



MOST
EXCELLENT

AND
LAMENTABLE



Author of
Diary of One Who Disappeared



JASON ERIK
LUNDBERG

“What is deemed ‘strange’ becomes
movingly conjoined with the familiar.”

Cyril Wong



Praise for *Most Excellent and Lamentable*

“A superb collection of beautifully crafted stories. They range from exquisite miniatures that render entire worlds within a few words to longer stories rich with the complexities of human interactions with the Other—where the Other might be a foreign tourist, a shaman, a fish that speaks or a wombat. Infused with a Southeast Asian sensibility, these tales transcend boundaries in the best tradition of speculative fiction.”

Vandana Singh, author of *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*

“Phlogiston (I am assured by usually reliable sources) does not exist...and yet *something* rare is powering these shimmering, surprising, infinitely combustible stories. Strange energies crackle throughout this most excellent collection.”

Andy Duncan, author of *An Agent of Utopia*
and three-time World Fantasy Award winner

Praise for Jason Erik Lundberg

“Lundberg explores the randomness of magical occurrences and how a life without magic can be just as deadening as it is safe.”

The Green Man Review

“Lundberg’s stories, launched from the real world on a trajectory to the surreal, fuse the idle daydream with the desperate heart.”

John Kessel, author of *Pride and Prometheus*

“Lundberg’s writing is that of an Old Soul who views the world through Young Eyes; his work is *jamais vu* of the highest order: these stories are memories encountered for the first time, but never to be forgotten once they’ve been experienced.”

James A. Owen, author and illustrator of
The Chronicles of the Imaginarium Geographica

“His writing often feels whole, in the sense that each story has been not so much ‘worked out’ as ‘grokked in its fullness’ first and written out subsequently.”

Big Sky

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Selected Stories

JASON ERIK
LUNDBERG



EPIGRAM
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Also by Jason Erik Lundberg

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Diary of One Who Disappeared (2019)

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The Alchemy of Happiness (2012)

Red Dot Irreal (2011, 2012)

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"The Stargirl and the Potter" was significantly condensed for its initial publication; the version that appears here is the author's preferred text.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, October 2019.

For all the dreamers

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Introduction

The best stories provoke questions. Some may offer answers; others, only signposts and clues. What makes Jason Erik Lundberg's stories remarkable is that often there are no answers at all, and we are left with the delicious act of speculation. In that mode, questions open up more questions while providing a powerful sense of resolution.

There is satisfaction in the act of asking, in the framing of the query, and in that moment of vulnerability we embark on a journey. Along the way, we learn and build and grow, swept along the narrative the characters inhabit. Being human means wanting to understand, and Lundberg's stories take us gently by the hand and show us that while we need to embrace our need to know, we also need to make peace with what we cannot know—but can imagine.

In Lundberg's narratives, endings are transformations, a change from one state to another: from ignorance to knowledge, from pain to understanding, from confusion to bliss. Death is a primary instigator, but it is not alone. Epiphanies and sad wisdom inhabit endings as well, and reveal the seeds of continuance. "What comes after" and

“what happens next” are concerns of the author’s work, and he shares his take on karmic cycles and serpentine circles as he reveals the tantalising ever-afters.

It is love that happens afterwards. Love continues. Identity continues. Remembrance continues. The story continues for it never truly ends, with each ending offering a new beginning, or a continuation, after profound changes. It is this insight, this narrative truth, that creates impact—that hope is never truly lost, and what is now is only for now.

Lundberg’s selections all sparkle, and his abilities as a writer are on full display. His evocations of place—these windows into marvellous worlds—are striking with telling details. His characters, jagged and smooth, gleaming with flaws, move with convincing agency.

Consider:

“The Stargirl and the Potter” showcases the continuance of love and of loss that heals, while telling the story of lovers whose memory fades in the distant tomorrow. Warm and wise and flush with beautiful writing, it examines the notion of love as fate. “Always a Risk” displays the quality and texture of Lundberg’s worldbuilding and his ability to deliver intricate action. What begins as a car ride to cross a magical border becomes a road trip of karmic discovery when past, present and future intertwine as secret histories are revealed. Here, love is also the key. “Wombat Fishbone” brings to mind the mysterious event stories of Kelly Link and Jeffrey Ford, where strange circumstances unfold at a startling pace that leaves the reader breathless. Lundberg

tells a story about the primal tribe of man and asks just what does it mean to be free. Is it an abnegation of self? Or a complete surrender to the deepest core of self?

“King of Hearts” explores what happens when memory is corrupted by disease. If our sense of identity is built of remembrances, then just who or what do we become when those memories are lost? What remains when we forget or are forgotten? Identity politics take centre stage in the delicious “Strange Mammals”, a surreal piece with unforgettable characters. Doubt and the subsequent erosion of the self lead to a surprising twist as things both stay the same and irrevocably change.

Love and loss and heroics are the elements of “Great Responsibility”, as we follow the heartbreaking story of a particular Spider-Man. Lundberg’s deft touch keeps this short piece powerful and true. “The Time Traveller’s Son” has the bittersweet revelation of future memories wrapped in a father-son narrative, while dealing with various possibilities of the afterlife.

Extra years of life are possible in “Slowly Slowly Slowly”, but doubt as to what happens after the treatment ends leads to an unexpected turn of events, imbuing an act of compassion with the weight of political defiance.

A man seeks and finds better health in a culture not his own in “Kopi Luwak”. But all things have a price, and the consequences of forgetting are dire. “Complications of the Flesh” finds love in the ashes of tragedy, and beginnings hidden in endings. Identity is both sacred and fluid in

“Most Excellent and Lamentable”. A fascinating meditation on love and continuance and archetypes and loss, this is Lundberg at his very best, melding language and technique with the themes he is concerned with to produce a story that provokes thought.

Mercantile might clashes with the culture of resistance in “Bogeymen”, combining elements of steampunk, romance and revenge into an action-packed tale. “Ikan Berbudi (Wise Fish)” is a sparkling jewel of a story about friendship, respect and love, and how these give rise to a greater understanding of how everything connects.

These “greatest hits” not only share similar themes, but are in conversation with one another. Read any story as your first, then savour the rest. You will discover, as you voyage across the sea or desert, a myriad of characters and situations, all delightful and strange and intriguing, with every story offering the flavour of endless possibilities.

Now go, and read.

Dean Francis Alfar
July 2019

The Stargirl and the Potter

for G

I tell you this tale as it was told to me so very long ago.

She appeared one day in the town. Nobody knew where she had come from, or who her family might be, or what she was called, or why her skin glowed ever so slightly with a sparkling luminescence. Nobody saw her enter the town from the main road, or alight from a carriage, or dismount from the back of a horse. One moment she was not there, and the next she was.

Although she had a laugh that filled the air with musicality, she did not speak. The young men of the town, desperate to learn her name, would chat for hours just to entice a single syllable from her lips, but apart from that mellifluous, mirthful sound, no utterance was forthcoming. It was clear that she was exceedingly intelligent—she was able to calm the cobbler’s raging palomino with little more than a stern look, and she repaired the sheriff’s steam-powered homunculus deputy in a single afternoon—and she was

sociable enough with anyone who happened to cross her path, but she never said a word; after some time, most came to the conclusion that she simply did not wish to. She kept her thoughts and opinions and explanations (including her identity) to herself, and so the townspeople collectively named her the Stargirl.

She set up shop in the vacant storefront two doors down from the general store, and sold intricately crafted clockwork devices, delicate little things that danced or performed acrobatic manoeuvres or climbed up the wall without any apparent effort. Bigger contraptions she constructed as well, including a full-scale artificial man that rivalled the sheriff's deputy, and needed to be serviced only a fraction as often. Money seemed to be a foreign concept to the Stargirl, so she bartered instead for every conceivable necessity, and when these were not available from the buyer, she accepted favours instead. And so it was that she quickly became integrated into the community.

The Stargirl was visited often by the young men of the town, and despite the language barrier, she was happy to entertain them and allow herself to be courted. Most of them were gentlemen and treated her as an equal, someone to be respected and not just admired, and to these young men she would grant kisses that could only be described unironically as "magical". A smaller group got greedy with their time, and felt entitled to more, but she silenced them firmly with a glare, her luminescent skin intensifying with her warning, and these less gentlemanly chaps quickly acquiesced.

However, there was one young man who could only be called a ruffian and a boor, the sole progeny of the town's most prosperous merchant, who felt that, as a privileged merchant's son, the universe owed him the affection and submission of the Stargirl; his mother had died in childbirth, and he grew up ignorant of the proper way to treat a lady, in addition to his arrogance and self-perceived superiority. When he returned home on the evening in which he tried to convince the Stargirl that she should be his, his father the merchant uttered a startled cry at his son's sorry state: his clothes were in tatters, his hair and eyebrows had been burned away, and upon his forehead was an angry-looking brand in the shape of a crescent moon. When the town Matriarch got word of the ruffian's transgression and attempted theft of consent, she banished him to the Outlands, and the merchant could do nothing but watch his only son disappear into the horizon.

During this time, the Stargirl spent many an afternoon with the town potter, whose own meagre shop was sandwiched in between hers and the general store. He was older than her by about fifteen years, and a widower, and never imposed on her time such as the younger and more vigorous men in the town. And perhaps it was this courteous distance that drew the Stargirl to him as a friend. He was an oasis of serenity in the small town, a man of few words himself, content to mould and form the rich clay from the nearby hills into his creations, which he then fired in his home-made kiln out back. Most of these offerings were util-

itarian—simple cups, jugs, bowls, plates and the like—but he also displayed the results of his more rarely used artistic voice: delicate vases both thin and bulbous, gravy boats with high scooping lips, teapots with long elegant spouts, planters, pitchers and figurines both animal and human, each piece adorned or inset with tiny stars. The Stargirl gravitated towards these more decorative pieces, staring at them for hours, while the potter was content in his turn to watch the Stargirl, and to try and guess what she saw in his art, for he knew enough not to ask her directly.

One day around noon, after two months of the Stargirl's regular visitations, the potter appeared in her shop with reddened ears and a picnic basket looped over his arm laden with hard cheese, salami, a fresh loaf of bread and a humble bottle of honey mead brewed by the sheriff himself. The Stargirl looked at the basket and then tilted her head, her expression quizzical.

The potter cleared his throat. "It's, uh, well, it's a picnic." His voice was rough and gravelly from disuse, and the utterance rose barely above a whisper. "It's a picnic," he said again, slightly louder. Her expression still belied puzzlement, and he spent the next minute trying to explain what a picnic was and why people indulged in them, his ears and cheeks blushing furiously as he stumbled and stuttered in embarrassment, until he made eye contact and saw that the Stargirl was smiling impishly. He chuckled to himself. "You're teasing me," he said. "You already know all about picnics, don't you?"

The Stargirl grinned and clapped her hands, then nodded enthusiastically. The potter exhaled in relief. They walked together down the main road making their way towards the hills just outside the town. The potter led them to a small field of lilacs with a grassy clearing, then extracted a cotton blanket from the basket, spread it on the ground and motioned for the Stargirl to sit down.

They sat side by side for several moments in silence, looking around at the profusion of purple flowers and greenery, and then the potter muttered, "This is my favourite place." The Stargirl gently placed a hand on his arm. The corners of the potter's mouth turned upward for the briefest of moments, his eyes twinkling, then he cleared his throat and reached for the block of cheese in the basket. He cut them both slices of cheese and salami, and ripped chunks of bread from the loaf. It was a fine lunch, and filling. When he realised that he'd neglected to bring cups for the mead, she placed a hand on his arm again and then sipped straight from the bottle.

They came back to town around an hour later, and before once again returning to their respective shops, she kissed him in full view of the whole town square, a brief action but he felt the pressure from it on his lips for the rest of the afternoon and evening. He had the most vivid of dreams that night, but never revealed to anyone their content.

The following evening near suppertime, the Stargirl brought over a small clockwork figure that strongly resembled the potter. The tiny simulacrum spun a miniature

potter's wheel and laid hands on a wire-frame bowl. It even paused every so often to scratch at a spot beside its left eye, an imitation of the potter's own unconscious tic while he was working, and the recognition of himself in this pint-sized version elicited a delighted guffaw from the older man. The Stargirl smiled at the unexpected burst of sound, but then she paused as tears crept out from the potter's eyelids and drizzled down his cheeks. She went to him and held him, and he grabbed onto her as though he were about to float away and she was the only thing anchoring him to the earth. She could hear no sobs as they embraced, only the potter's laboured breathing. After some time, he pulled back, the sadness of loss and guilt of new love very evident on his face. She kissed the tears away gently, then tilted his chin up and kissed his mouth.

That night after a simple supper of mushroom soup and brown bread in the rooms above the Stargirl's shop, they made love for the first time. The potter had lost his wife five years before, and had lain with no woman since, so although he wanted to protract the occasion for as long as possible, his body's excitement overcame him and he finished too quickly. Through his whispered apologies, the Stargirl reassured him, and held him, and planted little kisses on his face and neck and shoulders, until he was ready again. This time, she instructed him, through her gestures and small cries of passion, on how to appropriately pleasure her, and they soon established a rhythm that left them both breathless with unanticipated sensations; they

finished together, gloriously, and not one person in the town could avoid hearing the combined sound of release and then joyous laughter.

From that day on, the Stargirl and the potter were rarely ever apart, and the young men of the town both mourned lost possibilities and appreciated that two such unusual persons had found solace in each other. The townspeople got used to seeing the pair hand in hand on evening walks, or together on supply runs using wheeled automotive horseless carriages, or vanishing into the neighbouring hills for a quiet rendezvous. The lovers broke down the walls separating their shops and upstairs domiciles, and joined them together into a shared space.

Just over four years after the Stargirl appeared in the town, the Matriarch and sheriff requested her help in creating defences against a notorious gang of bandits that had been recently terrorising nearby townships; the Stargirl and the potter combined their talents to create a militia of autonomous defenders that were bulletproof and used non-lethal methods to deter attackers. When the bandits at last did arrive, they were shocked to discover two dozen drones made of machinery and glutinous clay at the mental command of the Stargirl, who directed the defenders to apprehend the bandits with nets, and propulsive bags of rice, and clayey skin that turned solid when punched or shot and then viscous right afterward in order to hold fast the fist or bullet. When the federal marshal arrived to escort the criminals back to the capitol, she rewarded the Stargirl and

the potter handsomely, but they donated the money to the town coffers; this action led to the only instance in which anyone ever saw the Matriarch shed a tear, and caused her to create a post specifically for the Stargirl, that of Grand Constable, and to charge her with keeping the town safe from malicious outsiders, just as the sheriff maintained order within.

The years passed. The Stargirl and the potter never begat children, and there was some speculation over whether this was a conscious decision because of the assiduous nature of her constabulary duties, or the result of incompatibility between a human being and whatever the Stargirl happened to be, but after some time even this juicy gossip lost steam. The townspeople lived their lives. Some died, others were born. Some left the town for other places, and newcomers arrived to make the town their home. Life continued.

One day, decades later, the townspeople awoke to the sight of two clay statues in the town square, full-sized replicas of the Stargirl and the potter, standing upright, holding hands, and adorned only with two tiny five-pointed stars on each figure; on the Stargirl, in the centre of her chin and below her left cheek; on the potter, at the middle of his right forearm and beside the corner of his left eye. Crawling over each statue were a multitude of clockwork spiders, for which purpose no one knew, although the cobbler speculated that it might be for maintenance. As to the Stargirl and the potter themselves, no one could find them; their shop was open and fully stocked, as though they had just

stepped out for a moment; their closets were still filled with clothing, and their personal belongings lay casually throughout the upstairs rooms. There was idle rumour that the Stargirl and the potter had travelled to her homeland (wherever that might be), or that after completing the remarkable statues that bore their likenesses they had dissolved in air, or that they had actually entombed themselves within the statues. However, despite the conjecture and the search party organised by the sheriff (by then, an elderly man himself), no one in the town ever saw them again. The Stargirl's defenders still vigilantly patrolled the town's perimeter despite her absence, largely out of sight, and the townspeople were comforted by the idea that they were out there.

An additional century passed, and the statues became objects of reverent myth. The tiny mechanical spiders continued in their duty, preventing anyone from moving the statues or even touching them. But even the most well-designed clockwork does not last forever, and one by one the spiders stopped working. At midnight on the 137th anniversary of the day that the Stargirl first appeared in the town, a night of full moon, the final spider ceased movement, and in that moment, the statues trembled and shivered and then slowly collapsed into particles no bigger than grains of sand, settling down and down until only two clay-coloured mounds remained.

The only witness to this disintegration was a six-year-old girl with a head of long, tangled, windblown hair, who had

woken earlier and felt drawn to the site of the two mysterious lovers. She would later tell her adopted parents and her schoolhouse friends that after the statues had been reduced to their original components, an ethereal wind suddenly carried the grains into the air, twisting the specks into collective shapes, as though they had a life of their own, briefly forming a five-pointed star before the entire cloud of granules wrung itself upward into the sky, into the clouds and then beyond view.

The girl's story would be largely dismissed, but one quiet boy in her school believed her, and when he told her so, she smiled so widely that her skin seemed to glow with the twinkling of young stars.

With thanks and apologies to Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez

Always a Risk

The chair upon which Julian fidgeted was constructed from the spotted purple epidermis of an unknown giant bird, and even through a layer of rough clothing—unremarkable cotton undershirt and trousers, and a wool vest with an interior pocket, inside which were nestled his travelling documents—the leather had caused an almost constant itching sensation for the past three days in which he had taken up his sentry position on it. Although it was entirely possible that the chair was infested with fleas, Julian shivered at the idea that either he was allergic to the birdskin itself—because of its natural oils or whatever chymical process had been utilised in order to treat it—or that a hex had been placed on the chair so that less determined patrons of the hostel would not be tempted, as Julian had, to remain in it for long periods of time.

Were the hostel lobby in which he squirmed and scratched to avail itself of another chair, Julian would have gladly traded places after five minutes on the first day; as it was, his only alternative was the scuffed hardwood floor, which proved useless for watching the lobby's sole window,

which, from the chair's point of view, afforded a view of the town's single dusty thoroughfare, and hence of any vehicle that would be stopping for final provisions before traversing the half-mile north to the checkpoint. So, the chair it was; Julian had, through power of concentration alone, succeeded in meditatively ignoring the worst of the sensation, and instead alternated his attention between swiping through the virtual pages of the ætherically-powered volume of *Advanced Fluid Dynamics, 37th Edition* in his lap and impatiently watching the street just outside.

Without any sort of personal conveyance, he was at the mercy of whomever might show him enough kindness to allow him to ride with them to the border, and beyond, to Bamboo Duo, and thence to the university at the heart of its capitol, cityCityCITY. And impatient because the checkpoint would remain open only three more days, and then slam shut for another septade. Julian was not surprised that more people weren't queuing up for the chance to enter the interstitial realm, the buffer zone between the dominions of man and demon; most of the people he knew considered demons as creatures of pure malevolent evil, unworthy to live, let alone to work with in an academic environment to solve the worldwide drought affecting all three realms. If he could put aside his own unconscious revulsion of the demons with whom he expected to conduct his studies in cityCityCITY, he optimistically imagined nothing but success and prosperity.

But he had to get to cityCityCITY first, and his nerves jumped at any movement from the window, although all he had detected so far were drunken perambulators weaving home from the town's only pub down the road and the occasional slaving pariah dog. He shifted in his seat, a motion having less to do with the constant itching than with the carved jade elephant safely tucked in a pouch on the inside of his underpants. The priceless object had been passed down through his mother's side of the family for hundreds of years, and it was the only payment he could offer to a driver bound for the Southeast Asian selvedge to the north. It pressed uncomfortably into his genitals and so, after furtively glancing about to ensure that the hostel's manager was not in sight, he leaned back and shoved his right hand down into his trousers to manually shift the carving to a better location. Task accomplished, he retracted his hand and exhaled.

"Feel better?"

Julian jumped at the voice, nearly dropping his æ-reader onto the floor. Standing next to the front door, although he had not heard her enter, was a beautiful woman, ethnically Chinese like Julian—a rare sight among the stragglers and passers-through of the border town—and dressed in finery that seemed to come directly out of cityCityCITY itself: a high-necked blouse that resembled the top half of a cheongsam, a long-sleeved bolero jacket with tails that draped nearly all the way to the floor like a malkoha bird and fitted trousers that flared out slightly at the cuffs, all of

it exquisitely tailored in silk brocade, each piece a slightly different but complementary shade of blue. With such an ostentatious showing of upper-class clothing, it would have been unsurprising had she affected an attitude of hauteur or arrogance, but instead she leaned against the wall, arms crossed loosely, and smirked at him.

“I...um...that is...”

“Oh, no need to explain,” the lady said. Was she royalty? “Sometimes one must just scratch that itch, eh?” Her accent was nasally brash, as if she had spent a great deal of time in Amerika, and unexpectedly throaty. Julian felt a blush rushing up his neck to colour his cheeks.

“It, erhm, it was not like that. You see—”

“Never mind, never mind. You’re Julian, is it?”

“Yes,” Julian said, sitting up straighter in the chair, resisting the strong urge to leap to his feet and bow deeply at the waist. “I am Julian Xue Zhe of Tumasik Town.”

“And you’re bound for cityCityCITY, correct?”

“Yes, Lady— Yes.”

“You have all the proper visas and sigils?”

“I do.”

The lady laughed once at the expression on Julian’s face, a brief exhalation that might have escaped notice if he hadn’t been paying such close attention to her. “You’re wondering how I know all this?”

“I, um, yes.”

The woman’s smirk changed very subtly into a genuine smile. “Everyone in town knows who you are and where

you’re going.” A notion that Julian, who had attempted to keep his head down and avoid any unwanted attention, found deeply discomfiting. “And that you need a ride.”

At this, Julian did stand, the motion dispelling the continuous itching sensation on his skin almost immediately. Just as he opened his mouth to reply in the affirmative, he noticed that as he and the high-class lady had been talking, a gentle rain shower had begun to fall outside; yet he knew without close examination that it was an unnatural rain, fizzling to vapour half a metre above the ground and therefore denying the cracked and parched earth of its much-needed moisture, a cruel tease that had plagued Julian’s town and all surrounding lands for almost a year. Attempts to capture the rain from roof-mounted barrels proved equally fruitless; the water droplets stopped just shy of any surface, no matter its elevation, including buildings, people and pariah dogs.

Julian cleared his throat, aware of the awkwardness of the moment, and a harrumph of reply sounded from just behind him: the hostel manager, who had emerged from his tiny office in response to the darkening of the early evening light thanks to the ab-rain. Although Julian appeared to be the hostel’s sole lodger at the moment, he had been given the distinct impression that the manager only reluctantly allowed his presence, despite the scrip Julian paid each morning. The manager, a crusty old man of olive skin and indeterminate ethnicity, whose cratered nose boasted the most pockmarks Julian had ever seen, quietly shuffled

around the lobby, lighting the room's gas lamps with a fwoomph of methane ignition, then returned to his station behind the front counter. He fixed the woman at the door with an expression that might have indicated scorn, suspicion or constipation.

"Lady?" the manager grumbled. Julian's hunch had been correct. "What you doing here?"

"I require a room for the night," she said, her smile unchanging but the positivity leaving her eyes, so that the expression more accurately resembled a grimace. "Anything else is beyond your concern."

"That right?"

"That's right."

The manager harrumphed again, as though he and the Lady had engaged in this exchange dozens of times before. "You got the scrip?"

The Lady unfolded her arms and placed her hands on her slender hips. "Do I look as if I can't pay?"

The manager chuckled under his breath, reached under the desk and produced a room key. "Just the one night?"

"That's correct," she said. "My friend Julian and I will be travelling into Bamboo Duo tomorrow."

Julian, aware once again of his presence in the room, swallowed hard. "We are?"

"I assume you have something to barter for your passage?"

Julian blushed again, exercising all of his willpower to avoid patting the jade elephant nestled next to his groin. "I do."

"Then we set off tomorrow morning at nine."

Julian exhaled, the tension melting from his shoulder muscles. At last.

"Excuse me, Lady, but what shall I call you?"

She stepped forward, the tails of her jacket swishing behind her audibly, and presented her right hand. Julian shook it and her grip was firm. "You may call me Blue," she said, and the smile once again stretched up into her eyes.

Blue's vehicle was a beast of a hybrid automobile. Even switched off, it exuded the sharp sizzle of technomancy from several paces away, and Julian curiously wondered if its engine had been inscribed with runes of protection and propulsion. Hard-topped sloping fastback and black as the deepest midnight, the vehicle was a marvel of curved surfaces and polished chrome, its tall grille as daring a display as a tiger baring its fangs. The body of the car hugged the ground, allowing only a few centimetres of clearance so as to prevent tampering with the undercarriage, its steel body a throwback to earlier days, before the invention of plastics and phlogiston engines had led to the innovation of lighter and more fuel-efficient vehicles. It looked as if it could withstand cannon fire, or whatever thaumaturgical attacks might await them on the road to cityCityCITY. Etched into the lid of the car's boot in swooping arabesques: *Fleetline Coupe*.

Julian stood by the passenger door—what should have been, to his mind, the driver’s door, which would make this an imported Amerikan car—shifting his stuffed duffel from one hand to the other, bringing his pocket watch to his ear to make sure it was ticking. She had said nine o’clock. Yet, as the minute hand made its careful way from 9.40 to 9.45 and Blue still failed to emerge from the hostel, Julian revisited the strange conversation from the previous evening. Definitely, nine o’clock. The morning sun oppressively beat down as though a giant hand were pressing him into the ground; his armpits and the back of his shirt were already stained with the sweat of delay, and he briefly considered stepping back inside the relative cool of the hostel’s lobby, but then wondered if such a move would be considered an insult.

Finally, at 10.07, Lady Blue burst from the hostel’s front door, clad in the same clothes as the day before, yet at the same time appearing completely unruffled. She wore large filmi-star sunglasses with obfuscatory lenses, and strode towards the Fleetline with a broad smile that caused Julian to forget about his discomfort and irritation, and to quicken his heartbeat against his ribcage. After taking a simple supper at the pub three doors down the night before, he had lain awake in his bunk at the hostel as the hours slowly progressed into the early morning, the image of Blue’s beauty forcing itself again and again into his mind’s eye, leading him to wonder at his karma and what he had accomplished in a previous life to gain

the reward of such an elegant woman’s company. As she approached, he kept his gaze deferential; smarter men than him had allowed themselves to devolve into lustful idiots in the presence of such a woman as this, and he could not afford to offend her.

“Morning!” she said brightly. “Sleep well?”

“Yes, Lady,” Julian said, stifling an inopportune yawn with his back teeth.

“Oh, come now, we’re going to be travelling companions for the next two days. None of that ‘Lady’ stuff, all right? I’m Blue.”

“Blue. Yes, sorry.”

Blue extracted a long copper key from a pocket inside her bolero and unlocked the driver’s door, producing a corresponding thunk from Julian’s side of the car. He reached forward to grab the handle and a sudden, sharp ætheric spark caused him to yank back and yelp in surprise. He hopped up and down and shook his left hand, stopping only when he noticed that his palm had turned purple, from fingertips to wrist. Blue laughed, the sound of water gently plashing over mountain stones, and stepped over to his side.

“Sorry about that. I rarely carry passengers, so I forget to remove the defences. Move over a moment.” Blue stood directly in front of the passenger door, closed her eyes, then performed a complicated mudra with her right hand and whispered something that resembled, “Da ba dee da ba dye.” She opened her eyes again. “There. All set. Shall we go?”

Julian opened the door, wincing in reaction to the second shock that didn't come, then placed his duffel gently on the back bench and sat himself in the front bucket seat. The door closed of its own accord, hissing shut with hydraulic quiet. In front of him, the dashboard gleamed in metal and wood grain, the dials and gauges primed for activation. The interior exuded cool, despite the intensifying heat outside, and Julian sank against the material of the bucket, which gave comfortably under his weight.

The boot slammed shut with a thunk of pressured air, and then Blue dropped into the driver's seat, sans the bolero, the door closing noiselessly. On her left arm, the skin from her wrist up to her elbow was inscribed with dozens of runed gravings, worn as if a forearm brace, the thaumaturgical symbols forming patterns and tribal shapes, and they moved, sliding like tar or lava in slow epidermal rivers. Julian had to avert his gaze, as the movement of the runes imposed an abrupt sluggish pain behind his eyes.

"Don't worry," Blue said, starting the engine, which growled to life like a living thing. "I'll glamour them again once we pass through the border so that you won't have to see them."

"What—" Julian breathed hard through his nose, "what are they?"

"You have your travel documents," she said, shifting into first gear and launching the vehicle forward, "and I have mine."

The Fleetline surged up the border town's solitary dirt road, spraying a cloud of pebbles and reddish dust in its wake. Julian was pressed even further into the plushness of the bucket through the rapid acceleration, and then, before he had a chance to get accustomed to the sensation, was thrown forward against the seatbelt as Blue braked suddenly. They were already at the border checkpoint, which consisted of a single tollbooth with a wooden gate striped in yellow and black; Julian knew that at midnight two days hence, the tollbooth would disappear along with the border entrance itself.

From out of the tiny rectilinear building stepped the border guard, a skeletally thin man, if a man he could be called, clothed from head to toe in deep military red body armour, his arms impossibly long, stretching down below his knees, his posture slightly hunched. A polished silver helmet covered his entire head, including the face, leaving only openings for the eyes, which, as he peered into the open driver's window, revealed irises as red as his armour. His right hand unfurled slowly, extending long tapered fingers, and he made a series of high-pitched clicking noises underneath the helmet. Julian reached into his vest pocket and quickly extracted his tri-folded travel documents, passing them over to Blue, who handed them to the border guard with one of her blinding smiles. The guard then slouched back to the interior of his booth and slammed the door shut.

"Should I be worried?" Julian asked.

About the Author

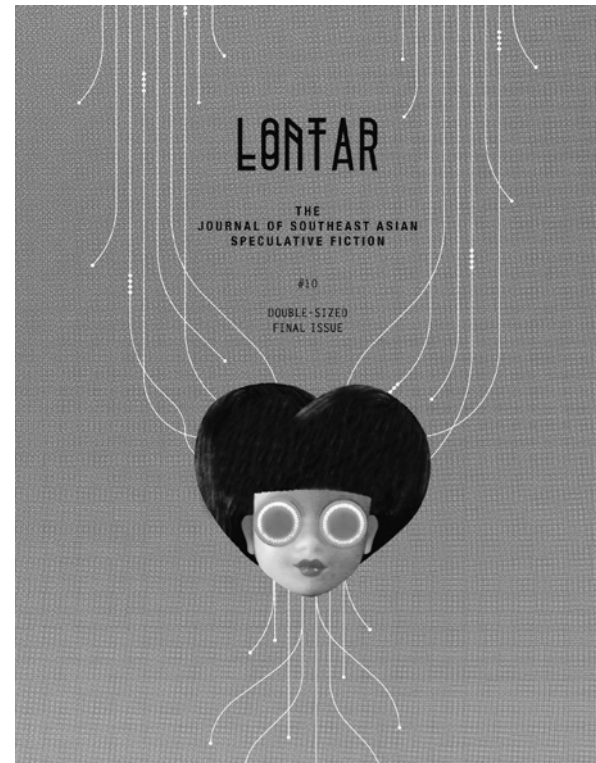
Jason Erik Lundberg was born in Brooklyn, New York, grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, and has lived in Singapore since 2007. He is the author and anthologist of over twenty books, including *Red Dot Irreal* (2011), *The Alchemy of Happiness* (2012), *Fish Eats Lion* (2012), *Strange Mammals* (2013), *Embracing the Strange* (2013), the six-book *Bo Bo and Cha Cha* children's picture book series (2012–2015), *Carol the Coral* (2016), and the biennial *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series (est. 2013). He is also the founding editor of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction* (2012–2018). His writing has been anthologised widely, shortlisted for multiple awards and honourably mentioned twice in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His novella, *Diary of One Who Disappeared*—a recipient of the 2013 Creation Grant from Singapore's National Arts Council—is also available from Epigram Books.





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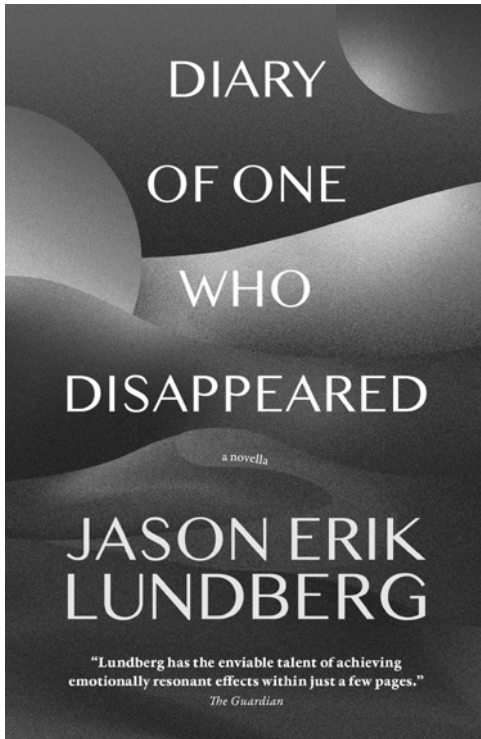
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