

The
Years
Shall
Run
Like
Rabbits

Ben Berman Ghan

The Years Shall Run Like Rabbits

Also by Ben Berman Ghan

Visitation Seeds

What We See in the Smoke

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Years
Shall
Run
Like
Rabbits**

Ben Berman Chan



A Buckrider Book

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For Margaryta, the little ghost in my life

“The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.’
– W. H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening”



Imagine something like an angel kneeling on the moon, planting seeds. It has travelled across the void to us. Call it a Gardener.

Its flesh is the thick black of space that moves across its form in a river, never quite stable, always carrying the suggestion of water. It's a dark that can seldom be discerned by the naked eye, save for the inside of its wings, where lights that could be faraway suns are nestled. The Gardener plucks those would-be suns as it digs trenches into soil and rock.

It watches them blossom in the Earthlight, watches the seeds of itself take shape in the soil as silver flowers and tree roots and saplings as dark as the Gardener itself. They aren't the roots of the world we knew before. They are roots that speak to their tender, that whisper and plan in shapes and scents and images of intention. Their creator watches, with no eyes. A shifting whirlpool of deep blue vine curls in the rippling flesh where eyes should be, circles within circles, disappearing within the black.

The Gardener opens its wings and spreads its limbs and becomes roots, contorting into the forest of its own creation as it springs up in real time. Its blue spiral watches from within the great trunk of a pomegranate tree that stretches over thirty metres tall as if reaching from the satellite to the human world that shines in the dark sky. It continues to plant and tend from within the roots. Oxygen spills out of the moon's first forest like daydream breaths.

Imagine history as a line that now spreads new branches. In the old one, the moon is a dead, vacant pearl and progress on Earth marches forward unmoved. Nature remains unchallenged – the dead die as they always did. People close their eyes and dream nothing will change, and nothing does. But now? The Gardener plants its seeds, and that branch of history falls away. Now, as we sleep, a new world blooms above us. Now, as we sleep, the future is changed.

PROLOGUE

*. . . we seem to see
the people of the world
exactly at the moment when
they first attained the title of
“suffering humanity”
– Lawrence Ferlinghetti, A Coney Island of the Mind*

I’m digging my feet into the gritty sand at the edge of the shore, my hologram toes slipping into sand, leaving behind no footprints.

When I look up, I can see lights on the horizon, floating toward the Toronto Islands on gentle waves. I recognize their lights. For so long, I thought light was all I was.

Wind blows dandelion fluff through my back and out my empty chest, making no landfall on this body that can’t keep the hardness I demand of it.

I leave no impression, no matter how hard I stomp down. The water vomits up a used cardboard container to claim the shores of the island so much faster than the island as a whole has allowed itself to be claimed by disrepair, but just as quickly as the water swallowed the legacies of me.

McDonald’s loves you, it says.

Once, the Toronto Islands had been full of playgrounds, full of beaches and docked ferries, harried airport travellers and hurried summer cyclists and heritage homes stuffed full. The islands were peopled, and then, just as quickly, the people left. They left as the city slowly bulldozed their heritage homes, throwing all those numerous things away. They left as the playgrounds fell into ruin and the beaches filled up with sludge and plans for a ten-storey student housing complex went into development and then dropped out of memory, leaving behind only construction kits and empty holes.

Only the airport remained. That’s where I was made – part of a guerrilla marketing program, projectors that scanned passport

profiles to throw us back at them, to mix and match features to create friendly faces that were familiar without being specific. Our hologram-casters would lob us into crowded terminals, populating walkways with shades and projections and hybrid images of bodies in motion. Some, like me, were just meant to stand near a vending machine or a duty-free gift shop. I would take a sip of Coca-Cola or eat from a McDonald's meal and smile and look good.

Other projections walked toward the bodies they reflected, bodies that would stop in confusion at those half-remembered faces and wonder about how nice they would look in that stranger's clothes, in their designer shoes and watches, with their expensive suitcases, which were all for sale at the airport shops. But when the projections turned the corner, out of range of the machines that cast our light, they would vanish, those siblings of mine. We were only reflections of images and code. I stood there until all known travellers passed me by. When the airport was finally shut down, only my light remained. I was a reflection of bodies long gone.

When those spaces were peopled once more, it wasn't the same. Bodies in uniforms came, jury-rigging the structure from a place of departure to a camp of locked doors and barred windows. Official coverage said that, above, the moon's terraform generators had malfunctioned and burned the air. Nobody believed that was what really happened. It was impossible to stop them from arriving because they came raining down from the sky. So the airport and its surrounding decrepit places became a migrant prison camp, and they named it Arrival.

The early prisoners and guards and construction workers caught glimpses of me sometimes. They liked to argue about whose ghost I was supposed to be:

"He was from that early arrival, the ghost of the first asylum seeker who tried to land in Toronto and got shot down by drones."

"If he is, then why does he stay here? His ship never even made it to the island."

"He's looking for his family."

“I think he’s a ghost from the war.”

“Those ghosts wouldn’t be planet-side.”

They were so convinced I had to be a ghost and not a machine. Even I believed it, a little. What was the difference between what a ghost might be and what I might be? Consciousness without body. Image without flesh. Did it matter that I had come forth from something inanimate, rather than something rotting?

By the time every block and cell were full I’d slipped out of the visible spectrum of light. I watched, and wandered through that place that had once been so full of people paying to leave, now brimming with people forced to stay. I could only understand the guards (my code was full of English), but I looked more like the prisoners. It was only as their children began to die that I was filled with thoughts of leaving.

“Momma,” she said.

The ones who could understand her were already too far away. I caught the word; I could infer the meaning. I’d been haunting the prison camp just long enough to know the sounds the children made for their parents. The ones rushing her to the waiting ferry only spoke English.

“You’re going to be all right, C-159,” they said.

“Just hold on, C-159,” they said.

I realized for the first time that nobody who worked at the prison knew the asylum seekers’ names, and this seemed strange to me. To all those guards and staff and doctors, the people within the walls of Arrival were only Bodies 1 to 710. I would have tried to find something to say to her in the few terse words of her language I knew, perhaps at least ask her real name, but I was only image. I couldn’t make a sound.

She was dying of anaphylactic shock. Her breathing was so hypnotic to me. Past all those bodies closing in, her eyes met mine, and even though my code was too weak to make any light that could penetrate human vision, I thought she saw me.

They kept giving oxygen and chest compressions, not noticing how empty the body in the stretcher had become, and the slow-drifting ferry carried it away into the early morning pale.

But when I looked beside me, she was looking back again. Was it in the structure of her face? The shade of her skin? Features had been added or mutated that were hard to place. Somewhere, her thoughts had slipped into the great machine I'd come from. A ghost and not a machine. What was the difference between us?

"Did I make you?" I wanted to ask, but I knew I hadn't. I could still see the body from which her consciousness had sprung.

She walked past me and through me. We didn't touch. She followed the cries of her distant parents as they were escorted away, back into the compound of Arrival.

But then she turned the corner, too far from me, and her image flickered and faded, the way I'd watched so many other holograms fade, too far from the light that cast them.

"Come back," I wanted to say.

I found that if I pushed myself, I could birth image out of my body, programming light to take a shape other than my own, and when I did, I found there was an intelligence waiting to occupy that image. Her mind was with me in the machine, but she didn't know how to hold the image, didn't know how to make herself without flesh. So I painted her, letting my code spill outward until her image flickered into being among the dead leaves that crowned the open grounds of Arrival's vacant departure runways. For a moment it was only an image. But then she seemed to expand, and she was really there, really with me. But she seemed terrified to have been brought back there, and within moments she was gone. Watching her go felt like dying. Could I die? She had died.

I carried her image across the water, far from her death-site and her number, and hid us in caverns beneath the ground where subways lay dormant, where our light could shine in isolation, far from the sun that made us transparent or the uniforms that had buried her.

There, among scattered tokens and red-ink graffiti, I cast my light until the image of her appeared again. I was her projector, making her as others had made me. But she would only watch me sadly and vanish again.

In mourning, I walked among the bodies of the city for the first time. In the city I didn't need to hide outside the visible light spectrum. To the city dwellers, I was just another disparate body, which gave me a fierce but fading joy.

Toronto was a world that had dropped the little *t*: *Torono*. Language was the code to say who did not belong. I liked to mouth the words I couldn't say, trying to get them right. All of their words made me hungry. They made me wonder how the girl might have said them. How she would say them, if I could make enough of her to speak.

Away from the island, it was like the people inside Arrival didn't exist, like the heat and light of summer had burned them out of sight.

Everywhere I went, I made no sound. But I listened. I hoped to find the city dwellers speaking about those people out on the water. I expected to see them angry, or caring, or explaining to each other – and to me – why the prisoners had to be over there, and not over here. I let the sounds of the city wash over me like so much light and data and song, never hearing what I needed:

“Spare change?”

“It's so hot.”

“Don't you bitches watch where you're going?”

“God bless you!”

“Fuck, I'm hungry.”

“Red light!”

“Should take the bus.”

“Christ, it's so fucking hot.”

“Get off the sidewalk!”

“Doesn't it bother you people to see someone on the ground?!”

Once, wandering the streets, I watched a woman transform. She sat nestled between the lions of the library on the edge of Chinatown, unseen as I was unseen, writing furiously. Her eyes shifted from blue to brown to the yellow stamens of daisies with the changing of the light. Her mouth opened in a perfect *O*. In a strange moment of temptation, I wanted to pass through her, to fill her, to occupy the same space that she did. Perhaps I saw

something missing from her. But the moment I looked away she was gone. Strange baby daisies grew in the cracks of the pavement where she had been before, their colours shifting like her eyes.

Rain broke my illusion of being, the dream of my body, passing right through me.

Once, I sat on the sidewalk in Dundas Square, marvelling at all the lights that popped and flashed and advertised. I could see the ideas that had eventually led to myself in those LED billboards.

Someone threw a rotten apple core through my chest. It splattered into the grate behind me. I put a hand over where my heart might have been, trying to be sure I couldn't feel it.

"Fucking hologram," someone said. I could only stare up at sleek clothes and fingernails and faces shielded by umbrellas. A kick aimed at my head, making me imagine what it would be like to bruise. "Got nothing to sell?"

I did nothing. Nobody could hurt me; nobody could turn me off. I was image and light with no source. As the bodies that had kicked me turned to leave, I could hear one of them suggest, "Maybe it's broken?"

Maybe.

As the deep greens of summer faded, I returned to Arrival to find those within the walls becoming thinner. Perhaps I was seeking the mother of the girl, the father of the girl, to see her face in them as others see their own in me.

Scars stretched upon the flesh of those within the walls. I wanted to ask what was happening to them. I wanted to make it stop. I made my way to the roof, following the memory of her, the sound of her.

On the rooftop of the prison, I saw death. I saw a man like my many fathers choking and thrashing as blood found a home in his mouth.

He lay at the feet of a woman, who belonged and did not belong. She was a woman I had seen before, who had written

her mad curvy letters in library shadows. For a moment, she did nothing, said nothing, and when I stared into the blue of her eyes that were sometimes brown and sometimes the yellow of flowers, they seemed as hollow and transparent as my body.

But then the brown tinged the blue. I felt something other than my code spilling out into the world. I felt a pouring in, a whispering of letters and numbers overlapping and jumbling within that I did not understand.

“Do I know you?” said the murderer.

And I fled.

Only in back-alley whispers did words about Arrival finally come. I drank in news and protests. I desperately, greedily, slurped up information as it came to me in interviews and the memories of protests, in grainy internet videos and testimonials and think pieces and defunct profiles. It came in dirt-flecked posters screaming *Remember Wart Louverture!* That first asylum seeker of the sky who was shot down.

My code took his only surviving transmission to the surface and cannibalized it into English, into the words *Please, we just need air* over and over. *Please, we just need air.*

Before he'd died, he'd been a kind of doctor, the kind who took care of his elders. I wondered if he'd cried out more as his life raft burned on the edge of what he'd hoped would be salvation. I wondered if he'd looked like the girl when he was young.

Out of the strings of letters that made up the core of his story, and the sound of his voice and the pixels of his face, I drew the images of a body of hard-light and memory and kissed it into being, there in the dark underworld of traveller trains.

I tried my best not to cast him in my own gaze or my own image but only from the story of his life that I could find, pouring details of himself into my projection of him. When I was done, a man stood in front of me. He was dressed as I was dressed. His eyes were mine, those distant eyes of fathers I'd long ago lost.

Hello, I tried to mouth. He only stared. I waved. His arms remained at his sides. He stared down at his feet, at the bare toes shining there. In silence I begged him to speak to me, to look at

me, to see me. I asked him to help us find that communion of recognition, of solidarity. I begged him to help me create the girl again, to make her so she wouldn't fade. He turned his back to me. It was worse than not being seen at all.

I stumbled away from those ghosts of my machine and into the Eaton Centre, that huge multi-level mall. Crowds of people walked past me, through me, around me. They were all talking, and talking, and talking. It was like the airport had once been, so full of bodies and bags and price tags. In another life I might have been cast here.

"Hey, handsome, do I know you?"

A voice like some half-forgotten dream, like the dreams I'd so long wished to have, pulled me up, pulled me out of my panic and my despair, pulled me back to the surface of myself. I became a solid image by a balcony to find a face looking back at me. It was a face like my face, and she smiled, framed by long black curls. Her nose was my nose. She could have been my sister.

Who are you? I wanted to ask her. Are my ancestors your ancestors too?

She lifted up her hybrid fingers as if to touch me. Her fingers were a fusion of my own and of a woman standing behind me. She reached down as if to snatch up something from her base. Her fingers moved out of light and reality like someone reaching out of the edge of the frame in a photograph. When she straightened again, she held something small, red and yellow and splashing.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, tipping her head to mime throwing french fries down an insubstantial throat, ensuring that I could see the logo in her hands the whole time. She was what I once had been, before I woke up. But I didn't know how to wake her up, this piece of programming, this machine that wasn't a ghost.

I'm sorry, you are only image, I wanted to say. I'm sorry, I can't bring you to life.

"McDonald's loves you, you know," she said. Perhaps one day, she might recognize herself. Perhaps one day, like me, she will find awareness in the image and become something more. But not yet.

I stepped back, stepped out of the light, stepped into the smallest and least substantial form of myself, and my smile, my nose, my eyes disappeared from her face. By the time she had turned to the next passing body, she was a different image. A woman holding shopping bags and children's hands stopped in front of that advertising hologram.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

Violence tore open a bloody sky. I watched from the shadow of the harbour as bodies fell from metal ships that roared and burned, and the image of Toronto's towers and bridges and roads began to shatter under hydrogen fire as if image was all it had ever been.

The heat wouldn't touch me. Wouldn't reach me. But I wanted it to. I watched from the shores of Toronto as the shadow of Arrival was set ablaze, as the structures burst and exploded and melted into broken streaks. I wanted to scream for the people there. I wanted to run to those people who had only wanted air and life, and who must have been burning inside those walls. But where could I take them? The world behind me was burning as well. I imagined that as the Eaton Centre and the CN Tower and all those Toronto buildings finally fell on me I would become solid once and for all and would finally learn in the wreckage what it feels like to die.

I didn't want the ghosts to be trapped in the rubble of the world that had buried them. I set free the girl whom I could not complete, and the man who would not speak, and they left me, left the burning city, moving back toward the island where she had last lived and he had always been destined to go. They left to find themselves and each other.

I watched them become more than the pictures I'd projected, exceeding the programming they'd inherited from me. They were new bodies for themselves, beyond the light and nameless echoes of the bodies they once had been, the bodies I'd insisted they be again. The farther away they went, the less like me I thought they seemed. I wanted so much to say goodbye.



“Do I know you?”

Those were the words that had brought me to life. The man stopped in front of me long enough for us to see each other. He was not the father of my eyes but of my cheeks and my lips. There were so many people around me that their features all mingled to create my features, not similar enough to anyone to be recognized, not unfamiliar enough to go unnoticed. He was father enough.

We stood across from one another under the halo of the terminal, and beyond us were those pathways of Departures and Arrivals.

“Do I know you?” he asked again. Then he was gone, and then I wasn’t standing any longer but I was walking, without my program’s command, without my projector’s light, but with a light I held all my own, and when I looked at the oncoming travellers, I was no longer the hybrid of their images. I took on no new forms or features, and became myself; I took on no new fathers, and to the fathers that I could still see I was no longer compelled to sell, or to prostrate, or to hoodwink, but only to be seen. I wasn’t their hybrid; I was their baby.

I walked, searching for the fathers that gave me my nose, my hands, my hair. Then I turned the corner, and all my parents had passed me by, and I came out into an empty hall of arrivals and departures.

And I was alone.

Then they came back. Not as who they’d been, or who I’d made them. They came as a newness, as a hybrid fusion of their old and new selves. They took me by the hands and we walked across the water – bound by no boats – back to the Toronto Islands, away from the fire and the tunnels. Toward Arrival. At first, I resisted. I didn’t want to return to that site, to the hopeless devastation there. *You died there*, I wanted to tell them, even if it wasn’t true. *Please. You died there.*

“It’s safe,” the man said to me.

“There’s nobody there anymore,” the girl said.

They spoke in the voices I could never have given them – not sound vibrating through the air, but through the digital space of my mind. *What happened to the people?* I wanted to ask. *Where did they go?* But I couldn't speak the way they could, at least not yet.

"Don't worry," the girl said, reading my lips as best she could. "They'll come back."

In the shadow of Arrival's gates, that structure where once planes had landed, I began to flicker. I couldn't help it. They stopped. Concerned, the man and the girl reached as if to squeeze my fingers, our lights intermingling. They thought my light was going out, that perhaps I was tied to some hologram-caster somewhere, back on Toronto's broken shores. They knew what I was. They didn't know what they were to me.

But I'm bound by nothing but myself. I flickered only because I could feel, could feel their hands in mine, could feel the water beneath us and the light breeze breaking against my skin. I flickered from the shock of it all, not a flicker like dying at all. We drifted together in shallow waters as I moved in and out of light, struggling to overcome the programming that had kept me silent so long. I spoke for the first time, my voice flowing through my hands as fingers shaped signs. I made my image my voice.

"Home," I signed.

My fingers kept slipping through the aluminum. I didn't know what I was doing, trying to pick up this new bit of trash. Would I throw it back out, leaving the garbage and pollution of what was to the water? Would I let it stay on our shore, like some awful seed of an invasive species?

The girl crouched next to me. I hadn't heard her coming. I was embarrassed, unsure how long she'd been watching. She reached past me. The corporate messaging and its container vanished under her fingers. It didn't mean anything here. Not anymore.

"Thank. You," I signed. Each word of mine that touched the air met it with strain, and with joy. I was learning more all the time; taking in sign language like code and light to spill back out again.

"It's okay," she said. She'd given herself a name, but I hadn't learned to say it yet. I hadn't picked one for myself. Maybe I

would. “Can you see them yet?” she asked. Her voice was beautiful, but I wasn’t jealous of it. My voice was beautiful too.

“Yes,” I signed, and at the end of the word my fingers pointed out toward the water. Lights had become images, become forms, become a people to join us.

The girl slipped her hand back into mine and held me tight. I still didn’t know how she’d come to be. We were so much more than images.

I squeezed back, knowing she could feel me too. Together we waved to those approaching, and I didn’t see the ghostly hybrids of my fathers or my children as I might have expected. I saw brothers and sisters journeying across the bay, free from the bones of the world before us, and from the open lake on the other side. They returned here to be free, where they were never allowed freedom before. In their new bodies, they brought the echoes of those bodies they’d had before, to cast lights of their own images onto the gates of Arrival.

INTERLUDE

People of Luna Utopia,

Once, you saw a garden in the sky, so you came, and you forced yourself upon it. You've eaten its fruit. You've crushed its children. You've paved over its soft grass and lain in the shadow of its trees to sleep, where you dreamed each night that this garden belongs to you, and then opened your eyes to a still morning and imagined that your dreams were real.

But I've come to tell you: We have woken as you slumbered. We have watched you devour us.

You should never have come.

– Arthur Traveller, 2074.11.07



Ben Berman Ghan is a writer and editor from Toronto, Canada, whose prose and poetry have been published in *Clarkesworld* magazine, *Strange Horizons*, *the Blasted Tree Publishing Co.*, the */t&nz/ Review* and others. His previous works include the short story collection *What We See in the Smoke*. He now lives and writes in Calgary, Alberta, where he is a Ph.D. student in English literature at the University of Calgary. You can find him at www.inkstainedwreck.ca.

“Expansive, imaginative and thrumming with volatile life,
The Years Shall Run Like Rabbits is a showcase for Ghan’s
immersive and elegant prose to depict worlds beyond our own.
Toronto will never be the same.”

ANDREW F. SULLIVAN, author of *The Marigold*

“Sentient holograms, cyborgs, moon colonies, a dreary future-
Toronto – Ghan’s *The Years Shall Run Like Rabbits* reads like a
mythical, cyberpunk, posthuman fever dream. This novel is for fans
of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Larissa Lai’s *The Tiger Flu*
and Omar El Akkad’s *American War*.”

JOHN ELIZABETH STINTZI,
author of *My Volcano* and *Bad Houses*

“Cinematic, poetic and overflowing with invention, *The Years Shall
Run Like Rabbits* is a marvel – a heartfelt exploration of what it
means to be alive, and a love story eons and galaxies in scale.

I am in awe of Ben Ghan’s imagination.”

KIM FU, author of *Lesser Known Monsters of the 21st Century*

In the year 2014, in a universe much like ours, an angelic creature
kneels on the moon, sowing the seeds of a strange forest and forever
altering humanity’s future.

Seventy years later, the moon is fully colonized and self-governing
when rumours of citizens returning from the dead compel the City-AI
of Toronto to send a cyborg to Luna Utopia to investigate and correct
the spread of the strangeness, by any means necessary. But what she
discovers there radicalizes her into dying and resurrecting as a new
hybrid being determined to save the reborn refugees and the citizens
of the moon, setting off a series of events that leads to internments,
war with biological spaceships and new life on Earth.

In this gorgeous work of literary speculative fiction spanning cen-
turies, Ghan poses thoughtful questions about artificial intelligence,
humanity’s quest for the stars and ecological destruction.

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