

We are all
Falling Towards
the Centre of
the Earth

Collected Stories

by

Julie Travis



The Wapshott Press

We are all Falling Towards the Centre of the Earth

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In memoriam Ian Johnstone (2.IX.67 – 30.VI.15).
Art Nature Magick Love

Foreword: (E)motion sickness

These stories have been written, for the most part, over a period of perhaps three or four years, although the concept of publishing them as a collection came about in Spring of 2016. Politically this was a turbulent time, a slow but deliberate car crash of a year, both here in Britain (my home) and later in the United States (the home of the Wapshott Press). This is a time when I would have loved two of my biggest influences—J G Ballard and George Orwell—to be here, to comment on the Black Hole that we've opened up, even if they couldn't keep us from being dragged into it.

Seeing the ultra-Right marching on the streets of Europe (including Britain, which has its most extreme Right-Wing government for many years) is something I always find shocking and shameful. Have we so easily forgotten the horrors of the recent past? We certainly seem determined to repeat them. Here in Britain, the wilful ignorance of so many has festered and become the absolute acceptance of hate crime. This is with the approval of a government happy to lay blame elsewhere for having made so many people's lives utterly miserable. Verbal and physical attacks on complete strangers, purely due to their difference to the attacker, have surged in recent years. There is a new generation of racists who want to think their politics are less odious because they call themselves 'alt' rather than 'ultra' Right, and who claim to be intellectual rather than thuggish, but it is just a rebranding of the same old bigotry.

However, it is not all bad news. Not everyone is fooled: political activism, a movement against such hatred, has become more visible, more mainstream, in recent times. In wildly optimistic moments I imagine this to be a sign of a 'waking up'; that people who've begun to question the current appalling state of their societies will realise that time is probably very short (the possibility of nuclear conflict has reared its ugly head again) and may wish to experience and participate in, rather than remotely viewing, their lives and the world around them. We have been seduced by technology into removing ourselves from the wonder of experience, we have happily become a society of spies and spectators and perhaps this has helped us to stop *seeing* our fellow humans — as people to communicate with, to understand and respect. Of course, when the bombs start dropping on us (as they constantly are in other parts of the world) life will be brought into brutal, hard focus. Will some insist on filming their own deaths in the ultimate narcissistic act ('selfie', after all, being an abbreviation for 'self-obsessed')?

Much of my writing is political in an abstract way, in the form of people with overpowering personal issues. It's not always obvious, but it's often politics that has got the protagonist into the situation they are in. Mental illness, for instance, can be a result of 'unconventional wiring' or a reaction to how certain people are treated by the world, its continuance partly due to the unavailability of effective treatment. The protagonists in my stories are on the outside of society, people who reject or are rejected by conventionality. They are generally survivors rather than victims, though, and most of them thrive on their singular way of looking at the world. It's how I identify and in whose company is my only hope of feeling comfortable. Perhaps, however, I should be more overtly political; I have no wish to be mistaken for a person who is happy

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with the way things are; the injustices of the human world, the enforced banality of ordinary life.

Another constant theme of my writing has been transformation; the potential to transform oneself—physically, spiritually, emotionally, psychically. But the stories in this collection were overwhelmingly driven by grief, dreams, isolation and death. After the last few years, which have been marked by terrible loss, I spend much of my time (in dreams and waking life) speculating and exploring what might happen to a person after physical death. For me, death is another form of transformation, a natural continuation of a soul's existence. My reading of female Surrealists/Occultists in the last few years reflects this ongoing obsession; Leonora Carrington, Anna Kavan, Dion Fortune and Ithell Colquhoun are figures I feel a great connection with – to the point where it is as if I have, somehow, always been influenced by them.

The stories here are not cheerful tales, but nonetheless I don't see this collection as reflecting a completely bleak philosophy. We are far more than the fragile bodies we inhabit. If we disconnect from our determination to force the world, and nature, to adapt to our selfish demands, we may be able to reconnect with what humans are truly capable of.

My sincere thanks go to Ginger Mayerson and the Wapshott Press. Their belief in my work, over many years now, is greatly appreciated.

Julie Travis, Penzance, Spring 2018

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Dark Fires

The starlings have gathered and begin their murmuration. They take the shape of a double-helix and fly past me in their formation. Once they've passed by, the murmuration breaks up and I am surrounded by the beating wings of a hundred thousand birds, before they turn east and head towards the rising sun.

The first time Maya died was the most frightening.

She wasn't dead for long, no more than a few minutes. Tending the plants on her kitchen windowsill, she became aware of an *aura*. She'd heard this happened as a prelude to an epileptic fit and tried to prepare for it. The flowers twisted and screamed in front of her and she dropped to the floor and nothingness. No arching muscle spasms, no pain, just *nothing*.

When Maya came to she knew that she'd been dead. How she knew was unclear but she was certain that her body had completely shut down and then re-started.

In shock, she managed to drink a glass of water, then cried, shaking so hard she knocked the glass off the table. For a while she felt horribly ill, her skin still corpse-cold and unresponsive, her body reluctant to do what she wanted it to. As the feeling began to pass, she wondered what the

cause of her temporary death had been. A stroke? A heart attack? Should she call an ambulance or see a doctor? Eventually it all felt unnecessary and she carried on with her day.

The second time Maya died was in public. Months had passed but she recognised the aura as soon as it appeared, a presence whirling around her. She was in a supermarket and tried to get to the toilets but dropped lifeless to the floor by the newspaper stand.

She awoke in an ambulance, the paramedic staring at her in shock.

"We've got her back!" he called over his shoulder to the driver. And then to Maya, "You decided to re-join the land of the living, then?"

How unprofessional, Maya thought, but was unable to say. The hospital carried out tests upon tests, the staff looking at her with a strange kind of suspicion, but no definite abnormality was found. When they decided to keep her in overnight for observation, she discharged herself. She knew she had died again and it was likely her test results were giving the doctors cause to suspect the same.

Given enough time, a person can get used to almost any situation, and over the next half dozen years Maya found that her frequent deaths became part of her life. There were adaptations to be made, of course; above all else she wanted her condition to remain private and under her control, as much as dying could be controlled. As she became less frightened by what was happening, she was able to detect the aura much sooner. It was almost nothing at first, a wisp of

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mist, heavy air that slowly materialised around her. It gave her time to go home and prepare; some water by her bed, curtains partly drawn. She could lay down in comfort and wait to die. But the auras were a blessing and a curse. To have warning of each imminent death helped keep it private but to know she was about to die—again—was torturous. Each death might be her last; she might not wake this time. To prepare for that possibility was impossible.

She began noting times, dates and the length of each period of death, trying to find a pattern. There was none, although she was concerned to see that the amount of time she was dead was increasing. What began as a few minutes became a few hours and, on the eve of her forty-first birthday, she remained dead for more than two days.

Once she was conscious and coherent, she became sick with fright; surely after fifty hours dead, her body would have begun to decompose? On the pretext of feeling run-down she made an appointment with her doctor. After her blood pressure and heartbeat had been checked and a blood sample taken, she went away with the advice to take a multivitamin supplement. It did not completely reassure her; her complexion was pallid and her eyes had a yellow tinge to them, but as the days wore on and her body functioned as normal, Maya began to relax. No real damage had been done. It was as if her body knew that each death was only temporary and reacted accordingly.

But if the effect on her body was minimal, the effect on her life was disastrous. Her social

life became sparse, a love life impossible in such circumstances. Workmates thought her strange or a snob, assuming she thought herself above socialising with them. Closer friends knew that something was wrong, but no one was able to find out what it was. Some suspected mental illness and kept their distance.

The truth was so much stranger than their suspicions and Maya didn't know if she could ever put it into words. And death was becoming such an experience that little else seemed to matter in comparison. After the episode in the supermarket, where she could've been declared dead and woken up entombed in the hospital morgue, her fear of interference, of her condition being discovered, had clouded everything but once she was confident it would not be repeated, she was free to explore what was happening.

And death was not a blank space in her life.

A year after the episodes began; she became aware upon waking of what had happened while she had been dead. The memories were hazy, like an almost forgotten dream, but eventually it was undeniable that they were real experiences. By the time of her two day death, she had notebooks filled with memories of what happened when she died. At first she'd hovered above her body, recognising it but happily disconnected from it, like having thrown off wet, heavy clothes. Then the experiences changed as her spirit became more aware, more skilled with its freedom.

I am travelling, I am in Strange Places. I am surrounded by storm clouds, so fierce they're coloured red, so intense they're bursting into flame around me.

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I am looking up at a million shooting stars filling the sky. I am travelling through Space at incredible speed.

These memories would come to her in flashbacks. They were exhilarating and nightmarish. Several times she collapsed in tears at work, which only added to the rumours about her mental health.

And then came the day the aura took her by surprise.

She was at work, taking notes at a meeting, listening to one of the participant's droning voice, when it changed. It became musical, beautiful. She looked up; the man's face was stretching, his jaw almost reaching the floor. And the air around her was heavy with mist.

Another death was almost upon her. How could she have missed it? Determined not to die in front of a roomful of people, she got up, meaning to head to the Sick Room, but instead lurched into the wall.

Navak, a woman she only vaguely knew, immediately saw that something was very wrong. She held Maya steady.

"Do you need an ambulance?" she asked.

Maya shook her head. "Sick Room," she managed to say.

Navak looked over her shoulder at the gaping faces. To their relief she said, "Carry on. I'll take care of her."

Maya was desperate to keep this latest death at bay until she was alone, but it swirled around her, seeping through her skin into her veins, muscles and bones, overtaking her. She was about to die. She gripped Navak's arm as the woman

helped her onto the Sick Room's uncomfortable bed.

"Whatever happens," she said, "no ambulance, no one else. It's important."

I am climbing a silver ladder to the silver Moon. This is the path through Death. I am ecstatic and above me is the Moon, terrifyingly big. I am aware of my smallness here and revel in it. The size of Space is too much to take in. I am beyond the limits of comprehension, but I am glad to be here. I look down and see two Beings at the foot of the ladder. They are tall creatures, benevolent, following rather than chasing.

She returned to consciousness in tears. Navak had her phone in her hand, her finger hovering over the screen.

"You were gone. I could've sworn you were gone."

She had been giving Maya her inept version of CPR for several minutes and, despite her promise, was about to call for help.

"I'm fine. I will be fine," said Maya. There was nothing for it but to come clean. "I've been dying for years."

Navak drove her home and heard the whole bizarre story. Once she'd begun, Maya found it impossible to stop. To unburden such a load was irresistible. She broke down in tears, laughed, shouted, nearly screamed her tale. But she was also precise and provided such details that Navak had no choice but to believe her; after all, she'd seen Maya die and be resurrected before her eyes. She'd heard rumours about Maya being strange and unstable, and wished now that that was all

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the woman was. In reality her older colleague was carrying an unbearable weight. As she saw Maya into her flat she was made to promise not to tell anyone what had happened. To involve doctors and hospitals and tests was unthinkable.

“There’s no cure for this. They’ll have me embalmed and buried because they won’t believe I’ll come back. Please. This would kill my parents. You can’t tell anyone.”

And that potential horror was the only thing that could be worse than what Maya was going through. So Navak agreed, and Maya’s extraordinary secret was safe. More than that, it was the beginning of Navak’s life as Maya’s confidante.

It was not a vocation Navak pursued. She did her best to forget what had happened but it was too monumental. Overnight it seemed that her life before this time had been reduced to nothing. Work, boozy weekends, her few brief relationships—all were time wasted. As the weeks passed she could not shake off the things she had seen and heard and so one Sunday Maya answered her door to find Navak standing there. They had not exchanged more than a few words since Maya had died in the Sick Room.

“I need answers. I need to understand what happened the other week.”

Maya was not surprised to see her but was relieved that she was alone.

“The thing is, I need answers, too,” Maya said as she poured wine for them both. “But over the years I’ve learnt to accept what happens, even to enjoy it. I just wish I had more control over it.”

She could see Navak was floundering.

"It hasn't happened in the last few weeks. There's no pattern. At one point I thought there was. I was completely taken by surprise last time. I didn't intend for anyone to know about this. I'm grateful that you've kept it to yourself."

"How do you know that I have?"

"If you'd told anyone, they'd have been with you today."

It was true enough; who could keep away, knowing such a thing?

"How has this not driven you mad?" asked Navak. "To live with death constantly... it's unnatural. It's too much to deal with."

"Perhaps it's easier for me than it is for you. I can't imagine what it must be like to see someone die and then come back to life. And I have an awareness of my deaths, my experience of them is as real as this is now."

"I'm beginning to wonder if it's more real," Navak murmured.

She was full of questions that Maya couldn't answer and some that Maya didn't care to answer. These were things that Maya had spent years exploring; they were hers, knowledge acquired in places Navak had never been. She wanted to keep them to herself.

"The next time it happens," Navak continued, "the next time you know you're going to die—you can let me know if you want. I can keep an eye on you. If you don't want to keep dying alone."

Maya didn't hear her; the air was becoming visible. Such heaviness. Navak flattened and became two-dimensional. The only real thing in the world was the air, so Maya grasped a handful of it.

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Navak guessed what was happening. Her first instinct was to run and leave Maya to her fate but she calmed herself, led Maya to her bedroom and lay her down. And was there to watch as death washed over her and dragged her under. It was peaceful, Maya the picture of calm, treading a now-familiar path.

Navak was not calm. She was terrified. What if Maya was dying for real, for ever? She ran to the kitchen and was sick in the sink.

Death lasted for eight days. Navak rushed to her side every evening after work. It was a hideous vigil; to all appearances Maya was dead. She neither moved nor breathed and her body was cold. Every day Navak nearly gave up, nearly called for an ambulance to make Maya's death official. Then she would gather herself and wash Maya down. In made for a sad ceremony. On the eighth evening she became aware of a glow around the lifeless body. It circled the bed, glowing in colours Navak had never seen before. It broke up and rained onto the figure on the bed. A little later Maya awoke and Navak realised she'd seen the woman's spirit re-entering her body.

I am on top of an angular stone structure, high in the mountains. From this point I look to one side and there is Saturn, close by, gigantic. The planet and its rings are glowing red. On the other side is a second Saturn. This one is made of silvery metal. Bizarre designs—hieroglyphs? Words?—are imprinted onto the planet's surface. What form do I take now, I wonder; I cast no shadow, I can see nothing of myself and as I move away from the mountain's edge, I approach another

structure. It looks like a stone circle. As I get closer I see that it is made up of elaborate tombstones, the graves pointing inwards to the centre of the circle. On the far side of the circle stand three figures. Feeling my presence, they turn to me and I see their demonic faces. One begins to make its way towards me, around the outside of the circle. It will not step inside. They fade away as I Travel to another place. Surrounded by towering sand dunes, I see the two Beings again. They are walking across the sand, although they leave no trail. They walk slowly on bony legs with numerous joints. They are a long way away yet we are talking as if they are next to me.

“You are here, and yet you are not,” they say. What had they been when they were alive—human, bird, mammal, plant, sea creature? Their form is reminiscent of all of these and none of them. Were they alive on Earth or some other planet? I sense that they are millions of years old. I explain that my deaths are temporary and not of my choosing.

“Beware the Abomination,” they say. “Journey in company.”

They disappear over the top of a sand dune and I am alone again.

Old habits die hard. It was Friday night and Navak was drunk. The pub was busy and Navak’s group occupied a corner of it. One of them, Don, grabbed Navak as the music blared. She shook him off.

“What’s wrong with you? You’ve been really weird lately,” he yelled over the music. It

was then that everything became clear to her.

"This isn't living," she spat. "I know dead people who live better than this."

And she walked out of the pub, more sober than she'd ever been in her life. Maya's long death had frightened her, ever more so as Maya refused to talk about her experience. What was she hiding? Once the worry was over, Navak had been furious.

"I watched over you for more than a week. Eight days, washing your cold body, convinced that you weren't coming back this time."

"You watched from the outside," said Maya. And then, a little spitefully, "That's nothing. It's my death, my experience. You haven't earned that knowledge."

"Have you any idea how pompous you sound? How selfish you're being?"

"No one asked you to be here. And you're being childish. This isn't a bag of sweets that I'm keeping to myself. I've spent years dealing with this on my own. I've almost lost my mind over it. And you think you can just share it with me?"

They hadn't spoken since, passing each other in the corridor at work with no more than a nod of acknowledgment. And now Navak was burning bridges with her friends. She had no regrets. It was pathetic to be living in such a way, without even the excuse of youth. Maya couldn't be so carefree. Navak envied the woman for her experiences although she couldn't imagine how horrific they were. Their lack of communication since their argument was depressing. She hoped Maya was as sorry as she was, but then again, what did Navak have to offer her?

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When she got home from work that night, a parcel was waiting for her. Inside were several notebooks with a Post-It note stuck to the front of the first: "Read these. Every word. Then tell me if you're still interested in sharing what I'm going through."

So these were the secrets you've kept all these years, thought Navak. Alone in her bedsit, she spent the night reading the notebooks, at first in disbelief, almost laughing at one point but later reading silently, in awe. There were detailed descriptions of Maya's ordeal each time she died, which was bad enough, but Maya's experiences whilst dead were jaw-dropping. Were they hallucinations, dreams? People who had near-death experiences often spoke of amazing things, but these had been dismissed as visions created by chemicals in the brain. Maya clearly accepted them as genuine. They seemed to inspire her. And if they *were* real, how could Maya's life compare? Navak couldn't forget what she'd seen: *something* absorbed by Maya before she was resurrected. Science and religion would both react wildly to this. No wonder Maya wanted to keep this secret—between them they'd tear her apart.

"Who is the Abomination?" I ask the two Beings. I am hurtling through Space and they are beside me. They look at me but say nothing. I will have to find the answer myself.

They next met one lunchtime on a park bench near the office. Navak returned the diaries, a little reluctantly, knowing she would never read

anything like them again.

“Death is changing me,” said Maya quietly. “I’ve got papers to write and meetings to attend. It’s all so irrelevant. I’ve already died again since we last spoke. I’ve just resigned from my job.”

“What are you going to do now? You need your flat, your privacy.”

Maya set her face, ready for the leap of faith she was about to take.

“I was hoping you’d take me in.”

Navak smiled.

Maya’s next death lasted for three hundred and sixty four days.

After selling nearly all her belongings, all the things most people held dear, she moved into Navak’s bedsit. Six weeks later the aura descended again. Navak kept news of her new bedfellow secret, from her workmates and the friends who she’d more or less lost touch with anyway. She wrote to Maya’s parents from Maya’s email address to keep up the pretence that their daughter was well, but too busy to visit. It was not difficult. Her parents lived in the south of Spain and were not close to their daughter. It became normal to come home from work to Maya’s lifeless body in her bed. At night she covered Maya in a blanket to prevent her coldness from keeping her awake. Whenever she felt her faith waning, she checked Maya over for signs of decay and, finding none, was satisfied.

During the ninth month, Navak was watching television when she heard noises behind her. She turned, expecting to see Maya conscious again but the woman was still lifeless.

The movement was next to her. Something was crawling from God knew where onto the air above the bed. It was an awkward shape with long legs, like a giant insect. As it pulled clear from wherever it was coming from it split in half. It was the two Beings. Navak recognised them from Maya's diaries.

They crawled across the air, fascinated by Maya's body. Navak sat still, hidden by shadows. She forced herself to breathe, even to ask a question.

"Where's Maya? I want her back."

Unsure whether she had spoken or just mouthed the words, the two Beings nevertheless ignored her while they peered at Maya. Eventually they acknowledged Navak but did not answer her question.

"Beware the Abomination," they said. They crawled into a crack in the air, hauling their limbs behind them, and were gone.

For the next three months Navak continued in her duties. It was a lonely task and she began to lose faith again, but one night she awoke and touched Maya's arm as she usually did, only this time there was a hint of warmth. Navak removed Maya's blanket and clasped her, ecstatic at the life beginning to flow through Maya's body again.

Recovery was much harder this time. A full twenty-four hours passed before Maya was coherent and could grasp how long she'd been dead. And when Navak described the appearance of the two Beings, Maya lost what little colour she had.

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“What does it mean that they were here?” she asked.

“What does it mean that you were gone so long?” countered Navak. “Where have you been all this time?”

“I found *Harmonic Sanctuary*,” said Maya. She didn’t know what it meant or what it was, but she knew it was where she had been.

Piece by piece the dead year was coming back to her. This time had been different. In the past she had travelled to all kinds of places in and out of Space, to strange and otherworldly landscapes. Different planets, galaxies or planes of existence, she supposed. None had been the world she was alive in. But during her year’s death she had repeatedly returned to a place she knew from childhood but couldn’t quite remember; the shores of a lake. She had stood there over and over again in the last year—or however long that was in dead time—aware of the mountain that rose behind her. On one side of her was a tiny church, on the other a small wood. The water stretched out before her, like glass despite the cold wind blowing across the lake. And yet; something lay below the surface. What was it—the two Beings? The Abomination? Or just the memory of where this place was?

If that was the case, it broke the surface several days after she had returned to life. It was the day the two Beings crawled back into the world of the living.

Navak was on her way home from work, hopeful that Maya was there, alive, and had just crossed the road into her street when Maya came running towards her.

“The lake was in Cumbria!” she shouted. “I remember it. It’s north of Keswick; the only natural lake in the Lake District. My parents kept telling me that.” Navak, weary from the day, took a few moments to remember what Maya was referring to.

“Why would you go there, though?” she asked. “Of all the places on the planet, why there? Is it because it’s a happy memory?”

Maya shrugged. “I have lots of happy memories,” she said.

The air around her began to shimmer and Navak wondered if it was the aura descending again but Maya showed no sign of recognition. A fissure opened in the twilight and the two Beings slipped through. A dog, trotting ahead of its owner, barked at them then turned tail and ran back towards the comfort of its master.

Maya had discussed death with the two Beings at length. They had become familiar faces over the years, unlike the other creatures she met during death, who mostly passed by on their travels. She had talked to some of them but her repeated encounters with the two Beings had a calming effect and made her feel more comfortable with death. She thought that they were key to everything that was happening to her. It was clear they were trying to tell her something but were unwilling or unable to elaborate on what it was. Faced with them again, Navak was frightened and she, too, wondered what these creatures had once been. Not human, she was sure; there was a knowledge to them that was far beyond her species. Their skin was covered in lines, running like the rings of a tree

around their limbs. Perhaps that way was the way to age them.

“Why are you here,” asked Maya, “where I’m alive? Why have I been visiting a place that’s on this planet?”

“The lake is where your boundaries between life and death are intertwined,” said the two Beings. “Water is the pathway between the two worlds.”

“Tell me what Harmonic Sanctuary is,” said Maya.

“Musical notes can have a protective or a destructive effect,” they said. “With the right notes and sounds we can build a Harmonic Sanctuary, that is, we can make a *hide* for you. It will be more difficult for the Abomination to find you.”

“Why is it so important?” asked Navak. “Maya’s safe while she’s alive, isn’t she? And if she knew what the Abomination was, she could avoid it.”

The two Beings looked at her, their mouths opening wide and then closing so completely they disappeared.

“The next time will be the last,” they said to Maya. “The Abomination crosses all worlds.”

Maya had more questions but the two Beings silenced her. They were listening. The two women listened, too. All they could hear were normal, everyday sounds—the wind sighing through telephone lines, a blackbird’s song, passing cars, a crying child. The two Beings gathered the sounds and began to construct something around Maya and Navak. Navak, protective as ever, went to push against it, but

Maya stopped her.

The Harmonic Sanctuary enclosed them both. It was as clear as glass but gave a distorted view of the outside world. The sounds of the world disappeared, replaced by the notes created by the Harmonic Sanctuary. The blackbird's song was there, but altered. The wind now sang through the telephone lines. It was all more beautiful than either of the women had ever heard. The Harmonic Sanctuary twisted and combined everything to create something new. It was majestic. Nothing in any world could touch them here, of that they were sure. The two Beings, however, could still be heard.

"We will take you to the lake," they said. Then, addressing Maya, "You must decide whether to continue your journey alone."

And Maya felt the aura making its way towards her, threatening to drown her for the last time.

Navak felt strangely at peace. The two Beings were benevolent; Maya was sure of it so Navak was reassured, although she felt less so as the street disappeared and was replaced by murkiness and the heaviness of water.

They were under the lake.

The water kept its distance, surrounding the Harmonic Sanctuary but not breaching it. The Sanctuary changed the sound of the water and of the fish and other creatures that lived there. The two Beings were just visible and beckoned them forward. Navak grasped Maya's hand and they stumbled a little before emerging onto the shores of Bassenthwaite Lake.

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The barbed wire fence, covered in tufts of sheeps' wool that led out of the water; the marsh grass growing alongside the stream that ended its journey in the lake; the two hawthorn trees a few feet from the shore—Maya had only vague memories of this place but there was a beautiful familiarity about it. She squeezed Navak's hand.

"The aura's beginning to appear again," Maya said. "It's faint but it's there. I don't know how long I've got. If this is the last time, I need to learn as much as I can from the two Beings before I die."

"Won't the Harmonic Sanctuary protect you?" Navak was desperate. Nursing Maya's body through death was a lonely vocation, but infinitely preferable to freedom.

"I'm not sure I want it to," said Maya. "Everyone—and everything—dies. It's not a bad thing, it just *is*, I suppose. I've learnt that many different things exist after death. But each time I've died there's been something ominous on the horizon. Is it the Abomination? I need to know before I die for the last time. *That* will protect me."

They stayed by the lake for a week, sleeping on the shore, with the sounds of the Harmonic Sanctuary enhancing the area's beauty. Flocks of Canada geese moved constantly around the water, their wings beating silently as they took off and landed. Snowstorms blew across from the north, turning the landscape from green to white, covering the Sanctuary while they slept. The women awoke to nothingness, only to have the two Beings gently wipe the covering of snow away. And sometimes they moved to the strange

music created by the Sanctuary.

Maya wanted to re-familiarise herself with the landscape, so they walked through the small woodland nearby and up towards the road that led to Keswick. On their return they headed to the tiny church that lay close to where they had emerged. Maya remembered a handmade bird box attached to one of the trees in the churchyard; devoid of birds, she had been delighted to find it contained the papery intricacy of a bees' nest. It would be long gone, of course, but she hoped the tree was still there.

But the little churchyard had been re-arranged.

The tombstones had been moved from their vague lines facing east, in order to make a gravestone circle.

Maya put her hands to her face.

"I've been to a place like this when I was dead, a long time ago," she said. "It's not the same place but the tombstones were like this." She stepped forward to confirm what she suspected. "With the graves facing inwards." She looked around her. "The place I went to had terrible creatures standing around it. Thank God they're not here."

What did it mean? Navak tried to remember what the two Beings had said—there had been something about the lake being where Maya's living and dead worlds met.

"I think everywhere you've been—ever—may be here somewhere," she said. Quietly she added, "This is where it all ends."

Maya heard her and nodded. "And I need to decide if I'm travelling alone."

Dark Fires

She didn't phrase the next question. She didn't need to. If she was going to die in company, Navak was the obvious choice, although she was aware of how selfish it would be to ask such a thing.

The starlings that had begun to appear in the trees grew in numbers over the days and near the end of the week began to murmurate. Small groups flew in formation during the day, as if in practise and at dusk they joined together.

Maya knew what would happen.

In a massive gathering of a hundred thousand birds, the starlings swept around the women in a beautiful cloud, then re-formed as a gigantic double-helix. They took up the sky with the shape, making it roll and turn. Then it positioned itself over the yew trees that surrounded the church and broke apart as the starlings dropped into the branches to roost.

The women tried to talk but couldn't be heard above the excited chatter of the birds. The two Beings, too, seemed overwhelmed by what they had seen.

"In the morning the birds will fly towards the rising sun," they informed Maya. "That is when you'll die for the last time. You must decide tonight if you'll be alone."

"Tell her what the Abomination is!" said Navak. "How can she decide anything without knowing that?"

The two Beings ran their hands over the Harmonic Sanctuary, checking that all was well with its construction. Their voices came through, a little faded but more melodious than before.

"You know what the Abomination is," they

told Maya.

She thought carefully. All the places she had been to during death had one thing in common—the storm-clouds looming on the horizon. More distant than some of the dangers she had faced, she had all but overlooked them. They were not storm-clouds, she realised now. It was an atmosphere, a feeling; something that could engulf her, wrap itself around her and never leave.

The Abomination was hopelessness. And in death it would be disastrous; oblivion, forever. She looked up at the two Beings. “If I’m alone, I’m more likely to find hopelessness. That’s what the Abomination is; losing belief in where I am.”

They lay beside Bassenthwaite Lake that night. Despite the Harmonic Sanctuary, Maya could feel the grass beneath her, could smell the earth. The music of the Harmonic Sanctuary accompanied her. She was glad—she wanted to experience as much as she could and the simplest things, the things she had so often taken for granted, were more beautiful, more heady than she’d ever known. There was no time left for hesitation. She asked Navak if she would join her on the journey. She took care not to plead.

Navak knew the question was coming, had suspected it for some time. It was only logical for Maya to ask her it. Her initial feeling was to accept; the worlds that Maya had described were fantastic. To travel them with her would be beyond anything she could have imagined death to be.

But in that lay a problem.

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Her reason for having helped Maya all this time—devoted herself to the woman—was that her own life had little meaning. Her thirty-six years of existence had been without direction. Was it right to die without having really lived? She knew now that death wasn't the end of things. It was liberating.

"I've thought about this for a while now," she said. "And part of me really wants to come with you. But I can't. I need to live first."

Maya closed her eyes. "Of course. I understand. I may not have a choice, but you do."

"But you can't go alone," said Navak, anxious again. "It's nearly sunrise. There's no one else here to ask."

Maya smiled. "Yes, there is."

The two Beings were in the woodland watching the starlings sleep. They turned at the sound of the Harmonic Sanctuary's approach and nodded when Maya asked if she could join them on their travels.

"You need to learn from this life before you proceed to the next," they said to Navak.

They took down one side of the Harmonic Sanctuary to let Navak out, then rebuilt it around Maya, who was delighted to find the sounds changing as the shape of the Sanctuary changed. The four of them made their way down to the edge of Bassenthwaite Lake. Maya was finding it increasingly difficult to walk. The aura had been around her for some time now, creeping around her body. Death was close.

Navak, anxious at the prospect of being so

close to the end, was again tempted to join Maya, so much so that she took a step forward when the others stood on the shore, and it took all her courage to stop again.

The two Beings spoke to her one last time. "You must still help Maya," they said. "You will make your way home from here. Maya's body will be there. It must be cremated. Then you will both be free."

Navak wasn't sure she wanted to be free, but the decision had been made, and it was heartening to know that she still had a part to play. The three of them began to walk into the lake. Maya, just visible in the half-light, looked different from outside the Harmonic Sanctuary. Slightly distorted, her expression was nevertheless clear and calm. She looked back only once. Neither of the women spoke. The words to express what was happening had not been invented.

Navak watched until they were under water, until the last ripple had made its way to the shore. As the sun rose she heard a great cacophony; the beating of wings and high-pitched chatter as a hundred thousand starlings took to the sky and flew east.

Maya, then, was dead.

Feeling vulnerable without the protection of the Harmonic Sanctuary, and now alone in the world, she bathed in the lake, baptising her new life.

It was time to make plans. After she had made her way back to London and said her private goodbyes to Maya, she would arrange her cremation and tidy up what little of her affairs remained. Then she would visit Maya's parents

Dark Fires

in Spain with one of her friend's few remaining possessions to give them, and the diaries for herself. After that—who knew? Maya had said that she was consumed by death, over and over again. Navak wanted to be consumed by life before death caught up with her. And if she was lucky, when that happened she would find Maya again.

I am surrounded by stars; a belt of them on either side, stretching to eternity. The two Beings and I have been drawn here. Two galaxies are in the process of colliding, they tell me. We are traversing the ever-narrowing gap between them. The pressure is crushing me but we are at the birth of something new, the formation of a super-galaxy. The stars, the planets, the spaces between them are all alive in their own ways. Just as I am alive even though I have died.

"We are all falling towards the centre of the earth", by Julie Travis

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