

Eternal City

Matthew Baker

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In the same way that a lamb, fed a fat diet of seeds and stems, can grow larger, and thicker, and eventually become another thing entirely—a sheep—power is simply the adult version of something smaller that each of us are born with: cruelty. What cruelty feeds on, then, is the Other.

Everything I ever needed to know I learned as a child, in the groves of plum and cedar beyond our village, inventing games of chance for the other children in which chance played no part, in which winning or losing depended on my whims alone. For me, the pleasure in these games was in exposing the Other in each of the children, finding a way to divide them from the rest of the pack, herding them away from the fields and into the caverns, a dark place for my cruelty to feed. For the mechanic's son, it was his lips—thick and pale, chapped almost to whiteness from a nervous habit, licking them with the tip of his tongue, a habit which I had pretended to have until he had acquired it as his own. For the glassblower's daughter, it was her lungs—I invented games of sprinting and leaping, games that were ever faster and faster and faster, until she would spend whole afternoons hacking up the yellowish fluid that puddled in her lungs and made her slower than the rest of us. For the grocer's children, it was a lisp, crooked teeth, the odor of one's sweat, an allergy to bees. The groves were full of children, and I turned each of them into the Other, one by one, banishing them from our games forever, and branding them with a name they

would wear until it was chiseled into the grave above the hole for their corpse—Toad, Nosehair, Pussbubble, Gutterspawn, Shehe, Squirrelmeat, Heshe, Smelly. My cruelty fed on the husks of them, the Others, with its nibs of teeth, its tiny licking tongue, until its fur thickened and silvered, and its lips were lined by fangs the length of gull feathers. It became a nightmare of a creature. Something insatiable.

But before it had become fullgrown, I banished the last of the children, Legstump and Snout, back to the village, and then the groves were empty except for me and the trees and the creature I had grown from myself. The thing about cruelty is that its stomach will stretch from all of its feeding until it can go only days between Others. We waited for more children to come, torturing whatever creatures we could find—popping the heads off silkworms, snapping the wings of hummingbirds—but these small cruelties were not enough to slake the hunger of what I had grown, and no new children came to replace those I had destroyed.

And so we left for fatter fields. We left for the cities ripe and swollen with adults for the harvesting, me and my halfgrown nightmare of power, but discovered too late that the cities were a world without games, a world in which I could not expose the Other as I had with the children. We were forced to feed on the Others that the adults had created on their own, the Others that grew on the outskirts of their society, the Others that were a natural byproduct of the cities, the carbon they exhaled. For years, we slunk through the night, me in a coat made of hoodwink, the creature whipsawing and pitchpoling each new Other with a savage sort of frenzy, leaving them worm-eaten and lice-infested, their skin mottled with mange. We left them scumming in the gutters, slipping off into the alleys at cockcrow, sleeping in empty sheds or abandoned factories until dusk came glomming up the last bits of sun from the streets. And still my creature was growing: its paws huge mitts of shadow, its back budding nubs of bone, sprouting wings the size of ship sails.

Then came the day when we grew tired of the night, grew tired of feeding like animals on the scraps of Other that adults had made, the day my creature became not only nightmare, but worldbuilder. I returned to my games, this time inventing a game that everyone could play—I created something imaginary. Like a painter, or a storyteller, I began with something tiny: a hummingbird. Then a nest for the hummingbird, made of lichen and spiderweb, and then a tree for the nest, and then a field of fluttering grass for the tree, and then everything rushing out from there, everything perfect and golden, the wind warm, smelling of cinnamon and saffron, the seas lapping salt onto black beaches flecked with golden sand, the trees hung with dark pomegranates almost glowing with color, and mangoes splitting their skins for all of their pulp and their juice, the stars breeding and breeding until the sky was almost more star than night, the water from the creeks tasting like nectar, or wine, or a cream-laced coffee, stingless bees flittering about the huge flowers, making beehives the size of bookshelves plump with honeycomb for the taking, everything perfect and golden, an entire world.

I used my creature to create it, in all of its power and cruelty. And then our work was finished—advertising our world was not necessary once it had been made. The adults came to us, all of them, begging us to tell them of our world, begging us for details of the strange and magical creatures who lived there, the new colors the sun would make for them there at sunset, the temperature of the rain. They built us a temple: not an imaginary temple, not one of the countless temples tucked into the golden jungles of my imaginary world, stocked with platters of macaroons, licorice, almond payasam, steamed pears in honey, but an actual temple in the actual world, a stone pagoda hung with paintings of the imaginary, and then an entire city around it, markets selling trinkets embossed with my face, paid for in coins stamped with the shape of my temple.

But one world was not enough. Before we could feed, my creature and I had to under-

take another creation: again, something tiny, this time, a stone. Then another stone, and another, and another, all of them gray and jagged, an entire world of stones. The sky, not night, but empty. The wind roasting and sticky with the smell of rotting meat, the mangled human carcasses that littered the pits that were scattered like wells in a world made of desert. Silkworms feeding on the raw wounds of the living, and also the dead, who could feel everything, who were not dead, but just pretending. Spleen-sized hail that would fall from the clouds that were not there, and rime the color of rust coating the surface of the Other Pond, the only body of water on the entire imaginary planet, stagnant, and spoiled by the poison of the countless drowned slugs floating among the rime.

While my first world had been necessary, this world was my masterpiece. It did not need to actually exist—it was enough for it simply to be possible that it might. Every morning I sent out my messengers with their bags stitched in gold, announcing those who I had recently accepted into the land of hummingbirds, and those who I had relegated to the land of silkworms. It was again the groves of plum and cedar, but groves that this time would never empty of adults for the husking. Those who displeased me, I declared Other, banishing them from the imaginary land they so desired—one morning, a court official who had ruled in favor of a law that protected the rights of Others who wished to breed with Others; another morning, a schoolteacher who had written a subversive poem. Those who slightly irritated me, I declared Other—a woman selling newspapers who failed to properly acknowledge my passing messenger, an androgynous beggar with liver-spotted skin. Those who I had never even heard of, I declared Other, pointing at random at names on a chart, exiling sometimes those with too many consonants, other times, those with too few.

Most of them came groveling to me, begging me to forgive them, even if they hadn't actually done anything to offend me, begging me to remove them from the imaginary land

of silkworms and return them to the imaginary land of hummingbirds. Those who didn't come to me, I had dragged to me, and found new parts of them to break until they too learned to grovel. And my creature fed on them, all of them, feasting on these all-too-easy cruelties, growing ever larger, becoming a world of its own.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

Acknowledgements

“Eternal City” originally appeared in *Annalemma* in 2010.

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