk Magazine Issue #10