

Creative Writing Manuscript:

Tropicopandemonium:

Short Speculative Fiction

Eugene H. Speakes Díaz

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of:

Master of Arts

Date:

Department of English

College of Humanities

University of Puerto Rico

Approved by:

Dr. Maritza Stanchich

Thesis Committee Member

Dr. Yolanda Rivera

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Dr. Loretta Collins

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ABSTRACT

Tropicopandemonium is a collection of short speculative fiction. The genre may include elements of science fiction, fantasy, the supernatural, and/or horror. This broad landscape allows for stories to unfold without the rigidity of having to adhere to one specific set of rules inherent to a single genre. The collection is influenced by my critical reading of several writers who employ the fantastical in one way or the other. Authors such as Philip K. Dick and Neil Gaiman have provided me with the starting point for a general understanding of short story writing. The work of Ishamel Reed offers insight into literary experimentation. An emphasis on Caribbean writers is crucial to my understanding of how to apply speculative fiction to a Caribbean setting. In studying the works of Jacob Ross, Nalo Hopkinson, and Jacqueline Bishop, to name a few, I better comprehended how to fuse speculative fiction to a uniquely Caribbean experience. The following themes are explored within my short stories: the exploitation of nature and its consequences; the anxiety of surviving a myriad of disasters on an island that still struggles under colonial rule; death and legacy; toxic tourism; and redemption.

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has been at the heart of all my work. In some form or another, through various mediums, from illustration and design to theater and filmmaking, my greatest passion has been to tell stories. The written word, as well as oral tradition, have always fascinated me. But, while telling stories orally came naturally, writing was another matter. I felt my words on paper lacked the energy conveyed through performance, as if what I were writing could not accurately reflect what I was thinking. I wanted to write, I was desperate to write, but I did not have the proper tools or confidence to do so outside bits of flash fiction and the occasional poem. I had too many ideas, and they did not necessarily work with one another. This is one of the reasons why the short story format appealed to me most. Each tale is self-contained with a specific focus. Another challenge was trying to find a way in which *how* I wrote reflected *what* I wrote. I did not wish to stick to one particular style of writing, allowing for the story to dictate how far I experimented with the text or if standard prose was all that was necessary. In the end, through various techniques studied from a collection of writers whose short stories I have come to truly admire, I have found the tools necessary to help me make the decisions needed to better express ideas I had once felt unable to properly convey.

Speculative fiction best defines my preferred genre as it encompasses various genres without adhering to one particular set of rules or tropes. Elements of fantasy, science fiction, horror, and supernatural fiction, to name a few, can be mixed and matched to create stories that are no longer bound to the rigidity of a single genre. Science fiction can free itself from hard science while fantasy can unfold within a realistic setting. Being able to step away from the expectations set by a given genre allows for the imagination to flow without restriction. Whether

or not this properly defines speculative fiction, it is less rigid, allowing for experimentation between genres.

My initial idea was to bring old concepts of mine to life. I had a notebook filled with ideas dating back to my youth, which I had never had the courage nor the confidence to develop into a story. I was going to use this opportunity to apply what I had learned over the course of the Master's program to finally give voice to these long-suppressed tales. However, with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, new ideas emerged, and old ideas took on a new form to reflect on and cope with everything that was happening.

This accounts for why some of the themes explored in my stories are as follows: the exploitation of nature and its consequences; the anxiety of surviving a slew of disasters on an island that still struggles under colonial rule; death and legacy; toxic tourism; and redemption. To tell these stories, I use elements of fantasy, science fiction, horror, folklore, and fables... whatever best-serves the tale being told. Speculative fiction, in a way, allows the stories to dictate the rules and not the genre expectations to dictate the stories.

The rest of this introduction is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on general influences, how certain published stories impacted my overall style choices. The second part offers an overview of my short stories followed by a brief description of the stories that inspired them directly.

I

Just as my stories evolved, so did my inspirations during the course of the project. Growing up, I was a fan of British authors, namely J.R.R. Tolkien and the humorous novels of Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett. However, when I became interested in writing, it was Philip K. Dick I turned to first. I wished to emulate the styles of Dick, a prominent 20th century science

fiction author from the United States, since I had first come across *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (2010). Although he is well known for his futuristic tales, he also wrote short fantasies which have had a greater influence over my own stories than his science fiction. There is a matter-of-factness to his work that I have come to believe is essential in my writing. Bizarre things happen in his stories, and, rather than explain how it is possible, the reader must simply accept the world as it is presented. A clear example is his short story “Out in the Garden” (1990). The story is simple. A man watches as his wife grows very fond of a duck in their garden. At one point, after expecting their first child, the man gets tired of watching his wife playing with the duck all the time and has the animal sent away. Years later, while trying to better connect with his young son, he realizes the child is the offspring of his wife and the duck. Dick does not overtly emphasize the absurdity of the whole thing. He simply presents the story as he would any other tale of infidelity. The fact that a duck was somehow able to impregnate a woman is not explained, nor is it necessary for the story to be effective. It is that absurdity, humor, and matter-of-factness that serves as the foundation for all my work.

A more contemporary writer from the United Kingdom who has been very influential is Neil Gaiman. Known mainly for his novels such as *American Gods* (2017), *Stardust* (2008), and *The Graveyard Book* (2010), Gaiman is also a prolific short story writer. He shares that matter-of-factness I admire so much in Dick. Gaiman, however, is tailored more toward fantasy, and his stories possess an almost dreamlike quality. One particular favorite is “The Price” (1998), which tells the story of a man trying to understand why his cat shows up every morning in a disheveled state. It turns out, every night, the selfless kitty fights the devil to keep it from entering the man’s house. It is this supernatural explanation to an everyday question that appeals to me a great deal

as a storyteller. Using one's imagination to make the quotidian become magical is key to some of my own stories.

Recently, as I became exposed to Caribbean writing, I felt more inspired to bring my stories home. Authors such as Roxanne Gay, Jennifer Rahim, and Lisa Allen-Agostini opened my eyes to the possibilities of telling stories set in the Caribbean, particularly Puerto Rico. Jacob Ross's *Tell No-One About This* (2017), a collection of short stories spanning 40 years, was particularly instrumental. Ross is able to tell deep and detailed stories in such an economical way. His stories, though short, feel complete. His characters are complex and his locations well-rendered. A prime example would be "Listen, the Sea," in which both setting and character leave nothing wanting. Both of his main characters feel fully fleshed-out, each with their own psychological nuances, while the tiny corner they inhabit feels detailed enough to visualize and navigate through as if the reader were actually there. This robust, yet economical, way of short story writing can make the everyday feel as epic and beautiful as the most intricate fantasy.

Economy is key to short story writing as there is little room for side stories and sub-plots. Knowing how much to tell is just as important as what is being told. All the authors discussed are quite masterful at this. From Ross to Jacqueline Bishop to Tobias Buckell, they are all able to tell incredible stories with a limited amount of text. Buckell stands out because his short story "Toy Planes" (2013) is unbelievably short; it could easily pass as flash fiction were it not just a little too long for that. Buckell transports you to a future in which the Caribbean plays a major role in space exploration while the protagonist, having to cut his dreadlocks to pilot the rocket, shows conflict between tradition and "progress." All this in the span of two pages is what makes "Toy Planes" a prime example of economical writing. Although not all my stories in this thesis are brief, I do consider economy during the writing process.

Having chosen to set my stories in Puerto Rico, I knew I would be dealing with code-switching at some point. I wanted to make sure when and how to use it properly. Spanish words would inevitably be popping up throughout my stories, and I needed to ensure they felt natural and did not slow the reader down. Luckily, there is no shortage of code-switching examples from Caribbean authors, and I soon picked up invaluable tips on how to integrate it into my own stories. Once again, Jacob Ross would provide the necessary tools I sought as well as many other authors from various islands. However, it was Madeline Ashby and Junot Díaz who provided me with greater insight into code-switching, seeing as how they were both using Spanish. What I found interesting was that Madeline Ashby, in her short story “The Education of Junior Number 12” (2013), used italics when switching to Spanish while Junot Díaz’s “Monstro” (2020) did not. The use of italics when code-switching was how I was taught, but I found Díaz’s method more appealing. I did not want my Spanish words to seem foreign in any way. They were very much a part of the story as any word in English. Context serves as a way of helping the reader understand what the words mean; I decided not to italicize Spanish words in my stories. I instead use italics for other purposes.

I have always used italics to emphasize specific words. If I wanted a reader to stress a certain word above others in a sentence, italics serve that purpose well. However, over the years, I have seen italics used in a more effective way to represent thought. Breanne Mc Ivor’s “Robber Talk” (2019) and David D. Levine’s “Tk’Tk”Tk” (2013) provide perfect examples of this. In Mc Ivor’s short story, the first-person narrator is suddenly taken over by his sinister side. Suddenly, the principal voice is thrust back into the characters mind and his thoughts expressed through italics. What is spoken remains in quotation marks. Levine also uses italics to voice thoughts. It helps the reader distinguish between what is being said and what is being thought without

cluttering the page with, “he thought, she thought, they thought” every time someone is thinking. It is particularly useful in dialogue heavy stories. Levine also uses all-capital letters when writing advertisements. Experimenting with fonts also helps to minimize word clutter if the reader can distinguish between who is saying what just by the style of letters being used. It can also be visually appealing.

“Uncle Obadiah and the Alien” (2007), by Geoffrey Philp, was crucial to me in addressing one of my larger concerns. I was not sure, when it came to the history or geography of real locations, how much needed to be explained. Philp tells a story that is steeped in Rastafarian culture. He mentions names and locations that those unfamiliar with Jamaican history may not recognize. However, his story flows without having to pause the action in order to explain everything. An example is found at the very beginning when the narrator mentions his Uncle’s favorite possession, a six-foot statue of Haile Selassie. Without understanding who Haile Selassie was, the reader still knows that the statute is of great significance to the uncle. Eventually, through a series of organic dialogue, the reader is given enough information to recognize Haile Selassie and his importance to Rastafari. At one point the statue is broken and Uncle Obadiah is furious. While the biographical details of Haile Selassie are limited, the importance of the statue and its relationship to the uncle and his Rastafarian beliefs are clear and the story remains accessible. When describing various locations in Puerto Rico as well as bits of folklore, I was never sure how much detail I had to put in, but Philp’s story was extremely informative in understanding how to determine when and where these details should be placed and when they are simply unnecessary.

Ted Chiang’s short story compilation *Stories of Your Life* (2016) is also a stunning and inspirational achievement. Chiang explores deep and intricate themes while using accessible

language. Even though his concepts are quite complex, he manages to make the unfamiliar relatable by focusing on the human aspects of his topics. An example of this is in his short entitled “Division by Zero” wherein he uses mathematics to explore and understand human relationships. Whether or not the reader understands the math, they still understand the character interactions. “Hell is the Absence of God,” another story in the collection, is centered on humanity’s quest for understanding and redemption. Again, regardless of the readers beliefs, there is a story that can be easily understood and identified with outside of its religious context. In the case of these two stories, mathematics and religion serve as textures enveloping what are essentially stories about what it means to be alive. Both his use of simple accessible language to tell complex stories and his focus on relatable topics enveloped in seemingly unrelatable themes gave me insight into how I went about preparing and editing my own stories. It helped me in choosing the right words, or at least words I felt comfortable with, by reminding me that complex vocabulary is not always required to express complex thought.

Carlos Hernandez, in his short story collection *The Assimilated Cuban’s Guide to Quantum Santeria* (2016), much like Chiang, tells complex stories using uncomplicated language. Despite being about a troubled child in a difficult situation, his story “The Macrobe Conservation Project” has a jovial feel as it is being told from the point of view of a young boy. Having the vocabulary accurately reflect the narrator’s background, and staying true to it throughout, was something I paid close attention to while writing my stories.

Although there are moments when I prefer to keep my vocabulary simple, I do enjoy playing with metaphors. Elizabeth Bear, in her short story “Tideline” (2013), seems to do so, as well. She uses fun ways to describe ordinary objects, creating vivid colors and textures in an otherwise bland post-apocalyptic setting. In doing so, she also brings an endearing level of

humanity to a robot. This will also come into play in some of my stories where humanity is viewed and shaped through non-human characters.

Finally, and most importantly, I wanted to understand how to incorporate these various techniques into a form of speculative fiction that takes place in Puerto Rico. *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean* (2016), a collection of speculative fiction edited by Karen Lord, helped me to do just that. The title is clear and its contents even more so. In the collection, I found an eclectic array of tales dealing with various topics ranging from political abuse to physical abuse, as well as life in the Caribbean from a social perspective to a personal perspective. This alone has been enough to show me I was on the right track, as my stories range from the outermost to the innermost experiences. What made the collection even more inspiring was how it defines speculative fiction in the first place. There are elements of science fiction, as seen in Brandon O'Brien's "fallenangel.dll," fantasy in Tammi Browne-Bannister's "Once in a Blood Moon," and even horror in Richard B. Lynch's "Water Under the Bridge." This solidifies my understanding of speculative fiction, allowing me to proceed with confidence in the knowledge that my various stories with their multiple themes, using a variety of elements from different genres, can be compiled into one collection.

The following section demonstrates how these various elements from other writers have been incorporated in the stories in this collection.

II

The Last Bee

As the title suggests, "The Last Bee" tells the tale of the last living bee on Earth. Zoe, the protagonist, finds herself alone after her queen and hive succumb to a bombardment of pesticides from a giant agrochemical/agricultural biotechnology corporation. Zoe, haunted by the voices of

her fallen family and ancestors, is befriended by other animals who are also suffering at the hands of the greedy megacorporation. What starts as a sad story of exploitation soon turns to a bloody tale of nature's revenge.

From the beginning of this project, I knew "The Last Bee" would be the first story I would write. It was the oldest of my planned stories and one that dealt with something I have always stood against, the exploitation of nature. I wanted the story to play out as an apocalyptic fable using standard prose with familiar tropes but an eerie undertone that would culminate in a gruesome twist.

Politically Correct Bedtime Stories (1994) immediately came to mind while preparing this story. Author James Finn Garner has a satirical collection of well-known fairy tales including "Little Red Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "The Three Little Pigs," which turns them into politically correct versions so as not to offend modern audiences. In Garner's version of "The Three Little Pigs," the wolves are written as greedy capitalists while a group of rebel pigs, referred to as 'porcinistas,' rise up to reclaim their stolen lands. This combination of humor with folklore and political satire was key to the development of "The Last Bee." I wanted it to start off as a run-of-the-mill fable before veering off into something darker, but always maintaining a certain level of humor.

Another invaluable short story to my own writing process was "The Laughin' Tree" by Jacob Ross. In his story, Ross tells the tale of a child and her grandmother who are being harassed by a man who is buying up all the surrounding lands with the intention of building a grand hotel. The grandmother refuses to sell, causing great friction while she endures incessant threats from the man and his company. In the end, the old woman comes up with a brilliant plan. She plants a tree with roots that grow to such lengths and girth that they literally destroy the

foundations of the hotel. It is a small victory of nature over those who would seek to exploit it, a theme I attempt to explore in “The Last Bee.” Another feature of Ross’s story is his ability to deal with profound subjects while creating endearing characters to root for, so to speak. If the reader did not care about the child and her grandmother, the story would feel hollow. I mentioned humor being key to many of my stories, but equally important, is heart.

Oddly, “Balancing Accounts” (2013), a short story by James L. Cambias, also helped in the creation of “The Last Bee.” I say ‘oddly’ because Cambias’s short is science fiction at its most pure. While on the surface it may seem to share nothing in common with my story, seeing as how it involves robots and space travel in the distant future, it is a wonderful example of how to tell a story about humanity through the eyes of non-human characters. As with Bear’s aforementioned “Tideline,” this can be a useful tool when describing certain aspects of humanity, positive or negative, without being too direct. Although “The Last Bee” is centered around animal protagonists, it is very much a critique of a particularly negative aspect of human behavior. Telling it from an animal’s point of view heightens the sense of tragedy and consequence.

Tropicopandemonium

After several natural disasters, a rise in government corruption, and a global pandemic, what could possibly happen next? A chaotic tale, “Tropicopandemonium,” follows a group of people who are thrust together, under bizarre circumstances, during an alien invasion on the island of Puerto Rico. The invasion leads to a series of other supernatural events that create absolute mayhem across the island. However, even under the most insane conditions, there is still hope.

The frantic pace, the kinetic energy, and the socio-political madness injected into “Tropicopandemonium” owes a lot to the works of Philip K. Dick. While his various novels and shorts stories often touch upon the inherent insanities of society at an often-breakneck speed, it was his short story “Sales Pitch” that offered inspiration for this particular tale. In Dick’s story, a man is harassed by a robot that is selling itself as the ultimate home appliance. The machine is relentless to the point of becoming dangerous. The man’s attempts to rid himself and his family of the robot end with him and the ornery machine tumbling helplessly through the depths of space. It is an obvious critique on the aggressiveness of advertisement presented in a way that is just as unrelenting as the antagonist. This non-stop bombardment of events is what appealed to me, although “Tropicopandemonium” takes place on a much larger scale. It is written in prose but with little room to breathe, the idea being to have the cluttered style reflect the chaos within the story.

Caterwaul

“Caterwaul” describes the final thoughts of a man suffering from a heart attack. Instead of just random flashes of a life he deems wasted, he is haunted by the characters and stories he never wrote. Having once dreamt of being a writer, he never pursued his dreams, and instead settled for a life without creative expression. He interacts with several of his unwritten creations as he watches countless worlds that once ruled his imagination explode.

While it was the third story written, “Caterwaul” was originally my primary objective. It was the story I had planned to write last, but by the time I had finished “Tropicopandemonium,” I felt inspired and ready. Without a doubt, Ishmael Reed and Susan Howe provided the tools and the self-assurance I needed to tackle the various styles used to guide “Caterwaul” out of my head and onto paper. My most experimental endeavor, while mainly prose, uses poetry, playwriting,

advertisement, lists, and stream of consciousness to reflect the various levels within the protagonist's mind.

Ishmael Reed's novel *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (2010) and his short story "Cab Calloway Stands in for the Moon" (1988) introduced me to a style of writing I had never seen before. The way he defied the rules of conventional storytelling, either through the integration of multiple literary genres or a simple disregard for the standard uses of grammar and punctuation, unlocked the potential for telling "Caterwaul" as I had truly envisioned it. Reed's stories possess a stream-of-consciousness vibe while also feeling deliberate, a controlled chaos I felt would best help to tell my tale. While I do adhere to a more standard use of punctuation, it is the mixture of literary genres that helped my short story flow.

Susan Howe's collection entitled *Singularities* (1990), particularly her poem "Thorow" added to the texture of "Caterwaul" by inspiring me to play with the text itself. In "Thorow," Howe has a complete section where the words no longer flow from left to right. Rather, lines are moving diagonally or upside down while seemingly random words are floating all over the page, often intersecting with other words. Suddenly, the poem not only tells a story through its words but also through the layout in which those words are displayed. It becomes a marriage of literature and graphic design. I do not go to the chaotic extremes of Howe's design, but it was enough to inspire in me a way to end my story in a manner that felt natural.

A small detail but extremely important for me is that I had never written in present tense before. Stories I *had* written were either in first-person or third-person past. "Caterwaul" is told from a first-person present perspective. There is an extra layer of tension created because a story told in past tense gives the reader a small sense of security; the narrator must have survived their ordeals if they are the one telling the story. First-person present feels more uncertain. H.K.

Williams's "Cascaduras" (2016) presented me with just such a story. Told in first-person present, using past tense for flashbacks, the story left me wondering what the outcome would be. To my surprise, the story's end is unbelievably anticlimactic. This is not a negative. It is actually quite ingenious. You are kept in a state of foreboding throughout the tale, waiting for something terrible to happen to the protagonist when... nothing. Life goes on. It is the first-person perspective that heightens the tension in the story, and this helped me in deciding to experiment with that perspective in "Caterwaul."

El Cuco

Straight to the point, "El Cuco" tells the story of a group of condescending tourists who enter a shady bar, and after insulting the locals and their beer, find themselves at the mercy of one of the bar's patrons. The no-nonsense individual, who goes by the nickname of El Cuco, does not shy away from abject humiliation and violence to get his point across.

The shortest of my stories was actually the hardest one to write. Having just finished "Caterwaul," my mind was in overdrive. I was coming out of a very personal and chaotic space. I did not want to repeat what I had just done; I did not have the energy. The challenge was to step back from abstraction and tell a far simpler story. My goal for "El Cuco" was to stay as realistic as possible, with no magic, no science fiction, just a quick story taking place on Earth without any monsters or talking animals. The protagonist, Cuco, would be my main focus, a type of character study. I wanted the dialogue to play a larger part in moving the action along while playing with actual song titles in the hopes of enticing the reader to look up the music and listen along as if creating a soundtrack.

Jacqueline Bishop provided excellent examples of short stories in realistic environments that still maintained a sense of beauty and wonder. Her book *The Gymnast and Other Positions*

(2015), a collection of short stories, essays, and interviews, helped me focus on keeping “El Cuco” grounded. Bishop’s short story “Soldier” was particularly helpful. Gossip played an integral part in building my titular character Cuco. All that is known about him is based on hearsay. “Soldier” creates a similar mystery around one of its characters although, unlike in “El Cuco,” the truth is revealed in the end. What was important to me was creating a myth around Cuco while keeping the main story real.

Bishop also gave me insight into atmosphere. In her short story “Flamboyant Tree,” she gives little information about her characters but emphasizes their relationship to a large flamboyant. She describes the tree in gorgeous detail and creates a space around it in which all her characters interact. This inspired me when it came time to describe the location where “El Cuco” takes place. I did not have to delve into the lives of my characters because their pasts were irrelevant to the present story. It would slow down the action. However, to make up for that loss of character detail, I spent a good amount of time at the beginning detailing the location in which the story unfolds. The atmosphere and how the characters interact within it gave me enough information about their personalities without having to spend unnecessary time explaining who they were.

The Baby Under the Bridge

On the outskirts of Naranjito, an unpopular drunk named Buenaventura finds himself stumbling down a dark country road in search of a place to continue his alcoholic endeavors. Upon reaching a little stone bridge, at a crossroad between three towns, he is met with a sinister surprise. The incident will forever change him... physically, mentally, and spiritually.

I wanted to tell a horror story based on a bit of family folklore in which my great-grandfather, it is said, encountered a baby under a bridge who had sharp teeth and the ability to

speak. It was a story my grandmother told me. I would soon discover that it was a tale my great-grandmother shared with her children and grandchildren, as well. I decided to come full circle and return to standard prose with little to no experimentation. I did not feel it was necessary to experiment this time because, even though it can be a very liberating experience, I did not want to experiment for experimentation's sake. I wanted to remain as honest as possible with each story and, in a way, go in the direction the story dictated. My goal, after all, had been to allow the story to determine the style. "The Baby Under the Bridge" led me back to simple prose. I did, however, want more location detail than in my other stories. The tale takes place in an actual location, and it was important to me to present my childhood home as vividly as possible.

Nalo Hopkinson's "Glass Bottle Trick" (2000) from the short story anthology *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (also edited by Hopkinson) as well as Breanne Mc Ivor's "Robber Talk," from her short story collection *Where There are Monsters*, were inspirational in the development of this story. Both authors tell stories in contemporary settings that incorporate cultural traditions and folklore from their respective backgrounds. It was that marriage of the modern and the traditional that caught my eye.

Hopkinson's attention to detail is exquisite in "Glass Bottle Trick." While I do begin my story with a bit of ominous foreshadowing, I felt that it was important to explore to some degree who the main character was before getting to the more sinister parts of the tale. Hopkinson takes a similar approach by taking her time with her characters and the space they occupy before exposing the reader to the terrors within. This gives the reader enough time to empathize with her protagonist before subjecting her to imminent horrors. The more terrifying elements of the story are accentuated because the reader has developed a connection to the main character.

Mc Ivor modernizes folklore, which I found appealing. Based on the carnival character the Midnight Robber, Mc Ivor's "Robber Talk" adds a horrifying twist reminiscent of Jekyll and Hyde to her story. What starts out as a potentially romantic stroll one evening becomes a gory account of uncontrollable bloodlust. Mc Ivor does not hold back but never goes overboard into sensationalism. She takes a traditional character and breathes new life into it. Inspired by this, I told a story passed down by my family for generations but made it my own.

It is important to note that Jacob Ross, once again, played an integral part in my preparation to write this story as well. His "Cold Hole" tells the story of a young boy on his way to the titular hole, a deep natural pool, to hunt for a giant crawfish known as a guaje. What stood out for me was not so much the destination but the journey. From his house to the hole, the boy comes across a variety of characters along a beautifully detailed path. The path taken in "The Baby Under the Bridge" is equally detailed as it is an actual location amidst the valleys of Naranjito in Puerto Rico. Having walked the road myself, I wanted the journey to be as authentic as possible without slowing down the story with an overabundance of descriptors. Ross, who can capture an abundance of detail while remaining brilliantly economical with his writing, was vital to my description of my character's journey through the valley.

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The following is an excerpt from...

The Last Bee

The hive was on high alert. Queen Elpida looked upon the golden walls of her queendom. A thousand dripping hexagons glistened around the panicking swarm. "I want everyone accounted for!" she yelled. Her majesty was unsure if the walls would protect them, but she knew that no one would survive outside. The last group of workers arrived. It was time to seal the entrance. "Wait!" the queen commanded. "We are missing one!"

"My comb sister!" cried Zsofi, a steadfast bee, most respected and revered among her siblings. "Where is she?"

"We could not find her," answered Meli, one of the returning workers.

"Typical," Zsofi said with frustration. "Where did you last see her?"

"By the docks, my sister."

"Show me."

Meli wagged with precision and haste. It was a dance of directions, coordinates to the last place where she had harvested pollen.

"I know this place," Zsofi said. "My queen! With your permission..."

"Go," the queen answered. "Find your sister, but do not come back until the skies are clear. Find shelter. Hide. Wait. Be patient, but above all... be safe." Her Grace looked on as Zsofi launched without hesitation. The hive was sealed as were her daughters' fate.

As Zsofi approached the docks, she called out her sister's name.

Zoe.

Her favorite place was inside the cup of a majagüilla flower. Now, it has been said that bees are some of Mother Nature's hardest workers, but while this is true, they have been known to daydream from time to time. She would break from the group, hide inside her yellow-padded sanctuary, and surround herself in its sweet perfumes coupled with the salty air of the Caribbean Sea and the muffled shoosh of delicate waves.

Zoe!

She would never think of neglecting her duties. She never went back to the hive with anything less than "a legful of gold" as her comb sister Zsofi would say. But... on those hot summer days, little Zoe couldn't resist a cool blissful nap within the soft embrace of the majagüilla.

ZOE!

She woke, startled, from her golden thoughts. *That sounded like Zsofi.* She peeked out over the edge of a sunlit petal expecting another lecture about the importance of discipline and hard work. Instead, she saw her comb sister flying toward the majagüilla tree with a giant cloud of gray and green closing in from behind. "Zoe, fly," her sister yelled, "Fly!"

The following is an excerpt from...

The Baby Under the Bridge

Early next morning, a small group of men, working for José Morales, found Buenaventura stuck on a fallen tree in the river. They carried him up to the Morales estate where, thankfully, José did *not* kill him. The prepotent landowner instead called for his family physician to see to Buenaventura's wounds. Days later, when he regained consciousness, he was questioned about his condition. He knew his story would only be ridiculed, so he left out some of the details. He said he was attacked by a large animal, but it was too dark to see. Hunters set out to find the beast, but it would obviously prove a fruitless endeavor. When he asked about Violín, they told him they had found her little broken body by the side of the road. Whatever had attacked him must have gotten her as well. He wept for days. Unable to stop crying, his tears washed all color from his right eye. It was a small price to pay for gazing upon the most unholy... and surviving. Luckily, the swelling over his left eye had healed and he was still able to see.

But if his days were painful and heart-breaking, his nights and the nightmares they brought were impossible. He woke up trembling, with fever, and drenched in sweat. He never screamed. He couldn't if he wanted to. He was only able to whisper, and even that was stressful. A knock came at the door. He knew who it was and was dreading that moment since he had regained consciousness. A large man stepped in, well-groomed but molded by earth and wood. It was José Morales himself. He pulled up a stool and sat right next to Buenaventura's bed.

"Say nothing," the large man said. "Just listen. All debts are forgiven. As far as I'm concerned, the man who wronged me died on that Godless night. Do not see this as some charitable act. I have my reasons. I have lived on these lands my entire life. I know the horrors that lurk under that bridge. But I was lucky. I had a horse." He stood from his seat and walked around the bed. He seemed lost in a distant thought that made him shiver.

“Best to keep these things to ourselves,” Morales continued, “lest we be labeled as madmen in a world that has already gone mad. Between us, though, if not for my obligations... I would have left this place long ago. But too much of my family’s blood runs through this valley. You rest. You’ll have plenty of time to think about what to do with the rest of your life. Make it grand or make it humble... but make it worthy of a second chance.” With that, Morales took his leave, closing the door behind him.

When he was finally able to stand on his own, Buenaventura asked to be taken to the church in town. Pepito had carved him an elegant walking stick which he would need for the rest of his life. When he arrived, he begged the parish priest to let him stay in exchange for his services as groundskeeper. He would have pursued more ambitious positions within the church, but the very sight of wine made him sick. He would never drink again. He asked only for a small room and whatever food the church could spare. He worked hard and his work was impeccable. The church had never looked so clean. The gardens were tended with such care that people began to ask for the groundskeeper’s private services. He turned down their offers, though, not daring to wander too far from his newfound sanctuary. The priest, impressed with Buenaventura’s efforts, was very generous with his portions when it came time to eat. The parish leader knew that Buenaventura would often share his meals with the local strays, so he always slipped him an extra bit of meat.

He was a kind man... Buenaventura. The nightmares would never relent, but he made the most of every waking hour. For over sixty years he lived this way until one particularly warm evening, he found the one thing he never thought possible since that cold, fateful night. He found peace.

CONCLUSION

These five stories are not the end of a project but rather a beginning. My goal is to continue exploring and challenging myself with various styles and sub-genres while refining my own voice. Through attaining a better understanding of speculative fiction, I have found a place where I feel less restricted, allowing my imagination to run wild, but with enough technique to reel it in before it runs amok. The experience of writing these stories has quelled many fears, as I am less afraid to experiment with my texts, should experimentation be called for. Likewise, I am also inspired to tell simpler stories. Reality and the quotidian can be equally as enchanting as high fantasy. One invaluable lesson learned is when to take control of the story and when to surrender to it. Many times, I've heard that stories often tell themselves. I once found this notion to be a tad silly and romantic, but now I understand. More importantly, I was encouraged to experiment. I previously felt that if I wanted to write science fiction or fantasy, I would have to travel to remote parts of the world. But after experiencing Caribbean speculative fiction, I see new possibilities. I have witnessed the magic and the wonders within my own surroundings. I will continue to dream my way across the universe, but I now know that home is a fantastic place to start.