

DIARY  
OF ONE  
WHO  
DISAPPEARED

a novella

JASON ERIK  
LUNDBERG

“Lundberg has the enviable talent of achieving emotionally resonant effects within just a few pages.”

*The Guardian*

Advance Praise for *Diary of One Who Disappeared*

“A richly-detailed and satisfying story of dissolution and discovery, set in a near-future reality where the question of what makes us human is paramount. Against larger political concerns, a smaller and more searing narrative unfolds, about a man who is lost and found in places that are found and lost. Within the pages of this book are insights on the human heart, serene and devastating in its truth-telling.”

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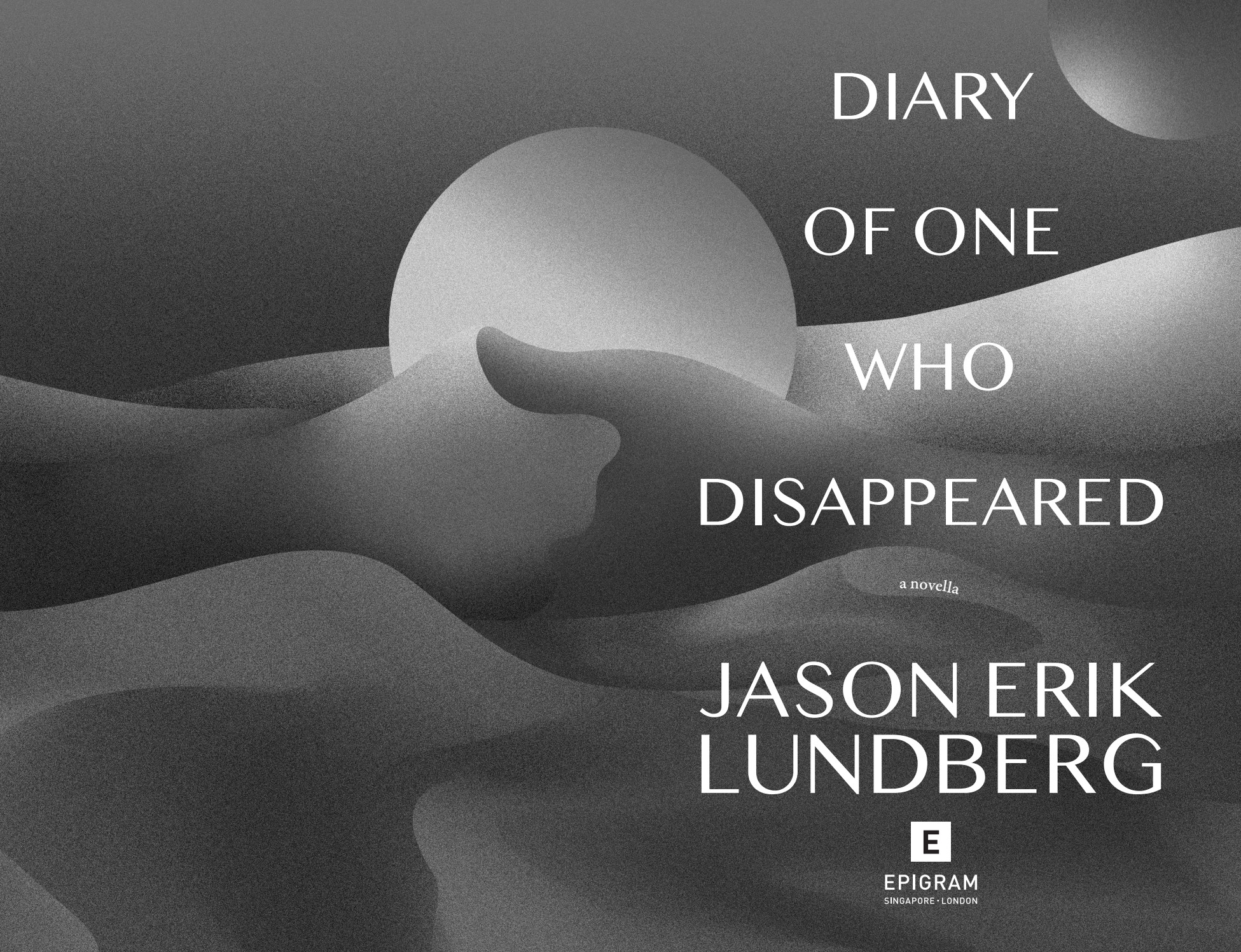
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# DIARY OF ONE WHO DISAPPEARED



DIARY  
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DISAPPEARED

*a novella*

JASON ERIK  
LUNDBERG



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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, April 2019.

*For John Kessel and every mentor  
who has given me the priceless gift of their expertise*

**OCTOBER**

ENCRYPTED DISPATCH#A4FEB6946B8AD5C444890F6CB2

Sent: Mon, 01 Oct, 3.37pm

Rick,

I've just returned by train from the indef camp in Orlando with the rest of the DESD contingent, and things are worse than we suspected. The camp warden, a squat red-faced man named Duke, put on a good show, presenting a Potemkin tent-city full of their "best behaved" *swees*, all smiles, everything clean and proper and in its place, not an untoward word against their prison guards. No complaints about the ability-blocking kara bracelets they're all forced to wear. Each tent decked out with books and magazines and even the odd tablet or æ-reader, like a fun camping trip instead of indefinite detention. Aside from the canvas of the tents, all of the administration and support buildings were grey concrete. The smell of bleach was strong.

Halfway through the tour, Warden Duke decided that we all needed a demonstration of the karas' effectiveness; one of the "model" *swees* was brought before us, a young Hispanic man with arabesqued tattoos on his arms. One of the guards aimed a hand-held device with wires all



over it at the *swee*'s bracelet; the metal kara glowed briefly, and then the warden handed the young man a cup of water. But instead of taking a sip, the *swee* waved his other hand over the top of the cup, and the water rose out of it! Of course, I've read the documentation on hydromancers, but to see it in person is a totally different experience.

With his outstretched hand, the *swee* pulled the water upward into a long tail and then manipulated the stream into different shapes in the air. The cup had dropped to the ground. One of my DESD colleagues (I think his name is Herman? He works in financial analysis) involuntarily clapped and let out a cry of delight, and then immediately checked his actions at the severe expression on the warden's face. But then the warden's mouth turned into an O as the *swee* lengthened the water into a thin tube and whipped it quickly in the direction of the warden's head. It could only have been providence that collapsed Warden Duke's knees at that moment, saving him from concussion or a lost eye or some worse injury.

The guards tackled the water-manipulating *swee* to the ground, even as the water whip struck them on their backs and arms; with the wired

box they reactivated the kara, which glowed again, and then the tube of water lost coherence and came apart in a splash that dampened all of them. The *swee* was again contained, so the guards marched him off to one of the support buildings. The warden stood back up and tried to laugh off the incident, "bad apples and all that", but he was clearly rattled that the demonstration had not gone according to plan.

I slipped away on the excuse of needing the toilet, and was able to meet up with our contact Blair in a service corridor inside the administration building. She handed over a sealed envelope, which I secreted underneath my shirt. Once the camp tour was concluded and I was back in my hotel room, I scanned the enclosed documents and photos, and then burned the originals; the digital files are attached to this dispatch.

It's clear that the tent-city was a ruse, because all the *swees* in the concentration camp are actually housed deep underground in fenced-off areas. The kara bracelets are not even necessary there because the walls are lined with a mesh that acts like an enormous Faraday cage, and blocks their superhuman abilities en masse, no matter what kind; they've solved

the problem of having to engineer each *kara* to work specifically with a given *swee*'s ability. However, the effect is that the environment looks like a maximum security prison. The electricity of the camp is powered by solar panels, but the *swees* themselves are denied sunlight.

The technology itself is remarkable, far more advanced than I'd have thought we're currently capable of. Just imagine where we'd be if the Range, that apocalyptic weapon, hadn't devastated our infrastructure for so long. It's appalling that these advances come at the expense of freedom and dignity.

And the children. Rick, they're keeping the children in overpopulated pens, segregated from the adults. Since they've got the *swee*-testing age now down to eight years old, there are kids there without their parents, without any adult supervision or care, having to cope on their own. Thank the Lord that, by law, we're unable to test any younger. Can you imagine the evil cruelty that would come with putting *babies* in cages?

That this site is on the former Disney World campus could not be more ironic.

I trust that you'll be able to use this information in your campaign to close down the camps once and for all, and reintegrate the

*swees* back into society. You have a difficult task ahead of you, sir, and battling President Jarret's single-minded bigotry is something I do not envy.

I'm also very aware that my diplomatic trip to Tinhau two days hence is now all the more important. If we're able to re-establish a partnership with a nation that openly celebrates its *swee* population, it'll increase the pressure on our "Dear Leader" to release his fellow citizens back into a life of dignity. But I worry that Ailene will throw a wrench into both our plans; her intolerance has only grown in the past few years, and her disdain for *swees* is a matter of public record. I'm praying that the importance of this mission will override her disgust and hatred.

I'll send an official communiqué before our airship departs for Tinhau, so that any monitored communication will produce the paper trail we want to leave. If you get a moment, I'd appreciate if you could spare a prayer for the success of this venture. More from me soon.

Lucas

**PRIORITY COMMUNIQUÉ****To DESD Director Richard O'Brien****For Your Eyes Only****Wednesday, October 3**

Dear Director O'Brien,

Once again, I must thank you for this grand opportunity to both spread the Word of Our Lord and work with the Orientals to revive the fortunes of our great North American Union and restore our empire to its former glory. With the Holy Father at our backs, hallowed be His name, we will once again become a force with which to be reckoned, and the Department of Economic and Spiritual Development shall forever reap the gains. Our faith will move mountains.

Soon I will be ensconced within a cabin on the NAUS *Zior* awaiting lift-off, the airship passage procured through our liaisons at Stewart Air Force Base. DESD Agent Grade Five Ailene Noonan will occupy the neighbouring berth, as per her wishes. I noticed a certain reticence on the part of the vessel's officers and crew yesterday as we came aboard for orientation, towards both Agent Noonan and myself. It is tempting to have a word with the captain of this vessel; after all, this long-haul flight will last around ten days, during which time we will all be cooped up together, colliding in the corridors and stepping on one another's toes.

Our flight plan will take us northwest over the NAU

provinces at the Arctic Circle, and thence through Russia and south along the coastlines of Nippon, China, Viet Nam, Siam and Malaya, before arriving at our destination in The Republic of Tinhau. Captain Bergeron has informed us of the increased risk of air piracy as we pass farther into Southeast Asia, but he is confident that his vessel's armour and phlogiston cannons will shepherd us through any such altercations.

This evening, Agent Noonan and I shall discuss our strategy in dealing with Tinhau's Ministry of Stability, for both cooperation and conversion. I take solace in your words, sir, that we must establish a friendship for mutual benefit, as well as to bring these Orientals to the Lord Our God so that they too will know the Kingdom of Heaven. I am filled with anticipation in doing His great work.

It is approaching time for reflection and prayer, and thus I must end here. I will report again several days hence as we reach the wireless node at Anchorage.

Your Obedient Servant and Emissary,  
DESD Agent Grade Three Lucas Lehrer

✧ FROM THE PAPER JOURNAL OF LL ✧

*Wednesday, October 3*

To the future, to a time of peace and spiritual communion and contentment: From the age of “recovery”, from the age of doublespeak, from the age of the “Holy Empire” of the North American Union—greetings!

Oh, what a big head I have, to think anyone will be interested in the ravings of a low-level civil servant anytime in the future. I’m of course talking to myself here. Hello, me!

Just before boarding this lighter-than-air monstrosity, I emailed my first official mission-related missive off into the æther, to wend its way to the ordinator squatting like a toad on O’Brien’s desk. I hope my verbal gymnastics are to the satisfaction of whoever will be intercepting them, although I hate having to perform like this at all. Still, I understand the importance of putting up a good front to those above O’Brien, so that no one gets suspicious about our true motives for meeting with Tinhau’s government.

Ailene is next door. Separated by a thick metal wall, and so much more. Eight years we’ve been married, eight years I’ve done everything asked of me, yet it’s never enough. I didn’t even want her along on this voyage to the East, my own brainchild, but since she insisted as my *superior* that she head the operation, I thought that it might at least rekindle something lost between us, maybe even get her into

my bed once again. But the possibility seems increasingly unlikely.

I’ve never felt so alone. It’s been over fourteen months since the last time we made love. When we got married, I believed (naïvely) there was no problem that couldn’t be overcome with patience and understanding. Now I know better. Now I see who she really is.

I’m reading over these words, and this feels angry. I *am* angry, but at the same time, I still love her. I still remember the same insecure and funny new recruit at DESD orientation during our cohort’s first week on the job, how her full-throated laugh could send tremors of pleasure up my spine. Her confidence and surety still arouse me. Am I a complete idiot? We’ve been through so much together, shared a lot of pain and sacrifice. I’d feel like a quitter if I simply gave up now.

Or is that really it? Do I really want Ailene back, or do I want to prevent the end of our marriage? I was never very good at being single; our years of couplehood (and courtship before that) have been stable and dependable, and I’ve been accorded every social and civic benefit of being married. It’s expected, it’s “normal”. Is this terror at the uncertainty of a marital failure, or do I honestly want us to be partners in life once again?

I have no answers right now. Things have been bad lately, but maybe she just needs a bit of space. At the very least, for the duration of this mission, we can be professionals.

*Supplemental*

Captain Bergeron has invited us to eat in the officers' mess during the voyage, so that's where Ailene and I met for dinner. Ailene only sipped her ginger ale and picked at her food, avoiding my eyes the whole time. Our conversation consisted of banal chit-chat, the same bullshit we go through at every shared meal, barely twenty words spoken between us. I tried discussing the mission, but Ailene refused to talk about it. Halfway through the meal, she excused herself and left for her cabin, her food mostly untouched. She claims she's got motion sickness, which has given her nausea and "a piercing headache". I don't know whether to believe her, even when she says she's been vomiting since the moment we departed New York. Part of me is sympathetic; I know how terrible that can be. Another part of me takes guilty pleasure at the idea that she's feeling so awful, and I wonder if that makes me a bad person.

Thankfully, I'm feeling fine. I have a strong inner ear, and I've always been solid on boats and airships. Dad claims I was born when the worst of Hurricane Ann hit Chicago, as if it conferred on me some special ability, an iron stomach. Like a *swee*. Man, what a boring superpower to have: Non-Vomiting Man!

(I also have to say, even though I am 100% on board with O'Brien's initiative to re-integrate all currently imprisoned *swees*, being around them at the camp in Orlando was unsettling. The propaganda against them has been strong

since I was a kid, and I'm sure that this reaction is a holdover from that conditioning, but just being physically in the same place with them made me very uncomfortable. I feel ashamed at this ingrained reaction, especially since so much of my covert mission is to try and help these people.)

It was probably my imagination, but I could swear that, as Ailene exited the mess, the captain's gaze lingered just a bit too long on her. Regardless, he didn't bother to invite me over to the captain's table with the rest of his senior staff afterward, so I quickly finished my lonely meal, then left for my own berth.

Not the most auspicious start to the trip.

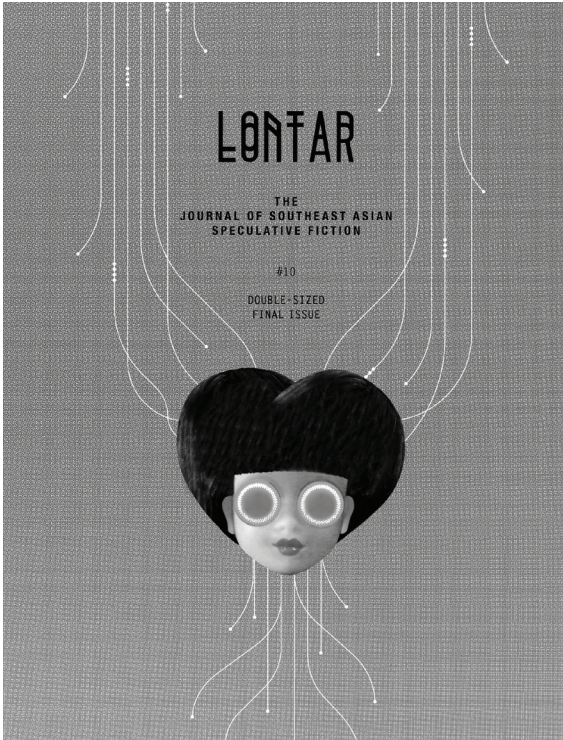
## About the Author

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 Fiction* (2012–2018), and a recipient of the 2013 Creation Grant from Singapore's National Arts Council. His writing has been anthologised widely, shortlisted for multiple awards and honourably mentioned twice in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His new "greatest hits" short story collection, *Most Excellent and Lamentable*, is available in late 2019 from Epigram Books.



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Edited by Jason Erik Lundberg



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