

RICH SHAPERO

*Arms*

FROM THE

SEA

*a novel*

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

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## 1 *A Living Wheel*

The chambers of Fossil Wells. Moonlight and thick shadow allowed Lyle to imagine them as they once were. Water's power had been preserved there, incised where streams whirled potholes, hollowed into caverns as the gorge opened up and the currents drilled deeper. The Wells were rock salt, and from the bedded strata of its pockets a myriad creatures hailed and beckoned, as if expecting some observer from the future to return them to life.

A man of twenty-six years, he was wiry with a round head and hair stiff as straw. He stood on a ledge of the east wall. Because the gorge ran through city center, the tops of tall buildings were visible. He couldn't see the patrols, but a streamer of salt dust glittered in the moonlight, marking their presence around the construction on the west rim of the gorge. Here, amid the ruins of the east wall, Lyle was alone.

The wells around him had been blasted and cleared. The jagged lips and shattered shells looked like so many broken pots fallen off a supply transport. He shut the loss out of his mind, facing a spot he remembered—directly opposite—with a perfect white bowl. He imagined he was curled inside it, dreaming of the ancient sea. The night sky was clear, but he drew clouds across it, combers that roiled like waves above him. And when he closed his eyes, the currents caught him. He was doubled and tumbling, senseless and breathless, immersed in the swarm of unusual lives, embraced in kinship by the primeval rivers.

He parted his lids, and through the part he could see the rear wall of the white bowl, its hardened shell like the skull of some alien mind. A mind that dreamt and created, nourished and sustained; the mind that conceived of the boundless ocean and filled its unfailing currents.

His loyalty was to that eternal blue, however distant and vague. His time here in the desert— Perhaps it was right that it should end.

Lyle drew a breath and turned, finding hand grips and footholds in the shattered wall, climbing out of the Wells. His hands were large and his legs were strong, and the speed of his ascent showed the skill of one who'd spent years among the salt cliffs. His temperament was impulsive, but his movements were measured and deliberate, as if they'd been learned in a medium denser than air.

As he rose onto the east rim, he checked the pathway and the white buildings opposite, pale eyes darting, lips trembling,

coughing and brushing his yellow hair aside. He opened his backpack, retrieved a mask and drew it over his face: a grinning corpse. Then he turned and hurried toward the pathway.



Along a white street, white vehicles droned. Their headlights rayed through the salt spicules. Lyle was hidden in the dimness, but as he turned, the moon shone on a withered cheek and nose. The corpse face scanned the thoroughfare. The traffic was thin. He removed a metal cylinder from his pack and held it to his nape, scrambling the tuner. Twenty minutes, at most. Here, at city center, tracers would recover his vectors quickly. He turned and gripped the crusted bars, salt crystals squealing in his fists, and mounted the white gate. Ten feet to its spikes and over, dropping to the ground on the far side. Then across the saltstone pavers of the park grounds.

The memorial towered over him, stark white beneath the moon and the spotlight beams, its blades and bands glittering, the long facets of the tapering spire flashing as he approached. In the shadows, hugging its pediment, Lyle clipped into the rope coiled on his shoulder. Not a moment wasted—

His hands were on the rock salt. He was ascending.

He angled across the base, using weather pits for toeholds, securing his hands in cracks and on nubs. Ten feet up, he reached a ragged sill with a line of repeated symbols—stylized limbs, clasped in fellowship. Above, pairs of tall tablets like shuttered windows. Through the holes in his mask, his lips

were tense, his eyes like embers blown from coals. He pulled the hammer from his waistband and found a piton in his pocket. *Tap, tap.* The salt-covered spike sank into the memorial, and he resumed the climb, following a groove between casements.

His frame was thin, but his legs were sure and his arms banded with muscle. He moved carefully, jaming knees and elbows, and when he was eye level with the tablet tops, he put in another spike. It was past midnight, but the air was stifling. Beneath the jaw of his mask, a rill of sweat descended, darkening the salt that powdered his neck. Below, the white courtyard surrounding the memorial extended on all sides, and beyond the grounds, a labyrinth of pale roads and bleached buildings. White vehicles, white sanctuaries with people in them, sealed behind glass, their faces rigid and cracked, dusted with chalk.

Lyle surmounted a row of open eyes, carved by craftsmen before he was born. Below a second tier of tablets he put in another anchor. And as he topped those, a sill carved with starbursts came into view, symbols of liberated understanding. The people who chiseled this were a simple lot, and trusting.

He paused on the sill and put in another spike. *Tap, tap.*

Two guards crossed the front court. Lyle froze. Had they heard him? Were they responding to a signaling device he'd tripped without knowing? They panned strobe lights across the base of the tower. And now the strobes ran up it, pausing at the top. Lyle held his breath. A moment later the lights were doused. He could hear the guards muttering, reporting

through their tuners. Steps. They were moving again, disappearing into the shadows.

His relief was mixed with anger. He turned away as from something insufferable, pulling his fingers to limber them. The sill carved with starbursts circled the memorial like a starched skirt. To delay was foolhardy, but emotion forced him: he looked out over the roofs of the city to the ridges rising in the distance. White, all white. The encrusted warrens, the nameless flats, the mountain walls— A dead world, as far as the eye could see. He scanned the southern edge of the urban labyrinth. There, beyond a confusion of cranes and scaffolding, were the paths of his childhood. A ruined shack. And inside, those to whom he owed life. A helpless mother with a runneled face and a crooked hand. Somehow the uncertain boy she loved had become an enemy of the State.

Lyle shifted his feet on the sill and faced the heights. Pinnacles were clustered around the central spire. He squeezed between two, finding toeholds and handholds, moving through the spotlight beams, rising slowly with the moon behind him like some hero from mythology, approaching the spire and its imposing statue.

He was bridging the gap, scrabbling at the steeple's base, hunched like a malcontent gargoyle determined to perch on a higher place. He straightened and started up it, clinging—

The spire was studded with cubes and pyramids. He gripped them, climbing without protection, approaching the globe at its top. The father of the State stood thirty feet tall, facing the stars, his sandals on the sphere. Glittering and rigid,

he posed for the generations, imagining himself the pride of his people.

Lyle reached the globe and muscled over it, getting his hand on one of the patriarch's feet. His arms circled the giant's ankle.

Up, under the statue's right side, feeling over the planes and curves, working around his front. Lyle inched up his pant leg, hugging the calf, planting a foot on a fold at his knee. The patriarch's hand was raised, addressing the multitudes. The difference in size struck Lyle powerfully. The grip of Salt had withstood the centuries, the passing of oceans, the joining of continents. Did he think he could change that?

He drew his right arm back and hammered a bolt into the patriarch's groin, very much in view now. He scanned the streets below. No one seemed to be watching, but there were undoubtedly sensors— Were alarms already sounding?

No fear, no hesitation—

Lyle moved up the patriarch's front, gripping folds in his sweater, finding footholds on his belt. *Clumsy job*, he rated the sculpting. The carvers had aimed at spartan dignity, but the result was homely and crude. Who was he really, this author of the First Liberation? A man of passion and conviction, a man who felt fear and gambled his life. A great fool, but a brave one.

Lyle put a bolt in his sternum. The ringing of his hammer shattered the silence. He shifted his gaze to the quiet city and back, then boosted himself onto the statue's bicep, straddling his shoulder and scooting along it.

Closer, closer—

Lyle rose beneath his chin, standing in midair at the top of the memorial. A step forward, and another—

The corner of the great mouth was turned up, the nostrils flared. His expression was stern, as if he could hear Lyle or smell him. The sculpted eyes glared as Lyle raised his hammer and drove a spike into his lip, above the eyetooth. And then—

Salt flew as Lyle battered his visage. Pocks at first. A pit in his cheek. The lower lip sagged and the smirk faded. Then the end of his nose and an eye—Lyle's hammer made quick work of it, leaving nothing but an empty socket.

Pieces rained onto the courtyard below. As Lyle started on the other eye, voices reached him.

Trouble.

The sound of footfalls on the pavers. Arc lights, many of them, swept over the patriarch's backside. Lyle paused, hammer drawn back. On the street, vehicles were pulling over. People got out—no uniforms, just Citizens in loose pants and smocks. Across the way, on the third floor, a couple at the window faced the statue, pointing.

On the other side of the park, men in white uniforms appeared, sprinting around a dead fountain, hurrying toward the memorial. The patriarch's front was visible to them, lit by the floods. Across the way, windows had opened. The couple was shouting down to the street. Crowds were gathering around the park's perimeter, faces lined the grating, staring up at the father of the State and the small figure standing on his shoulder.

The moment Lyle had feared.

“Avoiding detection will be difficult,” the leader of Solution had said earlier that evening. The insurgents thought he was mad. All they saw was his privilege. They didn’t understand how he’d been betrayed. How he’d been left with no choice but to barter away everything that mattered to him.

A siren started up close by—the sound of Helpers roused to action. Others joined it in quick succession, as if the metropolis itself was wounded and howling from all its precincts.

“Citizen El-mu-zero-five-nine-delta—” A robotic voice sounded in his head. Lyle touched the spot above his nape where the tuner was implanted. “You have entered a restricted area,” she said. “Your actions are unlawful. Remain motionless. An advisor will be with you shortly.”

They couldn’t see what he saw or hear what he was thinking. But he was no longer scrambled. They knew who he was and what he was doing. And that was the end of it.

There would be no forbearance. No more reprieves.

Lyle removed his mask and let a warm breeze take it. In the spotlights, his dripping face was like a cornered beast’s, eyes burning, his blond shocks crushed like weeds. He bucked his head with contempt and tried to smile. The State of Salt would be shaken. In every twist of the urban labyrinth, lights were igniting. People would ask why, and the answers—

None of that mattered. His dream was intact. Defiance protected it. The vision of a sea change was roaring inside him, and there was nothing they could do—now or ever—to take it away.

A ghostly voice echoed through the streets. Speaking through every tuner, the Helper broadcast resounded like the voice of the patriarch himself. An unprovoked crime, the voice said, motive unknown; reassurance the offenders will be caught, directions to secure the public well-being. At the end of the boulevard bordering the park, a platoon appeared.

Lyle's hands were powdered white. Salt crusted his nostrils and circled his lips. He affected a snarl, but what he felt now was nausea and shivering dismay. He was thinking of what remained, of the action he had to take.

"Citizen El-mu-zero-five-nine-delta—" The robot repeated her warning as the platoon marched through the gate, white soldiers in ranks. Armored vehicles were descending on the park from every angle of the city. Transports, paralysis screens, tankers of myelin smoke and swivel-neck launchers. White machines, white armies, white poison—

Lyle found another piton and hammered it into the remains of the patriarch's ear. He dipped his left hand into his smock and retrieved a carved figurine—an imaginary creature with a tube body, looping antennae and a ring of eyes—and he hung the figure on the piton. Then his arm went slack and the tool fell from his hand.

Would there be an upheaval, now or ever? Perhaps the only one possible was in the mind of a misfit, a disconnected soul. For this one, the struggle was over.

His hand returned to his pocket and found what Solution had given him.

Lyle opened his fingers and watched the capsule roll in his

palm, sapphire blue in the pitiless glare. It was time to pour petrol on himself and strike a match. Time to jump off the edge of the world.



Earlier that evening, Lyle had requested a meeting with Solution. When the request was granted, he made his way to the shelter on the salt flats beyond the city's perimeter. The location was out of Helper range, but they scrambled his tuner for safety. Red One, Solution head, was astonished to see him. The damage Lyle did at Helper HQ was public knowledge. How had he gotten his freedom? Some were suspicious, but Red One was convinced he hadn't been turned. No rebel was more rabid than the young sculptor.

Lyle explained what he planned to do. Red One pointed up the dangers and tried to dissuade him. Defacing the statue would disrupt the city, but would it trigger hostilities? He agreed Lyle's notoriety had reached a new level, but Solution wasn't ready to launch an offensive. "You'll never be ready," Lyle fumed. The insurgents could see he was distraught. They shared a hatred for Salt, but when Lyle spouted his litany of the sea, he lost them completely.

"We're cut off from our source," he railed. "Beached, baked— This life, our essence—" He clawed his chest. "It's dying inside us."

Empty stares. When Red One's deputy rolled his eyes, the leader shot him an angry look.

“End the State,” Lyle urged them. “Sweep it away. Starting tonight.” Even as he spoke, he was conscious of the gulf that separated his passion for a revolution in spirit from the changes in government that motivated Solution.

“Avoiding detection will be difficult,” Red One said.

Lyle shook his head, unwilling to think about that. Defiance was everything. He wasn't going to let himself be a pawn of the State.

Red One dismissed the group. “Bring Clean-Cut in here,” he ordered. “And the film of his Expiation.”

“None of them understand. Not a one,” Lyle motioned angrily, taking in the insurgents, the First City and the far-flung empire of Salt.

“To force an appreciation for your sea would require a regime as oppressive as the one we suffer under now.” Red One drew a breath. “You know what will happen if they catch you.”

“They won't,” Lyle said.

“Being in the public eye has consequences.”

A lieutenant led in Clean-Cut, the charismatic leader of Solution who preceded Red One. Lyle was familiar with him and knew his story, but the sight was disturbing nonetheless. The man's face was crossed by jagged seams, like a badly sewn quilt.

The lieutenant set a screen on the desk, and at a nod from Red One he played the broadcast that had been viewed by every adult and school-age child in the State.

“An atrocity,” Lyle said weakly, sensitive to Clean-Cut's presence. He remembered the broadcast. Who could forget it?

The video showed the former leader sitting in a hospital bed, face newly disfigured. A doctor was with him, a tall woman with blond hair, who Lyle knew only too well. She slid her hand into her white coat and eyed the camera, explaining the State's policy of fiat mutilation for dissidents. And then Clean-Cut spoke, confessing his crimes, disavowing his cohorts and pleading for mercy. Lyle's reaction to the broadcast was no different than anyone else's. It was obvious the Expiation was obtained under duress, and it was probably doctored. But between the gruesome punishment and Clean-Cut's apparent submission, the State's intolerance for rebellion was clearly communicated.

"I was foolish, arrogant," Clean-Cut said to the camera. "I ask for the Citizens' forgiveness," he turned to Doctor Wentt, "and the Helpers' mercy."

Red One gestured and the lieutenant stopped the film. Clean-Cut bowed his head.

"He didn't say that," Lyle sighed.

"No, he didn't," Red One said. "All they needed was raw footage. The rest was edits and overdubs. We lost half our outfit. It killed recruiting for three years."

Clean-Cut's humiliation filled the room.

Red One motioned for the lieutenant to leave.

"When you were nobody, you didn't matter," Red One said. "But now—" He nodded at the video screen. "That's how they'd use you."

"I would have chosen death," Clean-Cut said.

“You want to bring down the State—” Red One peered at Lyle. He shifted his gaze to the disfigured man, as if to show Lyle what failure looked like. “Talk to him. You should know what he went through.”

With that, Red One exited the room.

Lyle listened as Clean-Cut described his grisly ordeal: the incarceration, the medicines, the conditions under which the incisions were made and the questioning that followed. When they’d finished, Red One returned.

“Well?”

“I’m going to do it,” Lyle said.

“Give me a week or two,” Red One suggested. “Ask the Minister to give you more time.”

Lyle shook his head. “He can’t.”

Red One regarded him gravely.

“You’ve got your scrambler?” he asked.

Lyle nodded.

The leader led him to a utility closet. “For the security cameras,” he said. He opened the door, and Lyle selected a mask from those hanging there.

“Give me your hand,” Red One said.

When Lyle extended it, Red One turned it palm up and placed the capsule in it.

“If I can muster a resistance,” the leader said, “we’ll be with you.” He grabbed Lyle’s shoulders and shook him.



The capsule glittered in Lyle's palm. He took it between his thumb and forefinger, raising it slowly.

Military vehicles had reached the boulevard below.

Lyle admired the sapphire hue and coruscating reflections, turning the capsule before him. Then he parted his lips and placed it on his tongue.

His hands shook as he knotted the climbing rope and clipped himself to the bolt in the patriarch's face. An involuntary sob, and then his stumbling gaze found its way along a fence of buildings, down the dim boulevard to the dark declivity of Fossil Wells. He imagined he was curled in a favorite chamber, hearing and feeling the ancient currents. He was feverish, delirious. Creatures drifted by, noticing, pausing, fanning fins, flexing appendages. They were swarming around him, ready to accompany him on the journey he was about to make.

He mastered his quivering jaw and bit down, cracking the capsule.

A cold wave expanded from Lyle's mouth, staining his mind midnight blue. Amid the blue, a burst of light—an exploding hub with reaching spokes, spiraling open, turning and turning. Arms red at the center, blue where their urgency pierced the night—a living wheel with numberless arms, all-consuming.

Was this death taking control? Or a glowing call to return to life?

The arms of the wheel reached for Lyle, crossing the boundary between the two.

## 2 *Behold the Sea*

The rumble of transports was mounting. There were more soldiers in the street than at a Liberation Day parade.

Lyle's mystic wheel had dissolved. Beneath him, they had opened the gates of the park and the tankers and launchers were rumbling through, rolling up before a squad of men donning metalized suits. Sedans followed, circling the troops and military vehicles. They screeched to a halt, intelligence agents and State reporters piling out. From the largest, a man in night togs emerged.

The sight amused Lyle. It wasn't the Minister's habit to attend to State business in his bathrobe. Jordan was with him. The young soldier had managed to pull on his coat and pants. Flanked by Jordan and a half-dozen aides, the Minister strode toward the troop commander. The two were directly below now, at the foot of the memorial, conferring. Minister Audrie

put a finger to his ear and lifted his chin, staring up.

“Lyle—” His voice crackled through Lyle’s tuner. “What is this? You’ve done it now.” His practiced calm was gone, his tone harsh. “Some thanks. Damn you. Drown you!”

No Citizens were listening. They were on a closed channel, their words heard only by Helpers.

“Thanks?” Lyle said. “For a thirty-year sentence.”

“That was your doing,” Audrie snapped. “If you’d only—”

“You were lying to me.” Lyle said the words slowly, sadly.

“I was your patron, you fool.”

“You were using me. From the very first day.”

“You had nothing,” Audrie said. “Your talent was wasted.”

“That blab about giving Salt a new soul—” Lyle faltered. “You didn’t care about my creatures.”

“No, I didn’t,” the Minister admitted. “Any more than you cared about my people. No one in Salt wants your sea, Lyle. Can’t you accept that?”

Lyle heard Audrie’s sigh through his tuner.

“There were things we could have done,” the Minister said. “You could have left your mark—”

“All you care about is power,” Lyle told him. “I won’t be used. By any of you,” he added for the Helpers listening in. Then to Audrie, “Your day is over. The Chief will strip you and move you to Sewage.”

Audrie laughed. “You’re a sneeze to me, Lyle. I’ll blow my nose and forget you.”

A runner was cleared through the gate. He raced toward the Minister.

Audrie turned aside, closing the circuit to speak to him. When they'd finished, he reopened the channel. "It's your mother. She's passed. Before this humiliation, thankfully."

Lyle felt like he'd been struck. He reached for the rope as if to steady himself, picturing her motionless on the bed, father seated beside her, despairing.

"A timely send-off," Audrie said acidly, "from your only child. You still have your rights." His voice was hard as stone. "There's some chance of lenience if you—"

"No more bargains," Lyle screamed.

The Minister dodged his head and put his hand to his ear. Lyle saw nothing. His vision was blurred, eyes narrowed and searching. As if he might find her, alive and conscious. Conscious enough to hear him say goodbye.

Traffic on the street was parting. The cordon by the park gates relaxed to admit a second convoy of sedans and military vehicles. Doors opened and more officials and soldiers stepped out. Doctor Wentt was among them. She strode up to Audrie and after a brief exchange, she raised her arm and pointed toward the Minister's car. He headed for it with Jordan at his rear, and a moment later, they disappeared inside.

Lyle heard a click in his tuner, and Wentt turned to face him. She wore a black dress with a red scarf, and her stance was straight as a chisel. The eyes of the Helpers had all shifted to her.

"Will you come down from there?" Wentt asked him.

Her voice was calm, her manner unhurried.

Lyle didn't answer.

“That’s good enough for me,” she said with finality. Wentt raised her arm and waved the troop commander forward, and the gears of the State engaged. The commander barked an order. A unit of soldiers wearing gas masks and headlamps marched forward. They carried ropes and climbing equipment. Another order from the troop commander, and the neck of a nearby launcher swiveled toward the statue. A drone sounded over the hubbub as the barrel telescoped out.

They expected resistance, but retrieving him would be easier than that. All they would need was a van for his body. By the time they reached him, he would be gone. Lyle sensed it now—the drug in the capsule was working.

His balance wavered. The air popped in his ears. He felt weightless, unsubstantial. If he unclipped from the statue, he might float away on the wind.

Lyle closed his eyes. In a few more moments, the nightmare of Salt would be over. He heard the spoken directives below, the shuffle of boots. A scrabbling of hands and feet and the clink of hardware as the masked climbers started up the memorial. No need to watch. He was an artist. From the sounds, he could fill out the scene.

*Crack.* He pictured a puff rising from the muzzle of the launcher. The first bomb of myelin smoke burst over him, billowing like an aureole around the head of the patriarch. The precepts of power set down in those days said nothing about weapons like these or crimes that wounded the pride of the State. But every culture has its trajectory.

A faint *whir*. From a distance.

Aircraft perhaps? Or an effect of the drug. A soundtrack for dying.

The whirl pulsed, swelling and fading, like a resonating membrane in Lyle's head responding to some distant flux. Or a hidden pocket of fluid, trembling with communicated vibration. Perhaps the sound had always been there—like the high-pitched twinkling when you sink your head in calm water, or the stirring in the gel of your eye when you fix on the sun. There was energy in the sound—speed and motion. And detail, like a drop seen under a microscope, teeming with translucent protozoans.

Or—the sound was a memory. Perhaps he was hearing with an ancient ear, the ear of a forebear that swam the primordial seas. The currents still echoed in a hidden chamber of his brain. He was heir to them, feeling their rhythm as surely as the beat of his heart.

The sound of great waters.

Lyle thought, *I'm going home.*

He opened his eyes. The whirl was suddenly louder. In the distance he saw what looked like a giant wave, moonlight caught on its comber. Between white ridges it passed, plunging in an unbroken arc. A fog rose where it landed, and cascades broke loose, silvering the foothills. Water raged down the slopes, crashed onto the valley floor and charged across the salt flats, furious, unstoppable. A wall of water roofed with froth—was it twenty feet high, a hundred?

Lyle felt a moment's hurrah, as if some idle wish had been granted in a waking dream. And then— Shock.

He wasn't dreaming.

The water was descending on him. On his city, his world.

The dark wall advanced rapidly, drowning the basin—

No one saw it. White soldiers scurried below like a horde of ants intent on their business.

Lyle swung his arm toward the wave, motioning frantically. The liquid cliff reached the city's edge and fell in a great curl, its scoop lined with foam, its crown bristling with fountains. Spray irised in the moonlight, dressing the comber in rainbow hues. The impact was like bombs going off, and the outer precincts vanished in the blast.

The roar echoed inside him, a horror-filled hollow brimming with bodies. Death, death for so many. Beneath islets of flying foam, currents tumbled and ripped, reaching from the whorls of vapor, swarming over each other, headed straight for his birthplace. In an instant, the angry deluge swallowed it. Mother, father—

The soldiers finally heard it, the white ants froze in their tracks. A roar and a hissing, the sound of pressure released. Lyle saw what they couldn't—the swath of ruin, houses dashed to pieces, buildings uprooted, spinning and dragged down. The flood was boiling through the City of Salt, racing for the park at its center.

Schoolmates, friends, children in bed, Red One and Clean-Cut and the Museum director. Lyle saw their faces as the water struck them. It was the end for them all.

The sirens died quickly, one after another. The ghostly voice of the broadcast alert was muffled and gagged. Doctor

Wentt stood in her black dress, turning her head. The couple on the third floor were wide-eyed, shouting into their tuners. Would they have time to explain? No, it was happening *right now*.

Between the tall buildings, giant windrows appeared. The buildings tipped and swayed and were torn from their foundations. The flood crashed through the park grating, rushing upon the platoons and vehicles, swallowing everything. The crowds circling the park were engulfed, roiled together with the soldiers and machines of the State, vanishing in the churn.

Lyle was choked with dread, clinging to his anchor, shaking in every part. A high-rise rolled past like a log, frantic faces in windows, pleading, trying to escape. Another—panes shattered, bodies emerging—broached a wave and was sucked under. A naked woman clinging to a bedframe gazed up at him, shocked, staring— Screams from rooftops, bobbing heads, cries from the rafting debris. Cries for a halt. But everything was in motion.

On the racing tide, an image was superimposed, rising unbidden. Lyle saw his mother in a silver gondola staring up at the sky. His father was seated beside her, holding her hand, scanning the melee for a glimpse of his son.

Beyond the park, the deluge rolled on, swamping what remained of the city. On a hill to the north, the Helper stronghold— An arm of the flow hooked and rose around it, crushing it like an empty carton. The waters had drowned the memorial's pediment and lower casements, and they were rising quickly, swallowing the limbs of fellowship, the open eyes,

the starbursts of wisdom. The statue trembled beneath Lyle's feet. As he watched, the currents reached the masked climbers and tore them from their holds.

Cascades were still plunging through the pass. The inland lake continued to grow, its wave fronts moving toward the distant range. The last siren in the city was silenced. On every side, deep funnels whirled, dragging buildings and debris and people down—spiral eddies with foam tracers, like the turning thoughts of an alien mind. Beneath the surface, the currents were writhing and twisting in untold combinations.

Cold spray splattered Lyle's front and prickled his face. The waters had reached the top of the steeple. The globe bobbed like a buoy, and the next moment the statue's sandals were soaked. The father of the State stood on his ankles, his knees—  
And then—

The increase slowed.

The funnels flattened.

Lyle watched, mistrustful. Was the flooding over? The city and its people had vanished, and as the minutes crept by, the night grew still. Beneath the moon, the water extended in a continuous sheet, like molten silver.

It had found its level.

Lyle clung to his anchor, turning full around, taking in what the sea had done. All that remained were the peaks in the distance, a derelict statue sunk to its groin— And one living soul clipped to its head.



Exhaustion overcame him. When Lyle revived, the sky was paling. A glow was visible behind the mountains in the east. Around him, on every side—the sea.

It spread like a kaleidoscope fabric, emerald and blue, teal and chartreuse and aquamarine, with knots of froth woven through it—silver knots that tied and untied as he watched. Other than the darts of wind snagging its surface, the waters were calm. Below his feet, they lapped against the statue's side.

He imagined the city beneath him, with all those whose loss was beyond remedy. Those he loved and cared about. And those he did not: the great mass of humanity wedded to a life he hated, fools and Helpers. He felt an unreasoning guilt, as if through his longing for the vanished sea, he had wished this doom upon them.

A gabbling intruded. To the north Lyle saw a line of dark birds winding toward him, the green in their wings catching the sun. On the water behind them—

Was it possible?

A small craft was approaching—one made buoyant by air—an inflatable with a hull of silver tubes. Lyle could hear the hum of its engine. In the stern, a seaman sat with his hand on the throttle.

The birds turned a circle around him. Their bodies were thin with long snaking necks. One sculled its wings and descended, settling on the patriarch's head. Its beak was hooked, eyes glaring. It avoided Lyle's gaze, twisting its neck half around while the others back-batted and alighted on the craft.

The seaman rose from a thwart. His frame was large, black beard and sea hat, with oilskins the color of nickel, jotted and stained, as weathered as his face. He backed off the throttle, gliding. The inflatable's bow bumped the statue's hip, and the man moved to secure a line to the bolt in the patriarch's groin.

Lyle eyed him, perplexed.

The man reached into his pocket and drew out a watch. As he opened the lid, there was a wink of light.

"A short passage," he said in a smoky voice. "Like the time you've been hanging here. No time at all."

He checked the watch, snapped the lid closed and returned it to his pocket. "Unclip yourself," the man said.

Lyle was hanging in his harness. His pants were bunched and his smock was torn.

"Quickly," he gestured. "Lower yourself down."

"Who are you?"

"Blednishev," the man said. His face was solemn, lined and scarred, with thick lips and a broad nose. "Please, Lyle. Do what I say."

A quirk of lighting gave the man two different eyes—one silver and alien, the other dark and kindly. Lyle drew comfort from the kind one. He grabbed the rope with one hand and dug his feet into the statue's front, taking weight off his harness. As he sprang the catch, the gabbling mounted.

"Picket birds," Blednishev answered his look. "Our escorts. They're here to protect you."

"From what?" Lyle wondered.

The seaman motioned.

Lyle slid down the rope, letting Blednishev guide his legs into the craft.

“Here,” he pointed. “Stretch yourself out.” The seaman handed Lyle a blanket. “Pull that over you. You’re shivering.”

Lyle collapsed on the floor of the inflatable, picket birds eyeing him from the gunnels.

Blednishev loosened the mooring, pushed off and opened the throttle. The birds lifted back into the air, and the sentinel rose from the patriarch’s head. They formed a line, and the inflatable followed them, planing over the water.

“Luck is with you,” the seaman said without turning. “You’re in our care now.”

“Where are we going?”

“North, where the sea meets the clouds.” Blednishev expanded his chest, as if he imagined chill winds were beating against it. “The birds know the way.”

### 3 *Your Only Chance*

**L**roggy?” Blednishev asked.

“Where am I?” Lyle raised himself slowly.

“Don’t tip the boat.”

Lyle remained on his hip, eyeing the man and the humming turbines behind him. There was a black leather satchel by his boot. As Lyle’s eyes fell on it, Blednishev stooped and slid it beneath a thwart. He pulled his watch from his pocket and checked the time.

“How long was I out?”

“Less than an hour,” Blednishev replied.

Lyle sat up, expecting floodwater to spread in every direction. But the vista had changed completely. They were motor-ing beside cliffs, and the rock was unlike any he’d seen. It was sheer and blue and mirror-smooth, and the water was too. It looked as if you could walk across it. The craft was moving at high speed, nose up, skimming the glassy surface.

Lyle draped his arm over the side. A moment's hesitation, wondering at the speed and polish, and then he plunged his hand in. The water shocked his senses. It was thick and silky. He felt its coolness and blueness streaming through his fingers, in his palm and wrist, climbing his arm. He'd never touched a substance so sinuous or seen hues so rich—

Ahead the passage narrowed and turned, the walls looped with coves. Trickle brightened and multiplied, dripping from arches, ringing in pools, echoing in grottoes. Blue cloisters, turquoise arcades—blue, all blue, as if the rock had drawn its color from the water.

Lyle's eyes widened, his lips parted and the cool air passed between them. The fear and uncertainty of his final act, and of the life that preceded it, dissolved. He lifted his hand from the cold liquid, watching the stripe undulate as the currents embraced it, feeling a calm he'd never felt. It was morning. On his right, the rayed sun appeared above the blue galleries like an amber pecten.

"The capsule," Lyle muttered. "Am I dead, or dying?"

"Was that what you wanted?" Blednishev gazed down the passage.

"No. I wanted to live in a different world."

The blue arcades vanished behind them and new ones appeared, perfectly reflected.

"Like this," Lyle said.

He stared at the shifting swells, imagining the cool caresses and silvery bubbles against his skin. "I want to go in." As he spoke, Lyle quivered, his impulse mixed with

trepidation. What did he know of this foreign element?

Blednishev nodded. "There's a place up ahead."

The arches were opening, extending into channels on either side. Lyle peered down their winding courses.

"Where did the flood come from?"

"Our maker sent it," the seaman replied.

"Maker?"

Through the glassy water, the gripping roots of the arches were muscled and twisted like the limbs of giant amphibians.

"I serve a god unknown to you," Blednishev said. "He sent the water and the birds, and me along with them. To deliver you from a dying world."

"A god." Lyle laughed.

Blednishev met his gaze, solemn as the grave.

"God of what?"

"Everything here, in this heaven." The seaman faced forward.

"Heaven is a reward," Lyle said. "For good behavior."

Blednishev shook his head. "Heaven is the wellspring of beauty and freedom."

Images flashed before Lyle. Hands raised in the waters— Faces beneath swells, the woman on the bedframe, the shock in her eyes— "It was terrible."

"Terrible?"

"The flood. He drowned everyone."

"Were there some worth saving?" Blednishev squinted at him.

"Not all of them were salt mites," Lyle replied.

“He wasn’t thinking of them,” the seaman said. “His concern was for you.”

Lyle was bewildered. Lost in a dream, a half-life.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because of your gift. Because you yearned for the natal sea.” Blednishev eyed the silky surface beyond the prow. “Your hardships saddened him. They touched me as well. Can one young man change a civilization? That’s what preyed on me as I ran to fetch you. As I sat by the kicker, watching the reflection of sun and stars, seeing the sunken cities passing beneath me.”

“Cities—”

“The Empire of Salt is under the sea.”

“All of it?”

Blednishev peered down, as if he could see traces below. “The broken buildings were like ancient ruins, the relics of a forgotten race.”

He turned his eyes on Lyle. “These were your people. It’s right that you feel some responsibility for them. But— If they were as my master wished them to be, the waters would have welcomed them.”

“I don’t understand you,” Lyle said.

“Hang on,” Blednishev warned.

Lyle grasped a cleat, salt spicules stinging his palms, squealing beneath him as he shifted his thighs. The inflatable rounded a lapis point, shivering, throwing a thick plume behind them. The coves here were close, their blue hollows like bowls on edge or the gills of a sea creature viewed from inside. Straggles of mist drifted from the openings.

As the craft steadied, Lyle opened his blanket. His clothing was rumpled and dusted with salt, as it was on the steeple. He felt his hair. Still damp. He unfastened the harness and drew his legs through it. Blednishev lifted his hat by the visor and set it down. His hair was black and slicked straight back.

“How well do you know your god?” Lyle asked.

“I didn’t exist when he fashioned this heaven.” Blednishev nodded at the coves. “But I was with him on many conquests.”

“Conquests?”

“There are other blue realms. Worlds he transformed. Heavens like this. The cosmos is full of them.”

*The cosmos*, Lyle thought. The world of Salt was far behind him.



Like most of his generation, Lyle attended school till the age of sixteen. As a child, he had shown little interest in either studies or Pleasures, and as he matured he showed even less. He received instruction indifferently, without complaint. And he viewed and listened to the mandatory broadcasts without objection. But when it came to optional Pleasures provided online, he kept his selector off and his attitude was scornful. In this he was following a family tradition. During the days of the Second Liberation, his great-grandfather had been an obstructionist, and the ideas had been passed down to his mother, who believed that work was essential to self-worth.

She chose to barter her services as a seamstress to neighbors, rather than becoming a Helper.

As a lark, Lyle learned to climb during his last year in school. A friend invited him to the boulders in the salt hills outside of town, and Lyle discovered he had a talent for it. His limbs were strong and he liked using his hands. Boulders led to bluffs, and within a few months he was testing himself on steeper faces.

When schooling ended, his peers found their place in Salt society. A few were driven by desire or parental pressure to enlist as Helpers. One classmate became a medic. Others were accepted into the large Salt military. But most had no thirst to help. They became Citizens and joined the large work-free population with nothing but time on their hands. Lyle went with them, but instead of immersing himself in the Pleasures and Conveniences that accompanied Citizenship, his climbing turned into an obsession. He was an only child, uncomfortable in large groups, and as the forced mingling of the schoolroom was replaced by the isolation of the hills, he became increasingly solitary. For three years his climbing skill advanced. Then the Museum director contacted him.

She was short, talkative and determined. The Museum, she said, was going to collect fossils in Fossil Wells. It was critical to preserve them. She couldn't use Helpers, but HQ had given her permission to enlist Citizen volunteers. Lyle's passion for climbing had made him a frequent visitor to the gorge. Could he help retrieve specimens from its chambers? The woman stirred his interest, and he became a member of her team. New

demands were made on his skills, which advanced with the discovery of hidden hollows. It was diving in the absence of water, a dissection of the skeleton of the ancient sea.

In addition to retrieving them, Lyle helped clean the creatures once they'd been removed from their beds. He enjoyed that. The dexterity that made him an able climber fed his enthusiasm for the tools. And removing material from around the fossils led to carving models of them out of hunks of raw salt. You wanted to have more than their dead remains. You wanted to envision their movements, to see them in the midst of life.

Most of the Museum was devoted to the story of the State and its leaders, but in the small Nature wing, the team displayed its findings to visitors. Along with the fossil remains, Lyle shared his carvings. He found a receptive audience with children. The idea of the ancient sea and those that lived in it enchanted many, and their fascination quickened his own.

The director loved what he was doing and had play groups arranged beside the exhibit. Children who lived near the Wells were curious, and gatherings occurred in the community as word spread. Lyle found that those who hadn't yet started their schooling, or were in the first year or two, were the most receptive.

"Have you turned your Pleasures off?" he would ask.

The children touched their necks and nodded.

"This creature," Lyle introduced the first, "lived in sheltered pockets." He drew a figurine from his backpack. "It used its belly and tail to wriggle across the sand, and when the

currents were slack, it unfolded these wings and ventured from home. This one's a girl." He flew it past the children's faces. "Her flesh is as soft as the inside of your cheek."

Fingers reached out to touch the creature.

"She loves the water," Lyle said. "Imagine what it might be like to be one of her friends, flying beside her. You visit the same places that she does. Close your eyes— Go on now, close your eyes and imagine. You're flying right beside her. What do you see?"

Lyle's meditations in the chambers began as rests between specimen forays. Naps with dreams populated by creatures— those who had left a record of their passing, and those no one had ever seen. When Lyle returned from the Wells, he would carve the creatures he'd encountered in his fancies, and he shared these as well with the children, along with stories about them. To the excavators and the director this seemed harmless. They didn't understand what was happening. And neither did Lyle.

The work had taken him to the deepest level of the gorge. This particular recess was familiar only to him, and it was his steps that had worn a thin trail through it. The path skirted a crag, winding among bromide boulders, past a honeycomb of caves, their entrances fringed with stalactites. A diving breeze whistled through the needles. This was a submarine place, where currents once flowed. Beyond the caves, prehistoric eddies turned, wrapping and pooling in a deep lagoon. Lyle moved through the evaporates, knobs and white bollards, through brittle latticeworks, sea shrubs turned to petrified

thickets with their roots in chlorite—a cobbled surface that once floored the sea.

Beyond the shrubs was a labyrinth of chambers thick with fossils. The chamber contours, shells and sockets, wings and blades, were like interlocked bones—the frame of a giant that might awaken at any moment. Lyle entered the maze, traversing from chamber to chamber, following where currents had whirled, squeezing through portals where neighboring eddies had broken through. The gaps and windows grew narrow, the shells less broken, the white wings more tightly folded.

At the end of the path, the Skull appeared—a large chamber, nearly spherical, a white bubble at the maze's center. Lyle stooped and entered, rising with the horizontal strata around him. He eyed the pale bands, tracing his fingers over them. The sad story was remembered especially well here: the successive rule of dwindling tides deposed one after another, the vivid creatures drained of color and pressed together, locked in a pale matrix. The story of a vanished world, and how it passed as the great sea died.

Lyle sank to his knees.

As sleep curled him, the white bubble detached from its moorings. With its human passenger, the floating Skull turned and caught the currents, and bore Lyle into the realm of dreams.

He woke with sweat stinging his eyes and a briny tang on his lips. His return along the path and the ascent to the rim was somber, a recognition, an acceptance. The creatures of the ancient waters were blessed, and those that roamed the salt crust were not.

With his pack on his back, he trudged through the city, putting one foot ahead of the other. Plowing through dust, crunching through hardpan. The sky was cloudless. It was late afternoon, but the air was still blazing and the wind hissed around him, spicules stinging his face. Where a sea had been, there was only a desert inhabited by ghosts and mirages. Powdered figures passed without a greeting. They heard phantom voices, saw phantom images; they gestured and mouthed along, immersed in their Pleasures and mood medicines. They took nothing from the grim fossil record.

The Salt people didn't see what was coming.

Centuries before, technology had eliminated most of the jobs. The cost of goods and services plummeted, but without work no one could afford anything. That led to the First Liberation. With the armistice came the Dipole Order—Citizens and Helpers. Citizens received food, shelter, schools and doctors—gratis from the State. Making things and providing the services was turned over to Helpers, those who wanted to work. With their needs accounted for, the only question was: what would Citizens do with themselves?

It was the founder of the State of Salt, the man honored by the statue in Memorial Park, who led the First Liberation. And it was he who introduced the first Pleasures. By donning a removable device—a tuner—Citizens could receive online content produced by the State. The selection grew quickly to include an array of entertainments: puzzles, games, contests and shows; fables and fictions; forums, klatches, war watches and workouts.

The first tuner implants were introduced to monitor health problems. Then, with the invention of the crystal tuner and the changes brought on by the Second Liberation, a tuner was implanted in every newborn. This allowed preventive medical scans and seamless Pleasure access, as well as giving every Citizen a full-time connection to the State. As part of the Second Liberation, oversight by the Helpers using sophisticated monitoring analytics became mandatory. Intrinsic Communication, as it was called, opened a rift between the two classes. There were Helpers who viewed Citizens as Pleasure addicts and treated them with contempt. And there were Citizens who thought the Helpers had overstepped their bounds. To assuage discontent, Conveniences were introduced—a new range of State services. These included such things as cosmetic surgery, fashion patches for pants and smock, and cephalic depilation as an antidote to the heat.

Lyle passed the cluster of crusted bungalows where he was schooled. A group of children approached him, silent, eyes wandering, lost in their tuners. The path descended into a gully thick with shacks, white hovels crowded among the sulfide benches. Around a bend there were more, with rickety forms moving inside them. Defeated, condemned to their Pleasures, limbs stiff, faces scabbed with salt blisters, their absent expressions framed in the blasted windows.

He approached a slumping shanty. The air was cut with heat waves and the striae seemed to undermine the dwelling. Lyle stopped before the door, bowed his head and stooped to enter.

Like most of his peers, he lived with his parents. Lyle's father—a smiling, well-meaning man with white hair—was ten feet away, seated at a table, tuning a Pleasure for fantasy profit, sorting play bills brittle as crackers. His mother, Pleasureless as always, set down the curtains she was sewing and rose to greet him. With a reassured sigh, she embraced him and spoke his name.

Lyle kissed her parched cheek. She knew.

She knew the depth of his hatred for the life Salt had tendered them. For the inhuman crumbling of body and mind. The mineral of the State was dispersing through all of them, solidifying their soft parts. Their internal chemistry was hardening to each other and to themselves. The end was in sight—the day, the hour their stiffened limbs and vacant brains would be locked into the strata.



“We’ve arrived,” Blednishev announced.

Ahead the passage kinked and ended. Through the sunlit space mid-channel, a giant arch swept, blue and gleaming, its tapering legs rising and diving back into the mirror. The picket birds were perched on the arch, waiting. Behind them, a blue cove was wrapped, its naked rock patterned with scalloped fractures and branching veins. Seeps pulsed down, making the cove walls squirm like living tissue.

As the inflatable motored beneath the blue span, the picket birds straightened their necks and lifted off. They lined

themselves out and swung to port, crossing a hedge of surf, guiding the craft into the protected place.

“Hold on.” Blednishev revved the turbines.

He powered through the breakers, bucking and tipping into the cove. Its blue walls muted the surge, and in the calm at its center the picket birds were circling.

“There,” the seaman nodded.

The birds’ pattern was tight. They were turning over a sandbar the size of a small bed, waving their wings and purring excitedly.

Blednishev cut the motor. The inflatable’s nose ran up onto the sand. He started forward, reached for the anchor and lost his footing. Lyle clutched him, saving him from a fall, grabbed the hook and leaped onto the bar, securing the craft before it could slip down the bank. The picket birds settled on the silver tubes, their webbed claws gripping the rubber.

Blednishev nodded his thanks, lowered himself onto a thwart and reached for the leather satchel beneath it.

*All planned in advance*, Lyle thought. The picket birds were staring at him with copper eyes.

“You wanted to change things,” the seaman said. “To make Salt a home again for the sea and its creatures. But your efforts,” he opened the satchel, “were bootless.”

“You know?”

“I know. Your sculptures didn’t prick them. Defacing the statue wasn’t going to do it and neither were your mates—what was the name? Solution.”

“It doesn’t matter now, does it.”

Blednishev dipped his hand into the satchel, and when he raised it something glinted between his fingers. He held the object before Lyle's eyes.

It was an ampule filled with sapphire fluid.

"You recognize this," the seaman said.

Lyle was startled, confused.

"My master was the source," Blednishev said. "The man you received it from was none the wiser."

"Your master?"

Blednishev nodded. "You were going to die on that monument. He saved you."

Lyle gazed at the seaman, the blue arch, the seeping walls of the cove.

"There's suspicion in your eyes," the seaman said.

Doubt. Distrust. Foreboding. What were the rules of this delusion?

Blednishev fished in the satchel. "I'm to offer you another dose," he straightened with a hypodermic syringe in his hand. "One much stronger."

"What is it?"

"A glandular secretion," the seaman replied.

"Powerful stuff."

"It couldn't be more powerful without being fatal."

"You're trying to frighten me."

"I'm trying to brace you," Blednishev said, "for the face to face."

"Why should I do this?"

“He cares for you. That’s why he saved you.”

*Saved you, saved you. The steeple, the State*— Lyle looked down. His shoes were still crusted with salt, his arms and legs powdered with it.

“And—” The seaman took a breath.

“And?”

“Your future depends on it.”

As one, the picket birds bent their necks, bills pointing straight down.

Blednishev eyed the currents rounding the sandbar. “He’s down there, Lyle. Our god, and yours.”

Lyle stared at the coruscating ripples. The attention of the water seemed turned on him. There was an urgency in its whisper, a cold sorrow in the motionless air.

“This is your chance,” the man in oilskins said. “Your only one.”

Lyle looked at the hypodermic. “What do I do?”

Blednishev stepped over the gunnel tube, onto the sand. “Here,” he motioned and knelt.

A chill breeze struck Lyle. He’d never felt so alone. Nothing remained of the world he knew, and the terms of his dream were closing in.

“Lyle—”

Blednishev’s voice was soft and kindly.

“It’s your element,” the seaman said.

Lyle gazed at the water, letting the words settle inside him. Then he stepped over the gunnel tube.

As he knelt, Blednishev raised the ampule and inserted the needle. Sapphire fluid filled the barrel. It seemed poorly mixed, laced with jots and swirls.

The picket birds rose, muttering and treadling.

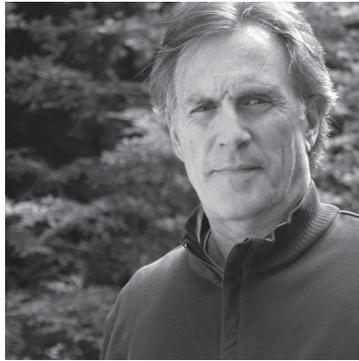
“On your back,” Blednishev said, helping him turn, easing his shoulders down.

Lyle shivered, seeing the sky and the birds in midair, hooked bills twitching, their wings iridescent in the oblique light. He offered the seaman his arm.

“Take a breath,” Blednishev said. “It will happen quickly.”

Lyle felt the seaman grip his bicep. The picket birds descended, positioning themselves around the perimeter of the bar. The sand grains shifted beneath him, speaking in hushed tones, secretive, confiding. As the needle bit, the birds raised their wings, tips touching.

“He’s in your bloodstream,” Blednishev said. “Heaven is boundless, and the sea is beneath you.” He spoke the last like a prayer.



Rich Shapero's stories plunge readers into unseen worlds. His previous titles, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far* and *Wild Animus*, combine book, music and visual art and are also available as immersive story experiences on tablets and phones. *The Village Voice* hailed *The Hope We Seek* as "a delirious fusion of fiction, music and art," and Howard Frank Mosher called him "a spellbinding storyteller." He lives with his wife and daughters in the Santa Cruz Mountains.