

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. In the foreground, a skeletal figure with a long, flowing beard and hair lies on a rocky, moss-covered ground. The figure is wearing a brown, textured tunic and a belt with a large buckle. A sword is visible, tucked into a scabbard on the figure's hip. The figure's eyes are closed, and its mouth is slightly open, revealing teeth. In the background, a dense forest of tall, dark evergreen trees rises against a sky filled with swirling, ethereal clouds in shades of pink, orange, and purple. The overall mood is mysterious and haunting.

# Genius of Loci

TALES OF  
THE SPIRIT  
OF PLACE

EDITED BY JAYM GATES

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# *Genius & Loci*

TALES OF  
THE SPIRIT  
OF PLACE

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Jaym Gates



GENIUS LOCI: TALES OF THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

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Published by Outland Entertainment LLC  
3119 Gillham Road  
Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler  
Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott  
Senior Editor: Gwendolyn Nix

ISBN: 978-1-947659-44-5  
Worldwide Rights  
Created in the United States of America

Editor: Jaym Gates  
Cover Illustration & Design: Jeremy D. Mohler  
Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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## — EDITOR'S NOTE —

Jaym Gates

When Brooke Bolander and I started discussing the weird *genius loci* of the places we grew up in a Facebook thread, we had no idea it would turn into an anthology (yes, I feel like this is a recurring theme). The concept of *genius loci* is something close to both of us. Brooke talks about her background in the introduction.

My background was as weird and rural, set in Northern California to her Texas. Clark Ashton Smith, Jack London, and Mark Twain all took inspiration from the area I grew up in. The hills there are known colloquially as *Calabama*, a strange mix of the Deep South, the Wild West, and remote mountains.

My hometown still relies on logging, mining, and ranching to keep it afloat. If our horses got off our property, they could get lost for weeks in the government-owned wildlands behind us. Family trips were spent in Death Valley, the Desolation Wilderness, and other remote locations. The ranchers rode with guns on their saddles, and when fires swept the mountains near my town last year, ranchers loaded horses and dogs into their trailers and headed into mountain meadows to try to rescue the stock.

When I was ten or so, the bridge on our road washed out, leaving us with only a single way out: a treacherous, muddy road winding back through the hills. When I was eighteen months old, an unseasonable snowstorm nearly trapped my family in the mountains during a backpacking trip.

I respect the land, and have learned to listen when it speaks. It turns out that I'm not the only one. A lot of people jumped on the conversation, telling their own stories and asking for recommendations for reading. I was sure there had to be a dozen anthologies with this theme already, but, to my surprise, we seemed to be the first.

Authors started signing up, and a beast was born. Ragnarok Publications agreed to take a chance on it, and a brilliant team of slushers, advisors, and supporters shaped up around it.

It was a challenge to wrangle from the start. We received almost a million words in submissions, and the quality was amazingly high. Pretty sure I could have published three or four anthologies and all of

them would have been good. But I didn't have that much room, and I had to whittle it down to the 111,000 words you're about to read.

A collection like this is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for an editor. It's a dream project, something I was able to take a risk producing. The Kickstarter goals focused on giving the authors more, making the project better and bigger and lusher, rather than on giving the backers a lot of physical stuff. It could easily have failed, although it is now becoming a nicely common Kickstarter strategy.

It's a diverse, eclectic collection. Some of the stories won't read as a genius loci story the first time around. Some are challenging, some are scary, or bleak. Many are based on real events. Some were strangely prophetic.

Take, for example, Ken Liu's *Snow Train*. He sent this story to me in the summer of 2014. The real Snow Train hadn't been brought out for years. Winter 2014, Boston was buried in a record-breaking snowstorm, and the train was brought out to help break Boston's public transit system out of the snow packs. Maybe it wouldn't have broken down if Charlie had been operating it.

Not every story will resonate with you, and that's okay. But I firmly believe that each story will resonate with *someone*, that each has something to say about our world and its strange spirits.

I hope, if nothing else, that it makes you look at the world around you and wonder what, *who*, is watching you.

Jaym Gates  
August, 2014

## — INTRODUCTION —

### Brooke Bolander

**W**hen I was a kid, the land was alive and it had a bad attitude. I don't mean that it was alive in some sort of woo-woo, Grandmother Willow kind of way. It didn't talk or sing, and the loblollies didn't shape themselves into special messages just for me. It made itself known in different ways. Horses, for example, it was not particularly fond of. The total number of horses struck by lightning on that parcel of acreage was a little ridiculous, and the ones not zapped by the sky went on to broken legs and god knows what other manners of gruesome fate. Or maybe it just didn't like anything with hooves. At least one cow fell down a sinkhole (A deep, round ravine in the woods, tree roots jutting out all the way down like those hands in *Labyrinth*) and had to be winched back out by my grandfather, who dutifully tried to nurse the broken thing back to health with limited success. When she finally went to wherever cattle go when they shuffle off this mortal coil, he hitched her corpse to a tractor and dragged it to the back forty boneyard, a skull-studded expanse of pasture that served as a sky burial place for all our dearly departed livestock.

Or maybe it just didn't like *anything*. My mother swore she heard someone (something) whispering our names outside her bedroom window late one night, which was a good six feet off the ground and at least five miles from the nearest neighbor. One of my earliest memories is of a low, rhythmic drumming noise coming from the woods around our place. My folks said it was probably an oil derrick, and for all I know they were entirely correct, but I've never heard anything like it since, and it seemed to fade the older I got. An inebriated joyrider wrecked his car a few miles up the blacktop at 3 AM one night and somehow managed to stagger all the way to our porch, where he briefly pounded on the door, then wandered on. The bloodstains stayed in the wood until we moved and the porch was torn down.

And then there was my much more recent encounter with The Thing That Laughed. It was 2 in the morning deep in the piney woods hinterland, a cold and rainy September. Something laughed below



my open second-story window. I say *something* because it was guttural and unhinged and not a coyote or owl or loon or cougar or fox or any other animal native to the Southeastern United States. I promptly got up and closed the damned window.

Most of this stuff is weird, but not unexplainable. People wreck their cars all the time. Horses and cows break their legs without any help from malevolent forest spirits pretty regularly, and oil derricks make weird noises that a six-year old could totally misinterpret as distant drums. My internal Scully understands these things. My internal *Mulder* knows how the land there felt and feels, how many graves are in those woods, how many headstones and abandoned homesteads and tumbledown shacks and Caddo burial mounds you stumble across if you hack your way through the blackberry brambles and vines. Loblolly pines grow fast. They cluster around the little one-horse road ruts of Eastern Texas like coyotes waiting for a mule to die, itching to pull down the sad Walmarts and empty courthouse squares and dying local businesses. This is *True Detective* territory, Joe Lansdale country, the place Leadbelly sang about going where the sun never shines. Cue swelling cicadas and the sound of a glass slide moaning down makeshift guitar strings. The South is constantly rotting down 'round your ears, damp and sweaty. How could that sort of omnipresent decay NOT inspire a gothic tradition? There was no way in all the humid, Spanish moss-encrusted hells I could grow up there and not escape carrying at least a little bit of superstitious dread.

All places have their own special personalities. The primeval forests of the Pacific Northwest don't feel the same as the ancient redwood groves of Northern California. Boston isn't New York isn't DC. Take a train from England into Scotland and you sense the landscape's mood changing almost as soon as you cross from Northumberland into Berwickshire. Some of this is geographical and environmental, obviously, but that doesn't always take into account the effect those shifting tones, that watchful feeling. Whether it's our innate desire as primates to put a face on everything or something other that can't be quantified, the way it moves us is very real, and calling it the 'spirit' of the place is as good a way to classify that unclassifiable feeling as any. The Romans knew it. The *genius loci* was the protector of an area, the spirit of the land that kept an eye on the land. You laid out offerings for your local forest god, or built a shrine dedicated to them, or splashed some wine or blood, because respecting the place you live is always a damned fine idea (you don't want to be on the bad side of a swamp or a city). More recently, there's a fine tradition of fanciful

media devoted to the idea, from *the Haunting of Hill House* to *Mononoke Hime* to the book you're holding in your hands.

This anthology is our contribution to that tradition and our libation, collected and spilled in honour of all the places we've interacted with and been affected by. Long may they haunt our memories and hearts and the hairs on the back of our necks, rusted and gnarled and old as stone and the sky.

Brooke Bolander



## — THE CITY —

### Vivienne Pustell

*The term “intelligent city” is a relatively new term, and one that isn’t fully defined. Essentially, an intelligent city uses digital technology to improve life in the city. A digital city uses digital services to provide services. An intelligent city does this as well, but also can adapt to changing services. An intelligent city combines human, collective, and artificial intelligence with an emphasis on innovation and adaptation. While the term involves human input, it’s easy to extrapolate from the concept of an intelligent city and picture a city which is sentient, buildings and networks providing a kind of body and brain beyond that of its human residents.*

*Examples of intelligent city concepts can be found in Amsterdam and Singapore, where designers integrate a variety of systems to measure energy use in real time with a goal of reducing CO2 emissions. In Singapore, this information is used to determine road fees, with the fees rising and falling based on use. In Amsterdam, it allows for efficient streetlights and tram stops. The key component in both cases is the fact that many systems are working together, in conjunction with human behavior and input. For instance, for the Singapore system to work, it has to involve urban logistics, cars that are equipped with technology that can integrate them into the grid, and mass transit systems that work with the grid. Sometimes high tech ideas are combined with low tech solutions—for instance, Chicago uses a low-tech solution of providing older homes with new windows and new lighting to reduce energy use. When combined with smart energy meters this saves millions of dollars in energy costs.*

*The idea of a city in which all systems communicate on a smart grid is both alluring and frightening. In the chilling story, “The City”, Vivienne Pustell pictures a city that is not just intelligent—it’s alive, and deeply menacing. The cause of the city’s sentience is not stated, but one can imagine a city which becomes so “smart” that it becomes the ultimate Artificial Intelligence.*



**T**he scratching was distant; she breathed a little more easily for the time being.

She was crouched by a pile of rubble, digging through the concrete chunks with determination. There was usually a package here. This cache seemed to go unnoticed more than others. Farther from the walls, maybe.

Behind her, the jagged tips of the ruined skyscrapers gnawed ineffectually at the starless gray dome that used to be a sky. A few windows flickered with the meager light of candles or lanterns, but the never-ending twilight glow of the sky was usually enough illumination to get by. Besides, it was better not to draw attention.

She shifted a larger chunk of concrete gingerly, trying not to make a sound. A few pebbles rolled down the side of the pile and skittered across the street, echoing in the silence; she cringed.

The City made no noise. It loomed above and around the tiny figures creeping through the streets, but it would not speak to them. The silence pounded down on them. Some cried, but their cries were soon consumed; the noises vanished. The City did not like voices.

There was only the scratching to pierce the silence, but it was worse. The scratching, a distant sound of claws in rubble or pulling down more buildings, crafting more ruin, was always a sound of despair. With it came the breathing, the rough sound of an animal tracking a scent. A hungry animal.

If she could just find the cache.

The scratching was moving. The breathing was there.

Her heart thudded in her chest, but even that was somehow without noise. The City did not like heartbeats.

There! The edge of the cache became visible underneath a small slab of drywall. The worn canvas, tattered and weathered, almost blended into the pile of debris. Her breath caught in her throat, she gently eased up the drywall and lifted out the parcel.

The scratching was getting closer. The breathing was picking up pace; it had caught a scent and was honing in on it.

She cradled the parcel against herself, leaping out of the pile of rubble and into the middle of the street. She whipped her head to each side, searching. The street was empty. The oppressive weight of the silence syruped into her lungs and filled her throat. The buildings loomed over her, the judgmental eyes of the vacant windows staring down, challenging her. What right had she to be there?

The air was still. Her skin prickled, the hair on her exposed arms rising up from between a lattice of bright red scars.



Clutching the parcel against her chest, she ran. Her feet pounded the cracked road, even the thudding of her heavy boots muffled by the City.

The ringing was beginning in her ears. They were stinging, the high pitched whine, still so quiet, piercing into her skull. As the breathing and the scratching got closer, she knew, the ringing would get more persistent.

The skyscrapers shivered, arching over her and leaning in on her, fingers closing in tight to capture a victim. She was vermin, and the City's exterminator drew near, snuffling and slobbering with insatiable hunger.

She ran faster, leaping over piles of debris and forgotten possessions, her heart battering itself against her ribcage as she ran through the skeleton of the City.

A shadow—so brief it could have just been a blink—passed over her. She swallowed. There were no shadows in the City; there was no light but the glow of the sky, and that was too ubiquitous to cause shadows. Only in buildings was there darkness, but nowhere were there shadows.

A block ahead of her, she saw a figure. It was a faint silhouette, nebulous and swaying slightly, as if caught in an ocean current distantly remembered.

The figure was nearly gone. She could see a stop sign, skewed at a rough angle, through the figure's torso. It was wispy and ethereal, and one arm was completely gone. It swayed mindlessly.

She skidded to a stop, staring at the other person. She opened her mouth, then closed it, slowly backing up.

It heard the sound of her skidding and craned its head. A mournful face, already partially dissolved, stared toward her, only the eyes still fully corporeal. Pain and confusion flowed out at her. She thought she saw its mouth move, a desperate attempt to figure out how to form words.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice catching in her throat. "I'm sorry." She spun on her heel and darted into the nearest building, collapsing to the floor as soon as she was fully into the darkness. She curled against the cold wall, bracing herself as the scratching came louder. The breathing was faster and harder. The ringing intensified; her skull felt like it might split.

She ripped off her shirt and balled it up, stuffing it into her mouth. She bit down hard to keep from screaming, her arms wrapped around her head in desperation.



Names were the first things lost.

No one understood, at first. People gathered together, trying to comfort each other, find loved ones, make meaning. It took so long to find the connection between the slow losses and the scratching, the breathing, the buildings closing in to bite. People became as jagged and ruined as the buildings.

First they lost their names, and everyone else's names too. They lost the name of the City.

They didn't know why they were there. They didn't know who they belonged to. They didn't remember, and they started to fade.

Entire families would watch each other vanish, the scratching and the ringing carving away their sanity even as the people they were standing next to lost limbs, became more and more translucent till eventually they became wispy and faded away. Their families watched and didn't know why they felt so profoundly sad. They didn't remember that there had been anyone there a few minutes ago. They faded away too, soon after.

No one made a sound, that's what she remembered. Even when people first clustered together, desperate to cling to each other and make sense of what had happened, the voices were muted and choked. The City took that, so that the names would be easy to steal. What good is a name if you can't use it?

She supposed that at some point she had a name. Perhaps there had even been people who brought her joy by saying it. She had been alone for a while. It didn't take long for people to realize that when they gathered, the vanishing came more quickly. The City saw their weakness, and delighted in it.

But it isn't so simple to destroy people. Take voices and take companionship and take memories, but people will fight back. They forged new ways of communicating—hidden caches throughout the rubble where they hid their weapons. Survival meant isolation. The caches were the only way to communicate, the only way to cling to the last vestiges of human connection.

She uncurled from against the wall, her heartbeat returned to normal and her breathing steady. With fingers that shook only slightly, she untied the tired, fraying cord from around the parcel. She pulled back the canvas and her lips curved up at the corners.

On the floor in front of her were weapons. Some jars of homemade paint. A carefully sharpened bit of glass. Some scraps of brilliantly colored fabric, stained but still vibrant.

She began with the fabric, ripping bits of her drab gray clothing and looping the cloth through so that it could be tied in place. Bits of pink clashed alongside safety orange, while a brilliant red bandana around her head warred with the yellow ribbons laced into her hair.

Next, the paint. She dipped her fingers into the jars, smearing her clothing and skin with the slimy gunk. It was no professional compound, for sure, but it dried and remained crusted, which was all that she needed.

Flames of color licked at her, but she knew it was not enough.

The final step was the glass. She gritted her teeth and quickly slashed across her arms several times, fresh red lines surging into existence, the older, gentler scars fading into the background at the aggression of the new gouges.

She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. This was the choice she made. This was the choice they made, the people. They fought for themselves. They clung to some belief, vain or not, that it meant something.

She carefully screwed the top back onto the jar and wiped the glass on her clothes. They were put back into the canvas, along with the few remaining scraps of fabric, and everything was tied up again, a grungy gift of survival for the few.

She would return it to the pile where she had found it, so that someone else who knew about the drop could use it. Then, she would strike out to find more things to hide. She was better at finding food than finding color; she tried to leave provisions in the drops where she collected colors.

Sometimes she would see another person and their eyes would meet briefly. They would nod, but that would be all—they would have to hurry on their way before they aroused suspicion or drew attention. A brief meeting of eyes and a tiny nod could sustain her through cold nights and empty drops, when she ran low on color and couldn't close her eyes for fear of the scratching.

As she stood back up from burying the parcel back beneath the debris, she saw another figure. This one, unlike the last one, was distinct. It was another woman, tall and poised for flight, standing on the tattered remains of a fire escape across the street.

The woman blazed with color, from the paint and the fabric that graced her clothes to the rich caramel of her skin.

She looked up at the woman, their eyes meeting. They held the gaze for several seconds, never breaking the silence as they spoke. They nodded.

Then like that, the woman was gone, running down the street in a flare of color.

Watching down the street till the other woman was out of sight, she finally started walking in the opposite direction. She was tired; she hadn't slept well in days, and at long last she had enough color that she could sleep safely for a few hours. She had her armor against the vanishing; the ringing would wake her up before all her pigment was gone and the City could start to truly eat her.



No one had ever tried to defeat it.

Well, she supposed, perhaps someone had, but no one remembered. Perhaps those memories got eaten up.

But then, she suspected, everyone was too busy trying to stay corporeal to worry about truly fighting back. It was hard enough to not disappear; it was hard enough to keep what you had. Who could focus on fighting when there was surviving to be done? Fighting was the dream of course—when she sat, assuaging her loneliness with thoughts of eye contact and nods, she dreamed of fighting, of winning. But how could she fight the City?

She stood in the street, looking up. The sky was dispassionate, refusing her the comfort of warmth, refusing her the solace of darkness. It was always there, always looming. More than a sky, it seemed a lid—there is no exit that way. If it felt anything, it was sadistic humor, the spiked teeth of skyscrapers showing its twisted smile. The silence was the City laughing.

How could she fight? She couldn't touch her enemy; it had no face for her to punch.

She frowned. A few quick steps took her from the center of the street to the side of a building. She reached out one hand slowly, touching just the tips of her fingers to the cool wall. Lightly, then more firmly, she pressed her whole hand against it.

A faint smile flickered on her face for a moment.

Suddenly determined, she began striding down the street. She had a destination in mind; there was another cache nearby.