



***DARING THE
CITY TO FALL
INTO IT***

***TWO POEMS AND A SHORT STORY ABOUT UTOPIA
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For Jo

Speculative fiction

In memoriam, Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018)

I want there to be a space commune
named Le Guin. It will be on Earth.
We will tell each other stories at night.
We will believe what we say.

The white rhinos will come back
and rampage through London
putting their horns through car windows
and bellowing songs of triumph.
We will call them dragons, get out of their way,
and leave offerings to them at traffic lights.

I want to walk away
and have something to walk towards:
to make the stony spaces ours,
to learn to grow food
in the most unlikely places.
I want the soil back.

Words will be light and springy.
They will be like reeds
and we will blow through them.
Everything will be a library.

I want the bleached coral to evolve
into something new, to rise
from the sea and tell us:
we must imagine better.

Daring The City To Fall Into It

The first time the power went out for more than a day, Briar knocked through their garden fence.

The first night, it rained hard. Briar walked home in the darkest dark they had ever seen, their solar-powered torch flickering and fading as they went. The edges of windows held the soft yellow light of candles, and the odd well-charged solar lamp glared suddenly through gaps in curtains, sparkling across the rain on their glasses. Sometimes quiet voices drifted out of windows cracked open to let in the mild spring air.

The next day the sky cleared. Those who could went to work in the brightness; lots of places had power-cut workarounds, though it always felt different with the power down. Those with solar panels were careful to conserve their energy, and it was a slower pace wherever you were, now that cuts of a few hours were regular enough occurrences not to be that alarming.

There had been some unrest – protests which included a confusing combination of people calling for emergency investment in renewable

energy, mixed with people who were demanding power by any means necessary and fuck the Earth. Sometimes there was rioting, windows smashed in the dark. But it was amazing how fast you got used to it; you just sort of got on with surviving.

This was a long one though.

The bike workshop where Briar worked was mostly fine without power; bikes are essentially mechanical, and they had rigged up a cycle generator for the things that really needed electricity; they gave a discount to customers who pedalled as they waited for their repairs.

But London hadn't been without power for this long before. It suddenly started to feel like something was really cracking: the reality of how much everything was changing seeping through, grease through a paper bag getting more and more fragile.

That night the sky cleared, and as if in answer, split open: the Milky Way soaked its way across the horizon, rose until it was right above like a glowing mouth, daring the city to fall into it. Briar wandered into the garden, stood breathing it in until their neck cramped. Jaime found them lying in the cool grass with tears running down their sides of their face into the earth.

“Sweet, what’s going on?” Jaime sat down beside them, taking their hand.

“Fuck, Jaime, I never knew it looked like that behind all the lights.”

“What love?”

“Babe, look up.”

Jaime leant back, laying her head on Briar’s stomach, and opened her eyes wide. The universe stared back. “Jesus Christ,” Jaime breathed, and lapsed Catholic though she was, it wasn’t even taking the name in vain.

After a while, Briar sat up. Jaime shifted her head so it was in their lap, but Briar said, “they have to see it.”

“Who?”

“Everyone. Everyone! Fuck Jaime, everything’s falling apart, but look, look! It’s cracking open into *this!*”

Jaime sat up, took Briar’s face in her hands in the starlight. Briar’s wet eyes were alive with silver sparks.

“You are the most beautiful, Briar,” Jaime said. “Let’s go.”

They climbed the fence instead of going around the front and knocked on their neighbours’ kitchen window. Grace jumped, looking a little scared. Then she recognised the two of them, and opened the window.

“Hey kids, what’s up?” she said, leaning out. The strands of silver in her kinky hair glittered in the light of the candle on the window.

Briar was shifting from foot to foot. “You have to come out here.”

“Huh?”

“Seriously, come out here and look up.”

Grace unlocked the kitchen door and shouldered it open – it stuck like hell, and the landlord didn’t bother to fix anything anymore. She tipped her head back and let out the softest “oh”.

“I’ve never seen it in the city before,” she breathed. “It’s different when it’s over your home, somehow.”

They waited some time to let Grace drink her fill of sky, then Jaime asked, “Is Hamish in?”

“Yeah,” Grace said. “He should see this.” She disappeared back into the house.

“I’m going over to the next one,” Briar declared.

“Babe, we don’t know them,” Jaime said.

“We should! We’ve got to!”

“OK, well, I think we should try the front door.”

Grace reappeared with Hamish, her stocky, bearded husband.

“Hey folks. What a night, eh?” he said, with his easy Canadian laugh. He span slowly as he looked up, arms out.

“We’re going next door to see if they want to come out,” Briar said, their voice a little strained, the stars pouring energy into them.

It turned out that the neighbours on the other side of Grace and Hamish were a bunch of students, four of them squeezed into their two bedroom house. Briar barely had to suggest that they scale the fence before they were dropping to the other side like foxes. Mariana had long dark hair that she wore in the thickest plait Jaime had ever seen; she enviously watched the starlight slide down its smooth zigzag. Marco was wearing a huge pink puffer jacket and looked pretty stoned. Laura looked sceptical behind chunky hexagonal glasses, chewing her lip as everyone introduced themselves. Greta was the most talkative, giving everyone huge, beguiling smiles.

Briar’s jumpy energy was infectious, but it mellowed as it spread. The night felt luminous now, reflecting off their gesticulating hands and the flashes of their teeth. Sure enough, Marco pulled a spliff from somewhere in his massive coat, and soon they were lying on the ground scattered across the garden, faces to the sky.

They talked about the power cuts, speculating about whether this one was caused by carbon vigilantes (“fighting emissions by any means

necessary”) or just the crumbling infrastructure where the government hadn’t invested in renewables in time.

They talked about the food shortages which were taking hold now – not so bad that people were really hungry, but enough that people were starting to be afraid that they might be. Greta described with gusto the exploits of a friend who broke into fancy restaurants when the power was down to redistribute their food to migrants, who were still finding their way in by ever more ingenious methods, pursued by wild weather and war. They were welcomed by practical solidarity networks as much as vilified and assaulted by racists.

That was when Grace started describing her vegetable patch. It was just across the grass, but it was too dark to really see what was growing – there were just some triangular outlines against the starlit sky that beans were starting to clamber up, their heart shaped leaves blurring the outlines lower down. It turned out that Grace really knew how to grow things. Neither Briar and Jaime nor the students had looked much over the five-foot fences: they hadn’t seen the squashes spreading along the ground, or smelt the tomatoes reddening on sharp-scented vines, or felt the soft fur of the sage leaves that grew higgeldy-piggeldy along the edges and into the paths. Grace had been gardening this patch of earth for twenty years because it made her feel like part of the world. Hamish chuckled, loving his wife’s green fingers with a soft, well-worn affection. Mariana, who had been the quietest, started talking shyly about the things her mother grew when she was a kid, before she died.

It was Laura who said that she wished she knew how to grow vegetables.

“Not just because of the food shortages,” she added, hurriedly, worriedly. “But also because of that.”

Grace didn't have to think for that long before she offered to teach any of them who wanted to learn. And it wasn't that far a leap to decide to garden together. And then, stoned on the sky and Marco's spliff and the certainty that the world was splitting open, it just seemed to make sense to knock down the fences between the three gardens.

Briar felt calm and certain and wild. They grabbed the top of the fence and hauled themselves over, and the next time Jaime saw their face it was through a gap made by the axe they used to chop wood for bonfires in their makeshift firepit.

Briar grinned. "Fuck, that felt good."

They handed the axe to Jaime and stood back, and Jaime swung it - the wood wasn't that thick, and it splintered satisfyingly. They passed the axe around, all eight of them, laughing and exclaiming and swearing. They pulled down half-splintered planks until there was a hole that Briar could step right through - they stepped into Jaime's arms and swung around together until they collapsed on the grass, breathless and laughing.

That night they made ragged, person-shaped holes in the fences. It wasn't long before the wood was bonfire, and the gardens - now one garden - rang with spades.



Meanwhile, the government crumbled slowly while it pretended it wasn't happening. Meanwhile, people organised their lives anyway.

Briar taught everyone to make bike generators. A month later, a collective came round offering lessons in hooking up solar panels. Briar

was wild with excitement, couldn't believe that they hadn't known about them – but it turned out they had only formed recently, on the same night that they had knocked down their garden fences under the inciting light of the Milky Way. Briar joined them.

Jaime was out on the picket lines at the university where she taught, a month into the biggest strike her union had ever seen. She came in with Laura, who was a student at the same university, talking with serious energy about their demands (from emergency action on climate change to pay which reflected food prices).

“Babe guess what!” she yelled, dumping coat and bag on the floor as Laura hung hers tidily on the bannister. Greta's sweet smile greeted them from the kitchen door, shortly followed by Briar, laughing in a dark green apron.

Laura told them excitedly about the students who had managed to open up the library by occupying the foyer and jamming the turnstiles, and anyway the security guards had joined the strike.

“No way, that's awesome!” Greta laughed. “You know my pals who were, er, forcibly redistributing food from fancy restaurants? They've squatted this huge mansion in Belgravia with a swimming pool and tennis court and they have like thirty migrants and homeless people living there with them. They've been doing it on and off for years, but they reckon they'll be able to stay there for way longer now because the cops haven't been paid in a while, and they seem a bit overwhelmed with all the protests and shoplifting and squatting going on.”

Jaime sometimes wondered if those old dreams of socialist revolution that she had shared in her early twenties might come to fruition at last, but it didn't make much sense any more. Jaime's old comrades were trying to build a food distribution network, which they seemed to be good at.

Things got bad sometimes. The remaining cops were brutal. There were riots which were just aimless destruction; Jaime and Briar talked about these with both exasperation and sympathy until Grace came home with a split lip and black eye from a bunch of racists who had decided that it was her fault that food was so expensive. She had yelled something about the Tories looking pretty well fed, and they had punched her before she managed to run.

“Shit Grace,” Briar said, as they mashed up comfrey from the garden and handed wads of it to her to put on her face. “I’m so sorry. What the fuck are we going to do about all this?”

Grace shrugged, and didn’t talk for a much longer time than was usual for her. Eventually, Briar balled their fists and told her that they would punch any racists who dared come onto this street. Grace smiled wanly.



The storm hit Britain later that year. It formed over the Atlantic, and the prediction was that it would spend its force on Ireland and the west coast before it reached London, but it was hard to accurately predict the weather these days. It wasn’t a hurricane by the time it got to them, but it was still the worst storm anyone could remember.

Briar, Jaime and their neighbours rushed to harvest as much as they could before the wind stripped everything, carefully storing unripe tomatoes and pulling up full heads of lettuce instead of just picking leaves. They all boarded up their windows with leftover pieces of fence, and rigged up battery-powered radios so they could check on each other.

Briar felt freaked out being too high up, so Briar and Jaime slept in their living room, curled up in a nest of blankets as the winds rattled the fence-pieces and scoured their carefully-tended garden. They murmured thanks for Grace's expertise, which had already brought in a lot of food, now stored in their cellar.

“Shit, the cellar!” Jaime suddenly sat up, her curly, blond mop of hair in lopsided disarray. “Will it flood? I have no idea what happens in a storm like this. All the food is down there! We have to get it!”

“Oh shit. I can't believe we didn't think of that!” Briar struggled out of the blankets and put their glasses on.

The cellar was an earthy hole in the ground that their landlord (who seemed to have disappeared) had never finished. The two of them hauled trays and boxes and bags into the living room, and slept surrounded by a ring of veg. They radioed Grace and Hamish, joking that they'd had to harvest everything all over again, feeling better for hearing Hamish's deep laugh.

The storm blew itself out in a couple of days. The evening that the sky cleared properly, Grace took the unripe tomatoes and fried them up. There were loads of them – little cherry tomatoes and big beef tomatoes, grown because Hamish and Briar loved them best of all the vegetables. She set herself up in her little paved front yard, and word spread pretty quickly that there was free food on offer. She did it even though she knew they might be hungry later.

Briar and Jaime lounged on the wall, handing out napkins going transparent with grease and chatting to people from up and down the street, and the streets on either side, and some people from even further. They were bringing reports of the destruction: those who hadn't boarded up their windows ended up with glass sparkling through

their rooms; some people were injured; there were roofs open to the sky.

Mariana was in an intense-looking conversation in Spanish with a young woman holding a baby, who was asleep in a carry sling. She was gesturing behind her at the students' house.

Greta had her arm round an elderly man who was weeping into an old-fashioned handkerchief.

Marco was telling jokes to a serious-looking kid who seemed about eight, who had wandered up on his own and had grease all round his mouth from the fried green tomatoes.

Laura was going from person to person, writing things down.

Once the last tomatoes had been eaten and dusk began to gently lick the colour from the street, Briar appeared with two hammers. Between them, Briar and Jaime pried the pieces of fence from the window, and stacked them into a bonfire in the middle of the road. Once other people spotted what they were doing, they started to reappear with bits of tree branch and their own downed fences, until they had a blaze going that kept them all in the street well into the night, sitting on chairs they had brought from their kitchens and upturned buckets and random bits of debris.

The fire burnt down. The kid with the greasy mouth fell asleep in his dad's lap – he had shown up at some point, having been stranded across the other side of the city. Someone told a rambling story that made everyone laugh.

Silence fell softly.

“Look up,” Briar said into the dark.

Everyone tipped their heads back, and let themselves fall into the perforated sky, and felt themselves caught in a net of light.

Incantation

I cut my forearm
on the Shard;
let the blood fall
into my garden.
I take a seed I found
in the cemetery-turned-woodland
with its uncountable textures
and clearings floored in leaves
turning to humus turning to mushrooms:
I take that seed and plant it
in the clotted earth.

I breathe in outbreak CO2
on the crowded tube
like leaves. I know my cells
are floating through the tunnels.

I eat what I am given:
the canal-side blackberries
enclosing pollution that drifted
into flowers like stardust.
Know that you are not a cancer,
they say. Know that you are a cell
which is plotting to overhaul the city
by becoming it.
Let the black snot and smog cough
be your communion.

I speak to the thin fox regarding me
from the garden wall. She is not afraid.

She says, *this is land.*

This is what we have made of it.

I tell her, *I cannot bring back the holy grove
that London was named for.*

*But I can be it, I can take my hands
and make them into trees.*

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