

THE FEELERS

Jenna Putnam

WHEN I WOKE up in my new body, it wasn't at all what I'd expected. It was cold, hard, nefarious, numb. It was sleek, silver, and in the right kind of light, it shimmered with a grace only the old world knew about. I have four propellers that rise from my body like wings, an eye that sees and records everything so that one day, if a shred of flesh ever breathes on this planet again, they will know that things were once very, very bad.

Elsa was reincarnated as trash, Jamal as a crumbling mid-century modern building, and Jean as a railing. I got lucky. In the old world they would have referred to me as a drone, but we don't have names for things anymore. It's unbearably lonely here; some of us throw ourselves into the sun. The horizon isn't so far if you've got nothing to live for, if you're technically not even alive. We don't run out of energy or batteries, and time stretches on like an impenetrable, blinding canvas. So some of us, we just keep going until we feel that tender heat peel back our layers like skin, until the sun swallows us whole. I've thought about doing it, real hard. I've gone halfway across what's left of the Pacific Ocean, which now looks like a constellation of scattered tidepools, but the closer I get to that white hot sun the more I start to feel human again, the more I get tricked into thinking there's something, someone out there waiting for me, some grand plan being written worth holding on a little longer for. So I always come back.

I've grown to enjoy filming moments where one of us resembles something living. A plastic bag rippling in the wind, a hunter's trap with its jaws wide open towards the sky, a drone that from a distance looks like a prehistoric bird. I guess you could say I'm voyeuristic. Sometimes I get signals from old satellite televisions that play pornographic films, or baseball games, or soap operas that would loop on repeat at nail salons. If I get turned on in the slightest, I start to glitch. Sparks fly from me, and it alarms the others. You see, we're not supposed to feel. Most don't. And I must be cursed, because sometimes I get this sick intuition like I'm feeling everything for everyone all at once, and those are the moments I debate taking a long flight towards that burning fire in the sky.

How do we fuck, you ask? We don't. Sex fell out of fashion in 2018, and that was a hundred and sixty years ago now. Though sometimes, if I try to remember real hard, I can recall those intense moments of shrieking pleasure, when orgasm somersaulted you into a higher state of being. I feel close to that pleasure when I fly high over bodies of water, drop down low-low and quick-quick, and linger above the surface like a whisper.

When Jaesa is in a good mood (she's one of the feelers), songs from the old world burst from her speakers into the pallid, smog-filled air, and it's like I have five senses again. The others often bereave her for this. One of her volume knobs is missing, so when she wants to turn up, she can't. When she's sad, she plays Ryuichi Sakamoto's "Merry Christmas Dr. Lawrence," and I appreciate her for that. I've filmed her crying dozens of times.

As far as we know, almost all living species on capital-E Earth have died out. Humans were the first to go. I like to soar through the bones of large animal skeletons, careen through dilapidated buildings, take refuge in the living rooms of decaying houses. Sometimes I probe through books and forgotten journals of all those pathetic people who never saw it coming. I can read five pages a minute; sometimes I get through entire novels in one sit-down.

When I want to feel better about my life, I visit abandoned Amazon factories. The walls still thrum with misery. Towards the end, humans rarely left their houses; stores shut down, buildings sat empty and unoccupied, the streets eerie, desolate, ringing with abandon and sorrow. It was a squatter's paradise. I often go to old movie theaters and play films for myself. I imagine

the scent of buttery popcorn, the droll of spontaneous conversation. Now and again I can hear rats scurrying beneath the seats, burrowing and nesting inside the musty velour. One day I want to have my very own film screening. I don't care if it plays to no one. I just want to leave something behind.

For the past five months, a group of us drones have traveled to the edges of Earth. I wish I could tell you it's been easy, peaceful, but it hasn't. Gangs of time bombs and old army tanks have been hunting us, and yesterday I watched my only friend get blown to smithereens. I kept her data card. At night, we see explosions in the distance, plumes of iridescent tangerine lighting up the cold, black sky. It reminds me of fireworks, and for a moment it's even beautiful, but then I remember what's going on. Destruction, destruction, destruction. You'd think in a world, if you can call it that, of emptiness and penury would be left alone to rot, but everyone insists on more annihilation. It is the oldest story in the book.

We've reached the last remaining ocean, a pale cerulean color with a tinge of magenta. Its tiny waves lick the shore, foam with glitter, and regurgitate the carcasses of sea anemones and starfish. I've been collecting pearls that I keep next to the rock I sleep on. It is rumored there is still life here, and I imagine entire cities beneath these waters, argosies of forgotten treasure, and it is all perfectly intact and it does not decay or fade or become ugly and it is not gnawed at or broken or scorned or tainted. Sometimes, though my eye might be playing tricks on me, I swear I can see the backs of dolphins breaching the surface. It gives me hope, anyway.