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INTRODUCTION

BY ERIC J. GUIGNARD

THIS IS THE THIRD VOLUME IN THE SERIES *Exploring Dark Short Fiction* and, like raising children, it has become my favorite in different ways from its siblings. The stories of Nisi Shawl straddle the amorphous bounds between the world we live and the world(s) we *could* live, alternately presenting views of both dark dystopian and hopeful utopian scenes, or simply offering an alternate view to *today*. Her writing speaks to societal issues and to philosophy, and to political activism and global awareness, to issues of culture and history and identity, all the while wrapping her messages within an invigorating artistic prowess of beauty, whim, and fantasy.

Or, more succinctly, Nisi pushes the boundaries of meaningful fiction, to the benefit of us all.

In 2016, The Washington Post wrote of Nisi's work (*Everfair*): "... It's a tribute to Shawl's powerful writing that her intricate, politically and racially charged imaginary world seems as believable—sometimes more believable—than the one we inhabit."

In this, I find the essence of Nisi's collected output, a sense of believability that no matter how fantastic the setting or situation, it allows me to consider, *This could happen*.

Case in point: One of my favorite stories of Nisi's is "The Pragmatical Princess," in which a French-speaking dragon is

converted to Muslim by a captive princess for the most pragmatic of reasons. In only a 4,600-word story, the author discusses differences in ancient culture, doctrine, and eastern religion, while also painting a remarkable setting and relationship between characters. And the plot: Regardless how implausible the storyline, to me it makes complete sense. It's reasonable, and it's *beautiful*. It's Fantasy with a message, with significance. It's Nisi Shawl, and it speaks to her savvy.

Another example is "Vulcanization," which is a tie-in to her novel, *Everfair*, and a haunting characterization of Leopold II, king of Belgium, who is historically atrocious for his exploitation and genocide of millions of native Congolese while pursuing personal riches via the lucrative rubber trade. Herein is an alternate view to history, and a steampunk one at that, filled with murky mechanizations and the tragic maimed ghosts of Leopold's own reign, torturing him with sights of what his violent subjugations have wrought. As somber as "The Pragmatical Princess" is hopeful, "Vulcanization" nonetheless humanizes a despot, while speaking to issues of racism and colonialism, and also the human emotions of guilt, of fear, of disgrace. Again, it's Fantasy with a message, and again, it speaks to Nisi's savvy.

And there are so many more! Although I did not include the above mentioned stories within this Primer, there are six others, and in each selection Nisi's distinctive voice and message shines through in ways that are sometimes inspiring, sometimes grim, yet always complex and satisfying. Whether speaking to ideas such as empowerment in "At the Huts of Ajala"; love and multicultural unity in "Otherwise"; or sexual identification and liberation in "Conversion Therapy," Nisi finds way to *connect* and to nurture the reader.

And perhaps her avid perceptions are due to life experiences, for vast exposure to those around us leads to vast understanding, and there is little that Nisi has not done or been involved with in the literary realm since auspicious leanings away from college

(where she began at only age 16), and into a sort of artists' colony for immersion into writing, art, and discourse, of which—in the early 1970s—sounds like an exquisite culmination of what I imagine as the ideals of a young bohemian lifestyle. By now, it seems, attempting to label Nisi as *only* an author or writer would seem too constrictive, as she is involved with any number of other tangential belletristic callings.

Praised by literary journals, news outlets, and leading fiction magazines, Nisi Shawl is tirelessly celebrated as an author whose works are lyrical and philosophical, speculative and far-ranging; “. . . broad in ambition and deep in accomplishment” (*The Seattle Times*). Besides nearly three decades of creating fantasy and science fiction, fairy tales, and indigenous stories, Nisi has also been lauded as editor, journalist, reviewer, teacher, speaker, afrofuturist, and proponent and mentor of feminism, African-American fiction, and other pedagogical issues of diversity.

And now she is here in this third Primer. So whether, dear reader, you are a first time visitor to Nisi's worlds, or else a fan wishing to learn more of her merit, consider that while her messages may wind in surprising directions, growing to beautifully intricate constructions, my message is quite simple: *Read Nisi Shawl.*

Midnight cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric J. Guignard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

—Eric J. Guignard
Chino Hills, California
October 31, 2018



ABOUT NISI SHAWL

MY LIFE

WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I TOLD MY MIDDLE SISTER Julie convoluted tales of how I, a mermaid, had come to dwell in the small Midwestern town of Kalamazoo, Michigan. This odyssey involved the Saint Lawrence Seaway, several of the Great Lakes, and mysterious underground passages my schoolteacher called aquifers. Her own origin was much simpler, of course; our parents, I explained, had found her in a garbage can.

At sixteen, in 1971, I moved from Kalamazoo to Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan's Residential College. I took several French courses, Oral History, Cosmology, and a poetry seminar that taught me ten weeks of nothing. Most classes took place in the dorm, and I got a job in the dorm's library. One day I was startled to notice an extremely short person walking toward me. They were less than two feet high. It took me several seconds to realize that this was a child.

Anyone under a certain age had become alien to my experience. It wasn't this isolation that led to my dropping out of school. I had an abortion. I became depressed. I quit going to classes two weeks from finals. I failed to finish my assignments, and left the University without a degree.

I moved into a house called Cosmic Plateau and lived with people who called themselves Bozoers. I paid \$65 a month rent. I worked part-time as a janitor, an au pair, a dorm cook, an artists'

model. I wrote. I performed my writings publicly, at parks and cafes and museums. I learned a lot.

I read Charnas, Russ, Delany, Colette, Wittig. I sent out a horrible story about fornicating centaurs and got a wonderfully sweet rejection letter. Then our landlady kicked all the Bozoes out of Cosmic Plateau, and I had to live by the sweat of my brow.

I worked at a natural foods warehouse. I sold structural steel and aluminum. I sold used books. I got married. I joined a band.

I kept writing. I got better.

My first science fiction appearance was in the nude. I modeled for one of Rick Lieder's illustrations for Bruce Sterling's *Crystal Express* (the Arkham House hardcover—I'm the Dark Girl of "Telliamed").

My first science fiction publication was in *Semiotext(e)* (see my bibliography for dates on this and the rest of my print oeuvre). I shared the table of contents with William S. Burroughs, J.G. Ballard, Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, and a bunch of less well-known but quite cool others. I owe my part in this literary conspiracy to Crowbar, publisher of the 'zine *Popular Reality*.

In 1992 I attended a cyberpunk "symposium" in Detroit. Sterling, in his inimitable manner, supposed that no one in the audience had heard of *Semiotext(e)*, let alone read it, and I was able to retort from the third row that I was *in* it. So I got to hang out with him, and with Pat Cadigan and John Shirley, which last professional offered to *read my stories!* He was of the opinion that I could write. He recommended that I attend the Clarion West Writers' Workshop, where he and Cadigan were to teach that summer.

At Clarion West I learned in six weeks what six years at the University could never have taught me.

Because of Clarion West and another writers' program in the Puget Sound area (Cottages at Hedgebrook, a retreat on Whidbey

Island), I put Seattle near the top of my list when considering a move from Michigan. I'd gotten divorced. We'd sold the house. When I asked my ancestors where I ought to live, they said this was the place.

My apartment is one block off of the #48 bus route. King County Metro takes me all the way to the beach. Gray and wild, or smooth as oil, the water is unfailingly beautiful. By ways as circuitous as those I described to my sister almost four decades ago, this mermaid has returned to the sea.



A BIOGRAPHY

NISI SHAWL'S DOZENS OF ACCLAIMED STORIES have appeared in *Analog* and *Asimov's Magazines* and in anthologies ranging from the groundbreaking *Dark Matter* series to Salon's online *Trump Project*, among many other publications. Her story "Vulcanization" was selected as one of twenty offered in Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Though best known for her short fiction, Shawl wrote the 2016 Nebula finalist and Tiptree Honor novel *Everfair*, an alternate history in which the Congo overthrows King Leopold II's genocidal regime. *Everfair* was hailed by Karen Joy Fowler as "luminous" and "original," a "wonderful achievement." Ursula K. Le Guin described Shawl's 2008 Tiptree Award-winning short story collection *Filter House* as "superbly written."

In 2005, Shawl co-wrote *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach* with Cynthia Ward. This book is now considered the standard text on diverse character representation in the imaginative genres, and it forms the basis of her years of online and in-person classes offered under the same name. She is a founder of the inclusivity-

focused Carl Brandon Society and has served on the Clarion West Writers Workshop's board of directors for nineteen years.

Since the turn of the millennium, Shawl has reviewed books for *The Seattle Times*, her local daily newspaper. She also occasionally freelances reviews for *Ms. Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She contributes monthly columns to *The Seattle Review of Books* and to *Tor.com*—the latter column expanding on her seminal 2016 “Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction” essay.

Shawl edits the reviews section of the feminist literary quarterly *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*. In the past she has edited and co-edited several fiction and nonfiction anthologies such as *Stories for Chip: A Tribute to Samuel R. Delany*; and *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*; both finalists for the Locus Award. Currently she's in the final stages of editing *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color*, to be published in March 2019 by Solaris Books.

She lives in Seattle, near a lake with enticingly strong currents, and takes frequent walks through the neighborhood with her mother June and her cat Minnie, at the pace of an entitled feline.



THE BEADS OF KU

THERE WAS A WOMAN NAMED DOSI, AND SHE GAVE birth to twins. At first both were weak and sickly, but the boy died, and then the girl prospered and grew strong. She was a good girl, willing to work hard, and with good sense.

When she was still very young, Fulla Fulla helped her mother in the market, running messages for her and bringing her the news. "Mother," she would say, "the women of Dit-ao-lane are over by the baobab, looking for cloth to make beautiful robes. Quick, give me that basket of feathers, that I may tempt them with bright colors." And Fulla Fulla would run to the river and sell all the feathers very dear. Or she would return from an errand leading a row of porters bearing salt. "Mother," she would say, "I have traded all our leather for this salt, and I got it very cheap. The merchant did not want to take it on with him and pay another duty. He did not know that in two days the taxes will be lowered because the King himself will be trading his salt for a new shipment of gold from the South..." And this was when Fulla Fulla was just a little girl.

As the woman Dosi grew older, she began more and more to stay at home and to leave all the business to Fulla Fulla. At last she became ill, and though Fulla Fulla nursed her mother diligently, she died. Fulla Fulla grieved for her mother, but she did not let grief make her weak or stupid. Those who tried to take advantage of her state soon found that this was so. It was harder than ever to read her face beneath the gray ashes of mourning. And though her

eyes were red and filled with tears, they missed nothing. So Fulla Fulla kept her place in the market and did well.

One day as she walked in the market she passed by the stall of a hunter selling cooked meat. "If I buy all your meat," she asked him, "will you give it to me for such-and-such a price?" The price she named was very low.

The hunter was a simple man, not a trader, and he sold the meat to her at the price that she had named. Then she took all that she had bought to the other side of the market and sold it for many times the price she had paid.

The next market day the hunter was there again, and she did the same thing. But the time after that he was not there. When he came again she asked him why he had not come to the last market. He said, "I hate to come to the city, where there are so many people, and noises, and ugly smells. I knew it was the market day, but I could not bear to leave the savannah. Besides, I was sure that you would buy all my meat, whenever I brought it." And he shrugged his big strong shoulders.

This gave Fulla Fulla an idea. "Come to my house," she said, "and I will fix you a fine meal from your own meat." The hunter was happy to hear this. He had lost his first wife many years ago, and he had not had a really fine meal since. He ate up everything Fulla Fulla cooked. When they were alone, he made her his wife.

For a while, the hunter and Fulla Fulla were very happy together. He stayed out on the savannah, hunting as long as he liked. When he wanted to, he came into the city and had a fine meal. He brought her all his meat, and she sold it in the market for a good price, and they prospered and grew very rich. But one market day, the hunter came to the city and Fulla Fulla was not there. He sent messengers all through the market. None found her. Angry and worried, the hunter stayed in the house. He did not know what to do. He felt helpless, and also he did not like to spend so much time cramped up in town. But just as he was

getting ready to give up, his wife walked in the door. "Where have you been?" he started to ask her. Then he noticed that she was wearing at her ears a certain kind of bead, called "the Beads of Ku." Then he knew that she had been to the Marketplace of Death.

When she heard that she had missed the market day, Fulla Fulla was upset. "Time has cheated me!" she said. "I spent only a little while there, but you say I have been gone for days. This must not be so." She frowned in heavy thought. "I will ask my mother what to do."

At these words the hunter's stomach grew cold with fear, and he tried to dissuade his wife from going again to Ku.

But Fulla Fulla looked at him fondly. "You are a fine, great, man," she said. "But you have no understanding of business at all. Of course I will go there again." And she set about planning her next trip.

The hunter returned to the savannah. He killed an antelope and two duikers. He saw many beautiful and restful sights, but he was ill at ease.

When he returned to the house he found Fulla Fulla there. Again she had missed a market day, but this time she did not seem so concerned. "It's easy what we must do," she said. She handed him a little whistle. "You must always return to town a day before market and blow upon this whistle. Then I will be called back." Good.

So the hunter did as Fulla Fulla told him to do, and they were happy. But not so happy as before. Now he could not spend as much time hunting as he wished. He had to come back to the city every three days, to blow the whistle and call his wife from the Market of Death.

Also, it seemed as if his wife was becoming a little strange. She had strange ideas, and she knew things one should not know, from talking to dead people. Whenever there was no one else around to see, she wore the Beads of Ku.

EXPLORING DARK SHORT FICTION #3: A PRIMER TO NISI SHAWL

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