The First Two Pages: "The Sunset Toll" by Carol Mitchell

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An Essay by Carol Mitchell

I typically don't write short stories with any outward-facing purpose. I'm not out to change how my readers think; instead, I write about whatever ideas currently obsess me. It's obvious in my more recent work that ideas of climate change and the future of small island developing states, particularly Caribbean islands like the ones I'm from, plague my mind. That said, even as those of us from developing islands do important work to position our worlds as worth saving and our voices as belonging at tables where discussions of the future are happening, I'm also interested in the ways in which our struggles against nature are so often futile. "The Sunset Toll" is a peek into those particular preoccupations.

The genesis for "The Sunset Toll" was a totally different body of work. In 2022, I had an idea for a short story about three women in an unusual circumstance. They lived in a heavily regulated underground society one hundred years in the future with strict and intrusive rules that governed their choices about procreation—rules that impacted each of the women in a different way. I was struggling to understand their story. How did they get there? What were the risks for these women if they did not comply with their society's expectations?

So I embarked on a task I often suggest to my creative writing students: I began writing the characters' backstory for my eyes only, simply to gain greater insight into where they are when we meet them. Eighty thousand words later, I have to admit that I might not be writing a short story after all.

So back to "The Sunset Toll." This story takes place long after the women in the originally conceived story have died and the underground bunkers in which they lived have deteriorated. For this story, I chose to spend the opening scenes layering details one on another. I wanted to draw the reader into the world in a way that they feel implicated in the fate of the characters in the end. In my creative writing classes, I caution my students against too much world building at the very start of a short story. "Begin in media res," I announce, then, once they understand why doing that often makes sense, I suggest that they judiciously break that and every creative writing "rule" I teach them. In the beginning of "The Sunset Toll," I'm following the latter bit of advice.

(Note, in the story, the character is neither named nor gendered. Neither turned out to be relevant, and each reader can make their own decision if they choose. So I will refer to the narrator with they/them pronouns.)

> Clang! The gong shocks me out of sleep, then echoes, hardly diminishing as it travels from wall to wall of this underground cavern where we survive. I spring into a sitting position on my cot, my hands covering my ears, peering through the darkness toward the fire dying in the far corner of the bunker. The notebook I'd journaled in before I fell asleep falls to the floor. I half expect it to make a thump, but the

> rising water table is turning the floor to mud, and so what I hear is more like a splat.

Including the backstory works here because every detail is connected to the character's state of mind, observations they would make rather than observations I, as the author, want to bring to my readers' attention. You will notice a lot of emphasis on sound in this first paragraph, the clang of the gong and the expected thump and subsequent splat of the book on the ground. These are observations that come naturally to the main character because their norm is quiet, so unexpected sounds are particularly jarring and notable. There is a lot more I could describe about the surroundings, but I stick carefully to what would make sense given the main character's morose frame of mind.

The first paragraph of the story refers to "we" and the next paragraph puts to rest any speculation about who that "we" is.

> Only three of us live here now, and I wonder which of the other two, Maeve or Greg, has woken me. I guess Greg. He's younger than Maeve but still almost twice my age, and I suspect he feels somewhat responsible for me. He would wake me; make sure I was present for the sunset. I can't tell what time it is; it's always dark down here now, but since they've summoned me, I suppose it must be almost time to await another miracle . . . or not. It's been three days since the last one.

The reader now has a full picture of the inhabitants of this situation and their relationship to one another. Even though I am world building, I really work to make every sentence do heavy lifting for the story while staying true to my narrator. The main character's guess about who hit the gong is infused with an

assessment of their living mates. Although only Greg's intentions are described, we can deduce that Maeve is not as kind and unlikely to think of waking the narrator for whatever the sunset will bring.

To move things forward, I'm also careful to deviate from setting the scene to give the reader a glimpse into the central tension of the story. With all the world building, I don't want to lose their interest. Readers may be wondering "Why are we even reading about this moment?" That pesky "So what?" question. The answer: It's sunset, and in this world, up until recently, miracles have happened at sunsets. With the information the reader has about the characters' world, they can draw some conclusions about what sort of miracles the characters might wish for.

Throwing up questions and withholding answers is a great way to build tension in a short story, and here I try to do that. I only give one hint at the central problem: one hundred and forty-seven have escaped this world. My hope is that the reader will speculate about the nature of the miracle and that the next paragraph, which really tightens the knife on how dire the situation is, will deepen the readers' concern about the welfare of the narrator: They are not sleeping well, it's cold, they are hungry, but they have hope. They refuse to eat the rations that were assigned for those who have disappeared, acknowledging:

> We can eat more now that our numbers have dwindled from a hundred and fifty to three, though our generation has only known scarcity. Eating the rations allotted for the others would mean acknowledging they may have escaped permanently.

In the following last paragraph of the first two pages, the reader gets more insight into the origins of the narrator's circumstance. This is a good spot for some backstory, as by now the reader has connected to the narrator through their current experience and is curious to learn more about why they are in this situation.

> This afternoon, I slept so deeply that I dreamed. I dreamed of cotton-ball clouds thick like the ones I've seen in the books my grandmother left behind; books she got from her grandmother, who was one of the first to descend. My great-great-grandfather built these bunkers in 2025 when the island was still considered a paradise. He predicted climate change would soon render his island uninhabitable, and there was no political will to change that course … Yes, my ancestor was a visionary, but even he underestimated the power of nature to reclaim what we humans misuse.

That paragraph does a lot more than provide backstory. It sets the reader up for the underlying question that the story asks. The narrator's great grandfather sought to avoid the impact of climate change to protect his descendants, but is it possible to outrun the forces of nature? Does the Universe care about our individual well-being? About the survival of the earth? These questions thread through the rest of the story as even more bizarre events unfold and readers are left with an answer … or perhaps not.

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Carol Mitchell is the author of the novel *What Start Bad a Mornin'* and nineteen books for children. Her book reviews and short stories have appeared in numerous journals. She holds an MFA and is a fellow of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and several other arts institutions. By day, Mitchell teaches writing to support her current nightly obsession: working on her new novel. Her latest work is *A Good Haunting: Stories*.