

St. Juju

Rivers Solomon

The trash garden is stunning in the predawn morn, lit up beneath a bulbous ivory moon. Two hundred acres of fungus hills stand between us and the edge of the enclave, and the smoky fragrance of pink toadstools weights the air with sweet earthiness.

Enid sniffs, nose twitching. Buried inside layers of mushrooming *quisquiliae comedenti*, there are still several decades worth of trash, and though I can't smell it, Enid can. Six-foot-deep fungus covers the rotting bottles, cans, cartons, clothes, wrappers, and broken toys, but Enid's a hound-mutant. She can smell it all. The fungus has been feasting on the refuse of the former landfill for over a hundred years, and the scent of the old-world trash lingers for those with her genetic mutation.

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"Do you mind it much?" I ask Enid. "The odor?" The fungus from the trash gardens is enough to feed most of the world, but they seemed a bittersweet phenomenon for the hound-mutants. "I mean, I know it doesn't stink to you," I say, "but does it remind you of the past?"

Enid shakes her head, the matted, bowl-cut coils sweeping back and forth over her forehead. There's a scar on her left temple spanning down to her left eye and across her cheek, where she got swiped by a mountain lion that she was trying to spring from a trap.

It's the sort of story that sounds like a tall tale, a hagiography, a myth. The beginning of a heroine's journey. I've been reading about the lives of various saints over the last year in preparation for my oration to the enclave, and in another time, I think my Enid could've been St. Enid. To avoid the shackles of marriage to a horrid noble, she'd commit herself to God and become a nun. The noble would demand her chastity anyway, but she'd run into a den of lions to escape his horseback-riding soldiers. The lions would claw her face, deforming her, and then, finally, the noble might give up his claims. She'd be the patron saint of women with scars.





Animation by Motion504

The Verge has brought together some of the most exciting names in science fiction writing to imagine *Better Worlds*.

I bite the collar of my flannel as Enid and I walk the fungus-capped ground. Although the focus of my upcoming oration revolves around the less savory aspects of traditional belief systems — the parts about people like me and Enid and how we are sin incarnate — I can see the beauty in it, too, why people did and still do devote their lives to these religions.

Enid's nose twitches again, and she bites her bottom lip. We shouldn't have taken this route. The other ways out the enclave were longer, but they didn't have the same baggage.

"You sure you all right going this way?" I ask. That makes Enid stop sniffing.

"I'm fine," she says.

"Yeah?" I say.

She nods. "Yeah."

"I know it must be hard to be on these grounds," I tell her.

"It's not," she says.

"Must be a little bit," I press, unable to be a normal fucking person for once in my life and let it go. Growing up, my older brother always called me a pestering little shit, and he's right. Ever needy, I poke and poke and poke until I poke so hard it's more of a push. Suddenly, I'm shoving folks out my life under the pretense of having a nice conversation. Not that Enid will give in to my prodding.

I mostly talk to keep myself company. If I'm silent, the void of half-light will gobble me up. Silence likes to feast on folks like me. A heady, hot stew of discontent, I can't settle my mind when left to my

own devices, left alone to think, wonder, despair. I get feverish and wild.

“You can talk to me about it, if you want. Feelings and shit, I mean,” I say.

“I’m good,” says Enid.

“You sure?”

“Don’t ask again,” she says, and maybe it should sting, but it doesn’t. Maybe I like to poke to see where the ends of things are, and life becomes so much easier when I do.

This history of the hound-mutants isn’t kind

Skipping shoes tonight was a good idea. My feet sink into the flesh of the *quisquiliae comedenti* mushrooms. The feedback is strange but nice, and it gives me something to focus on other than Enid.

I can’t tell if she’s lying or not, if she means it when she says it doesn’t hurt her to be in this place, but maybe I can’t let it go because how could it not? This history of the hound-mutants isn’t kind. Even that goddamn name.

It feels wrong to call Enid after a dog, but it’s her preferred term for folks born with *picave pathologia*. Enid eats metal. She eats paper. She eats plastic. She eats trash. She has since she was an infant. She came out the womb craving non-foodstuff. Her body processes it and turns it into useable waste. In the old days, before garbage-eating fungus, hound-mutants were rounded up to clear the landfills. They sniffed and sought out trash like mutts, and the name stuck.



Being here has to dredge up memories, even if they're not her own, even if it all happened in a time before she was born. Sometimes I feel like that's what must be wrong with me. I'm always seeing ghosts. Hearing things. I call them my figments, but maybe they're things from long ago returning from the dead, creeping in.

Enid's face is indecipherable in the dark, but every few moments, her eyes blink for too long, or she swallows heavily, causing her lips to move and her throat to rise and fall. "The trash garden is my favorite place in the enclave," I offer. Whenever Enid's near, an uneasy energy springs up in my chest, and I've just got to talk and talk to get it out of me, or it might build up pressure inside, explode. I've always been a chatterbox, but it's worse around here. "You wouldn't believe all the hollows I've dug into the fungus. Perfect hiding spots to nap in."

"The trash garden is my favorite place in the enclave."

"I know," she says, and yeah, I guess I've told her before.

"I was born out here," I say.

"I *know*, Juju," says Enid.

"My papa was harvesting mushroom for supper when he felt his waters come loose," I continue. Why? It's like I'm trying to salvage something out of this exchange, make this story worth it, but all I'm doing is making Enid feel worse and digging my hole deeper. "He leant up against one of the fungus hills, squatted, and rested until I came. My other papa wasn't there. He was just waiting and waiting and waiting at home for Pops to come home with the mushrooms because he was ready to cook supper."

Enid nods but doesn't speak. When she leaves, is this all she'll remember of me? The girl whose mouth was a fucking geyser. The girl who fidgets. The girl who talks and talks and talks to silence the voices, the images. The girl who's turned her birth into a fairy tale, even though Enid knows the truth: that my papa died out there in the field, and I almost did, too, born two months early and with no hope of medical intervention.

Enid grabs my hand and squeezes tight, enough to hurt, but the pressure reins me in. It reminds me that my body exists. I don't know why she bothers with a thing as untogether as me.

"I'll visit you whenever I can," she says. I nod my head and smile, and it hurts my cheeks for how disingenuous it is. "My offer to come with still stands," she says, but she knows I'm set on staying. The invitation is a way for her to be nice without any threat she'll have to suffer the consequences of my company. "There's a lot I want to show you," says Enid. "Stuff I think you'd love."

"There's a lot I want to show you, stuff I think you'd love."

"I've lived my whole life on the enclave," I say. "I'm not as a brave as you."

Enid's never spent more than a few years off and on in the enclaves, preferring to travel in packs with others like her. She's going back out there tonight. We'll say our goodbyes, then walk to the edge of the enclave, then she'll step forth into the unpredictable frontier of life outside the enclave.

Can't pretend it doesn't muck me up inside, thinking of her leaving me, but what right have I got to be angry? The world out there scares me. Open road, open field, open forest. The ruins of cities and suburbs. Wild animals. The same world of the old saints. The past is still out there, waiting for us to make what we will of the future.

In the enclave, we feed entirely off the fungus and foraged plants and fruit. Out there, they hunt meat. They're vagabonds, chasing good weather, good game, good land, never setting camp for more than four or six weeks at a time.

"Let's just do this then," says Enid.

Together, Enid and I climb up our hill, the tallest mushroom in the trash garden. This is where we'll be together for the last time. We lay on its flattened apex. She asks me again if I'm sure I won't go with her, and I tell her the same thing I did before: I have a life here. I have certainty. I have kindness. After my oration, I can complete the Coming of Age Rites. Twenty years old, I'll be a full-fledged adult, able to take on more projects, more responsibility. More ways to undo the quietness in my mind that sometimes undoes me. "It's not fair to ask me to leave paradise."

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"I know, I know," she says, sitting next to me.

"I have a role here."

"I know," she says.

"It's important."

"I *know*, Juju," she says, and places her lips to mine, so soft. I should go with her just for that, the way she touches me and I dissolve, legs parting unconsciously.

They used to think it sin, us doing what we're doing now, putting our mouths and our chests and our stomachs together. We writhe, shameless as dogs. Tender, wondrous, small, aching, and needy, we are. This flesh, this pliable, weak flesh — we revel in it.

I press my groin up into Enid's, and we rub and rub. She draws her calloused thumb along my left cheek, nail grazing the freshly buzzed sideburns, skin still raw and inflamed. My head is bald, too, black from inked designs but for where my brown skin peaks through.

"God, you feel so good," says Enid. "I wish you'd come with me." I don't understand it, but I know she means it. "Please?" Her voice rasps and splinters, and to hear it makes my whole body despair. How is

it that in the moments preceding the final throes of fucking one's body feels so bereft, so gluttonous for contact and heat? Someone watching would think I'd never been touched at all for how desperately I jerk my body to Enid's until we both are spent, mad with feeling.

The bed of fungus we lay on is taller than two houses put together, and there's a blanket beneath and above us. I can see Venus. I can see every star. My breaths haven't slowed yet, but I don't want them to. Soon as they do, that's when I'll remember Enid is leaving me.

Enid doesn't know what it's like to have to live in a place where you're responsible to other people "Juju?" Enid asks, her voice gentler than I'm used to hearing it. She scratches her head, fingers catching in the mass of short, tight curls. The sun's coming up, and her face is beautiful in the light. She's always got a scowl on, like she's thinking deeply, and it makes her thick eyebrows furrow. "Juju? Come back to me." She grabs my shoulder and jostles me a little.

"Sorry," I say.

"Don't be sorry," she says. "You thinking about all that stuff you've been reading again? I know it's how you do things here, but I think it's stupid. That oration. Everything. What's your topic again? What'd they call it, call *us*?"

"Homosexual," I say.

"And you're still having nightmares about everything you've read?"

I shrug my shoulders.





Enid doesn't know what it's like to have to live in a place where you're responsible to other people. I get the Coming of Age Rites. I really do. It's tradition to present a moral argument to the enclave so they can decide if you're ready to handle the intense questioning of the tribunal. They're the ones to ultimately determine if your moral reasoning and sense of compassion is developed enough to undergo the Rites. Usually, the topic isn't something particularly relevant to our lives now, but was of note at a moment in history.

The past year, I've composed a treatise deconstructing several arguments that called women like me sinners, degenerates. And Enid's not wrong — it has weighed on me — but that doesn't mean it isn't worth doing.

"Sun's pretty much up," says Enid. She slips her old leather jacket back on and buttons up her jeans, looking even cooler now than she had when she'd first come to Milkwood Enclave, a gun on her back, a crow on her shoulder, a limping coyote at her side. St. Enid.

I start to get ready, too, buttoning my flannel up, but Enid holds out her hand. "You don't have to walk me to the edge. I can get there on my own. This was our goodbye, wasn't it?"

She's already walking down the mushroom hill before I can properly respond. "Wait!" I say. I slip and slide, chasing after her, feet unsteady against the dew-wet fungus. I want to go with her so bad, more than anything.

"Tell me it's good out there," I call after her.

How can I live like that, without certainty?

I don't even have a bag. She doesn't either. She doesn't need one. How can I live like that, without certainty?

"Tell me it's as good or better than Milkwood," I demand.

That makes her stop, and I catch up to her at the bottom of the hill. "About 500 miles from here, there's an enclave called the Sacred Grounds. Sometimes they hire out hound-mutants to clear out forest to make new farms in exchange for food and other items, board."

"That's wrong," I say, sounding more scandalized than I mean to. I always worry Enid will think I sound too innocent, too unscathed. She's right, isn't she? That's why I want to stay here.

I'm just hearing about all this shit now, since Enid came to Milkwood half a year ago. I've never left the 600 acres that make up my enclave. Had Enid never come here, I might think the world perfect outside of what I read in history books.

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“They’re not supposed to do that. Did you try and stop them?” I ask Enid. Hiring hound-mutants for eating scrap is degrading. But clearing forest land to make farms, that could get someone in real trouble. The United Federation of Indigenous Nations manages land use, and the enclaves who lease the territories from them are expected to abide by the stipulations. No money changes hands, but it’s understood who rules.

“It wasn’t a great time for me,” says Enid. “I was lonely. There were about 500 other hound-mutants there doing the same work, and it felt good to be close to so many of my kind. Anyway, there was this girl I was fooling around with. One night, these two women from the enclave discovered us. Margaret Mae and Jessa, I think it was. They threw bleach on our naked bodies. On our genitals.” I try not to gasp as Enid speaks. “Now that got me properly vexed, and I punched Margaret Mae, who seemed to be the ringleader, and broke her nose. Blood spurted out her nostrils like a red firecracker. I backhanded that woman Jessa, too. Afterward, I hoisted up the girl I was with — I can’t remember her name — and took her into the creek, and we washed off until we were clean and no longer aflame.”

I dig my hands into the pockets in my old jeans. I don’t know how I could ever reason with people who do the kind of things those women did to my Enid and to her lover.

“What’d you do next?” I ask.

“I left. All us dog-girls left. Every single one of them. And when we left, there were places to go to,” Enid says.

I can’t stop shaking my head. I slap my forehead with the heel of my hand over and over.

“But the enclaves are no guarantee of safety,” Enid says.

Doesn’t she know I know that? Of course I fucking do. But at least here there was a system that tried to address it.

“Perfection isn’t a reasonable demand of living things.”

“You don’t think they had folks at the Sacred Grounds stand up and make fancy arguments that sounded like the truth?” Enid goes on. She grabs my wrist, but I tear it from her hands. “Part of the reason I even told you that story is because it stood out. It’s not common,” she insists. “Most places I’ve been to are better than that. There are some places better than here, but perfection isn’t a reasonable demand of living things.”

Once upon a time, I could imagine evil as something theoretical. I didn’t like to think of it as real and breathing and near.

“They shouldn’t have assigned you this topic,” says Enid. “Your life isn’t some goddamn thesis. I

understand the impulse to award adulthood based on an intellectualized notion of moral rigor, but it is flawed to believe it is a proper shield against wrongdoing, wrong-thinking.”

Then what is?

Nothing. Nothing is. I shake all over, admitting it to myself. The ghosts of other times shouldn’t haunt me like they do, but what does it say about humankind that for generations and generations, tyranny reigned? Who am I to think we can gird against it? Bigotry is taught, I know that, but I wish it weren’t so easily learned. I wish humans had a failsafe against it.

All this time, I’ve been thinking I was afraid of life outside the enclaves with Enid, but maybe I’m afraid of life here, too — life everywhere. Afraid of people and what we’re capable of. Maybe not in this time, but if it happened in another. I want to go back in time and deliver my oration to them, but something makes me think that’d make no difference at all.



The Verge spoke with “St. Juhu” author Rivers Solomon about communities and the stories they tell, as well as their fascination with futuristic fungus.

My heart beats and beats, lead in my chest. It’s an exhilarating thought to know that nothing I say

could matter. If such a thing were possible, I'd be sorely tempted to build a time machine to go before people of the past and say, "Let us dykes fucking rut."

We're all part god, born raging. Let us who wish to be soothed by this intimacy be soothed by it.

I don't know why I'm so raw, so goddamn frayed. You'd think my life was a tragedy to hear me talk about my loving home, my loving community of kinfolk. The world as I understand it is in a state of healing, but maybe I'm too much the sort who loves to pick a scab.

I tear a wad of fungus from the ground and smell it, seeing if I can get a whiff of stink from the world before, the world of garbage. But there's nothing left of it. It just smells like food. Like in no time at all, it will be soup simmering on the stove with butter and milk.

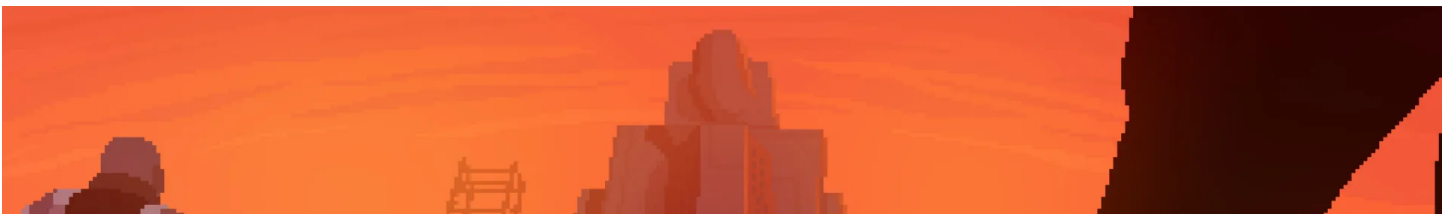
"I'm coming with you," I tell Enid.

Her smile in that moment is all the assurance that there is more good than bad in the world I need. I follow her through the trash garden out the enclave, into the world.



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