Edge Runner

Agnes Borinsky

It Lasts Forever and Then It's Over
by Anne de Marcken
160pp. New Directions 2024

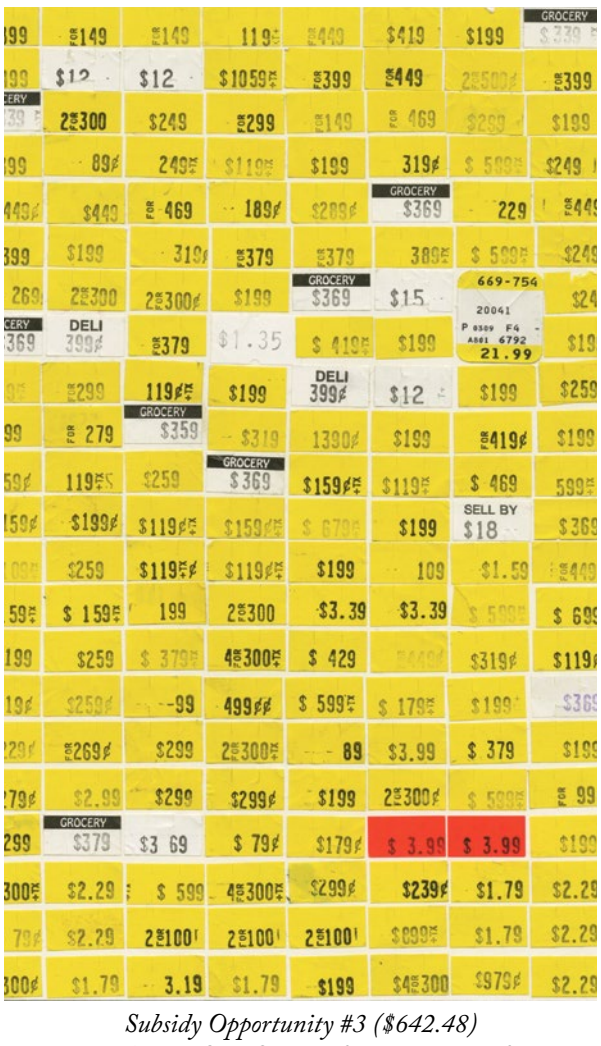
In the opening pages of *It Lasts Forever and Then It's Over*, Anne de Marcken's nameless first-person narrator—a kind of zombie—is ensconced in a culty collective living situation in a hotel. She sits by the pool with her friend Marguerite. Her arm has recently fallen off. Together the two zombie women recap episodes of *Madame Secretary* and discuss the nature of metaphor. Neither of them really wants to sit through the revival meeting thundering on in the conference room. The community's resident zombie evangelical (evangelical zombie?) Mitchem theologizes bottomless hunger and the strange condition of being undead: "We have made a new world!" "We are unbound… we are endless…"

Zombie memory is blurry, occluded. Most have forgotten their old names, old identities, old lives (Marguerite is "the kind of name you pick for French class"). To pass the time some zombies do things like recite all the lines in the movie *Moonstruck*. Others philosophize, as they can, like tightrope walkers suspended over the voids of underdefined selves. Our narrator compares the ethics of eating a human to the ethics of eating a clam. She goes swimming in the sound with Marguerite and another zombie named Carlos. But something is sliding out of control. To be a zombie feels like a spiritually and ethically impossible position. Soon Marguerite is lashing herself to a stake in an elaborate ceremony of self-immolation. The narrator decides to run away.

We spend the rest of the novel following her flight through a landscape of recognizably American desolation—truck stops, missing person fliers, storage units, toppled tow trucks, trashed La-Z-Boys by the side of the road. Grief is pulsing inside her. She addresses someone—a "you." We know almost nothing about this "you." We surmise that the "you" was once the narrator's lover, that the "you" is now dead. Zombie existence seems somehow shameful in relation to the lover ("I protect myself from what you will think.") The narrator encounters a dead crow and tucks it up under her rib cage, lashing it to her body, willing it to become a part of her, a kind of prosthetic spiritual heart. Crows, after all, mate for life.

As the book progresses, scraps of memory float to the surface of the narrator's mind. Feelings from childhood, flashes of trips taken with her lover. These memories anchor her. She knows they are not real, not present, but they become a place of refuge, a destination.

The violence and heartbreak of the world is almost unbearable. At one point the narrator surprises two teenagers who have snuck off into a field to have sex. She murders the girl—leaves the boy terrified. After that, she decides to stop killing people. She meets a woman who feeds herself slowly to her ravenous zombie child. (Parenting as brutal self-consumption—a sacrifice on the altar of the future.) Even as we approach the limit of the possible, the thinkable, de Marcken insists that the limits we imagine are not there. Stories may have endings, but life is ongoing: "Every live thing is the history and future of all death things. Every death thing is the future of all live things."



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Eventually a group of humans captures the narrator, lops off her head, and strings her up from a pole. Her severed head watches her hanging body. An unexpected ally saves her, brings her back down. This choreography of dead flesh scores the novel's metaphysics.

For all of the morbid antics of the narrative, though, the emotional life of the book is in the slow, tender steadiness of de Marcken's prose. The gentlest linguistic shifts call in tides of emotion. One of Mitchem's insistent ideas is that "Nothing is real." The narrator turns this over and, with the nudge of italics, transforms it: "Nothing *is* real." A memory of a shared walk along a beach slips into metaphor and then takes off into a shimmering moment of abstraction:

> We go you-then-me through the beach pines and out into the dune grass. Whatever sound our footsteps make is swallowed up by surf we can't see until the last rise when all the shining world comes into view and we are like two piles of leaves picked up by the wind. Everything that was separated into you and me is thrown together and tossed up into the sky.

In De Marcken's zombie apocalypse, fear is just a cover for grief. Zombies are roiling swarms of grief—that's why they scare us. "I am what they feared so much," our narrator says. Meaning: they feared me; but also: I am constituted by the substance of their fear. To be human is to run away from the things we find too unbearable to admit. "How long before we let ourselves know what we know?" the narrator asks. And in the delicate, vibrating linguistic ecosystem de Marcken has cultivated, every word has its ghosts. The sound of the word "know" conjures other words: no, now, you. We resist knowledge. And also: knowledge is the only way to approach relation, to melt from violence into relief.

There is a version of this book in which zombification is a forceful metaphor for the politics and poetics of bottomless appetite, in which zombie apocalypse figures a world that has reached a point of political and ecological collapse. That feels like a well-trodden literary path littered with late-capitalist, climate-collapse speculative dystopias. But what is so bracing about de Marcken's book is how little it feels like a diagnosis of a social condition; it is a spiritual novel. It feels closer to Fanny Howe than, say, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*.

It Lasts Forever and Then It's Over feels, ultimately, like a book about imagination. About running to the edges of what we can picture. "Maybe…the beginning hasn't yet begun," the narrator says at one point. "Maybe there is a time between end and beginning that is like the time between beginning and end." What do we see if we look into that gap? The whole novel is full of limits, edges, holes—literal and metaphorical. Edges can seem like tight places, narrow and confining. Where do you move, when you reach the outer limit? How do you render in language the thing beyond the edge of the known?

De Marcken opens the book with a line of Judith Butler's: "Without you, that indefinite, promiscuous, and expansive pronoun, we are wrecked and we fall." The "you" is the ultimate horizon, the ultimate guarantor of the self's limit. (We are not, as Mitchem would have it, endless.) You are an edge—the limit of me. You are also the possibility of relationship. And when our limits meet, we arrive at the possibility of mutual transformation.

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A CHARM

The Family (not vultures)

Julian Carter

Once upon a time, our people died young and The Family swooped down to steal what remained. Some claimed their fear was love. Some didn't bother with the lies. I knew a man who swallowed hard and invited his lover's absentee sister to spread his ashes on Mt. Tam. He had wanted his body to feed the redwoods. The soaring trees look south across the Golden Gate where San Francisco rises from the water like Oz, or heaven. Sister didn't reply. But when the man got home that night the house was stripped: she'd used his absence as her chance to take every book, every pair of socks, every stick of furniture. Later, too numb to rage, he couldn't stop asking why she locked the door behind her.

But of course she turned that key. Warding off, shutting out, closing down the channels: it was never about protecting anyone, not even The Family and their illusions. The Family resented the hell out of our refusal to let them control our bodies. They would not forgive our unrepentant opening into worlds they did not control. The spread of throat and sphincter and heart, the yes of arching spine and clutching hand: we rejoiced in expansions they'd have denied if we'd let them.

They took their revenge.

Some families stole it all. Others simply stopped paying the rent and let the landlord throw everything out onto the sidewalk or into a dumpster and never came to get the body.

When you grieve, please don't malign the vultures that wheel above the mountain. Cathartes aura. Their name means cleansing wind, purifying breath. They come to clean the bones for us. They don't care how we died or that we find their appetites revolting. Queer birds wild and shameless they seek us out, take us in, absorb us, cherish and receive us as nourishment. We should salute them when they wheel overhead. I promise to lie down for them when it's my turn, to make it easy for the ones who come along to carry my bones.

Julian Carter is the author of The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1890-1940 *and critical essays exploring how embodied identities are developed, communicated, contested, and lived in cultural productions ranging from vintage public health pamphlets to postmodern dance performance. He teaches at California College of the Arts in San Francisco.*

Excerpted from Dances of Time and Tenderness *(Nightboat 2024)*