

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Fiction Category

Honorable Mention: Excerpt from “*Tremon*,” by Amber Dimond

Jethro dragged his fingers lengthwise down the edge of a thick, yellowed page. Two years of ambassadorship spurred more need to handle books than the rest of his life combined. He could barely read the twisting, pompous font. Thinking of the years wasted in handwriting these encyclopedias made his lower back muscles clench in irritation and sympathy. Still, the look and feel of such old paper incited something softer inside him. It felt almost sentimental, like a gentle whirl of complex curiosity: about the age, the transcriber, the art and the invisible fingerprints eternally stamped all over the tired surfaces. The volume in his hand looked older than any other book he had touched. He glanced at the hunched figure across the hall.

“Excuse me, Scribe!” he yelled. He didn’t mind yelling in libraries, a petty rebellion against their inefficiency. The scribe was the only other person in the building. Jethro quietly hoped his protest would produce some effect, that the scribe would look irritated. But the books absorbed the volume, and the old man started hobbling over with a small smile on his face.

“What can I assist you in, sir?” he asked calmly.

“Is this book relic? It was in with references.” Jethro carefully placed it in the scribe’s outstretched hand. The curled fingers slowly turned the pages of the book, sometimes stopping to point to something on a seemingly random page. The scribe’s eyes moved about two times faster than his hands, but in equally random directions. He started nodding, first to himself, then to Jethro, turning the pages all the while.

“It is a relic and a reference. However, no one cares about it as a relic, so I put it in with the references.”

“I need a current reference for *Tremon*, not an antiquity. Where is the relevant reference?” Jethro grew slightly impatient as he spoke. The old man knew what he needed and should have produced it after the first question.

“This is the current reference,” the scribe contentedly assured him. “No edits have been issued since 1112 R.A. My mentor updated it himself. However, no one cares about my mentor, so I put it in with the references.”

Jethro chuckled to himself and took the volume from the buckled hands. “Don’t you think *Tremon* could use a more durable copy?” he said, smirking. The scribe matched his smirk.

“Perhaps. However, no one cares about *Tremon*. The handling it receives here is as seldom as it could expect in a relic display, and it takes up less space.”

“But your mentor updated it himself, eighty years ago. And it still belongs on a reference shelf in a personal room?”

“My mentor never claimed to be a great artist. A transcriber could never afford to be as sentimental as you.” The scribe leaned his head to one side. “Did you not find what you needed in this edition? I have a few official letters that have been cleared for foreign affairs. It would take me some time to find them.”

“If you have some time, then take it. If you are busy, then don’t. I’m not looking for anything specific, just trying to find as much as I can to work with.”

“Have you ever been to Tremon?”

“No.”

“I will give you a suggestion. Given as an old man who’s transcribed thousands of interactions between dozens of cultures. I see them unfold, one page after another. I can tell where things went wrong or right. You can come prosecute me for my advice, but I’ll probably be dead soon. This is what I say: do whatever you need to on Tremon.” The scribe’s eyes started languidly wandering through the top shelves. “Do whatever you need to on Tremon,” he repeated. “If they take offense, you will never know the difference. It will be quicker not to worry about navigating their culture.”

“Half of the largest continent on our planet relies on substrate from Tremon. Are you sure we wouldn’t notice if they took offense?”

“Yes, I’m sure. But I don’t think you were asking me in earnest. Anyway, I’m too old for regrets, so it’s easy to be sure.” The old scribe lowered himself into a chair and closed his eyes. His continued presence made Jethro slightly uncomfortable. He needed to study the reference; it felt odd to so obviously disregard the advice of someone more knowledgeable than him, even more odd to disregard it while that individual sat right in front of him. He looked down at the reference.

The civil war of 986 R.A. began as a result of proletarian unrest over what they deemed to be an unjust computation. It escalated when the director of inclusions refused to submit to an updated empathy test on the grounds of constitutional disrespect.

Jethro’s eyes drifted down the page towards the war report.

Casualties: 2 adult males, 1 adult female, 2 conjoined embryos.

Official War Span: 986 R. A to 987 R.A.

Resolution: amicable negotiation, significant constitutional alterations, particularly to respect umbrellas.

“Respect umbrella?” Jethro mumbled to himself.

“It means criminal rudeness,” the scribe offered. He turned his head and opened his eyes to look at Jethro. “If you are disrespectful to certain high ranking individuals it is considered a federal offense.”

“I thought you said we’d never know if I offend them. They seem to be pretty forthcoming with it.”

“You are too important to be disrespectful towards, and too unimportant to be involved in controversial matters. I doubt they will do anything but ignore your manners.”

Jethro accepted this indifferently and continued scanning the reference. Nothing drew his attention as new or useful information. Some small ecological concerns. Continually swelling animal rights laws and the resulting political complications. An overview of matriarch based society and its impact on arranged marriage. Predicted length of current dynasty. He skipped to the last edit.

Brawt Lon, first genetically designed royal heir born 1112.556 R.A. Scheduled for installation as queen 1126. R.A. Dominant trait: empathy. Secondary trait: logic.

“Will you please make an official copy of this reference?” Jethro asked the lifeless looking scribe, ready to be irritated at his lack of response.

“The complete reference, the Tremon entry, or the last edit?”

“What? Oh, the Tremon entry, please. Have it sent to my queue.”

“I noticed when you scanned in that your queue was full. Your allotment was used up last night. Looks like you have a bit of work to do, eh?” The old man chuckled in that patronizing

way only the elderly do, where it sounds like they are simultaneously comparing their youth to your youth and both youths to current wisdom. Jethro closed his eyes and cracked his neck, maybe in preparation for clearing out his queue, maybe to feel older.

“Send the report over in an hour. There’ll be room.”

“Very well, my friend. When are you scheduled to leave?”

“For Tremon? Two days. By official transport.” Jethro’s mind drifted towards his upcoming assignment. An odd assignment. The result would be at least important enough to merit an edit in the reference. But his name wouldn’t be included. He wasn’t anything more than an expensive delivery boy. He wondered if the old scribe in front of him would be involved in the edit.

“I have a friend who knew the queen of Tremon,” the scribe’s voice jarringly interjected.

“Knew?” asked Jethro, questioning the full extent of the old man’s knowledge of current affairs on Tremon. The scribe smiled in his contented way.

“Yes, he certainly did. That was...a few years ago, though. She’s done well, the queen. My friend assured me that she would. No edits in 80 years. That’s what I call peace. Absolute peace. Like living in a home you can afford and still having time to cook,” he paused. “I’m at peace, by the way. Ready for the sun to stand still. I’ll follow it to wherever it goes. And I really don’t care if it leads nowhere. I’ve known for a few years now that peace and indifference go hand in hand. And I’ve had some pleasant conversations along the way, too. In an hour I’ll send that report over and if it’s rejected because your queue is still full, I consider that a conversation.” He chuckled again. Jethro felt tired. This scribe wasn’t going to be involved in anymore real projects. Clearly, his mind no longer merited anything more than secretarial assignments.

“I have to go,” Jethro said, handing the ancient book back to its ancient keeper.

“Yes, I know. Work to do.” Chuckle. Jethro smiled and made his way out.

As he opened the door a waft of fresh air sucked the dust out of his lungs. Already, the musty, ornate building and its strange inhabitant began to evanesce. He could relegate them both to memory, a low ranking memory that exists but is rarely, if ever, summoned. He wished he had walked to the library so he could now walk home. He could have begun clearing his queue as he walked. Fog started to rest on the pavement and in the branches, obscuring the streetlights, the diffused light making it unclear whether the night looked darker or lighter than normal. It smelled like the wetlands. What would Tremon smell like at night? What would it sound like? He wanted to start his first extra planetary mission with a clean queue, regardless of how superfluous the mission made him feel. He sighed and lifted up his sleeve, looking for a fresh place to position a spurt tack. If he could postpone sleep a little longer he might be able to come close. The last tack fell to the ground as he popped it out of the package. At one time, that would have bothered him enough to throw it away. Not tonight. Infection perched at the bottom of his list of concerns. He picked it up, brushed it off, secured it in a little vein near his armpit and opened the door to his car, wondering what his mom made for dinner.

JUDGE’S COMMENTS

I felt this well-written piece suffered from being an excerpt. I don’t know enough about Jethro to get into his point of view. The tone of the piece changes completely in the last sentence, where Jethro is going home to “mom” for dinner. Who is he?

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