

THE BONE
CHIME SONG
AND OTHER STORIES

JOANNE ANDERTON

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Joanne is very lucky to have so many supportive people in her life. First and foremost she would like to thank her husband for his unending patience and understanding, and her friends and family for not disowning her when she disappears down the writing rabbit hole.

She would also like to thank Rabia Gale for her keen beta-reading eye and generous encouragement, and Alan Baxter for knowing when to tell her to shut up and get on with it. Finally, she would like to thank Tehani, for having such faith in her.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION — KAAARON WARREN

THE BONE CHIME SONG	1
MAH SONG	17
SHADOW OF DROUGHT	37
SANAA'S ARMY	51
FROM THE DRY HEART TO THE SEA	63
ALWAYS A PRICE	81
OUT HUNTING FOR TEETH	89
DEATH MASQUE	103
FLOWERS IN THE SHADOW OF THE GARDEN	117
A MEMORY TRAPPED IN LIGHT	139
TRAIL OF DEAD	157
FENCE LINES	171
TIED TO THE WASTE	189

INTRODUCTION

There are some writers who inhabit a world set slightly apart from ours. It feels familiar, smells, looks, sounds that way. You get drawn in because of this familiarity. You sink into it.

Then everything changes.

Joanne Anderton inhabits such a place. Her stories are transformative. From the hauntingly beautiful “The Bone Chime Song” to the poignant “From the Dry Heart to the Sea”, Anderton casts a spell over us that draws us into Anderton-world and makes us believe it is all possible.

Her stories are filled with people we care about, because she cares so damn much. She brings them to life on the page, from the natural sense of dialogue (“Some yuppie wanker’s idea of art,” Nathan says, in the excellent “Shadow of Drought”) to her descriptions. In “Mah Song”, new to this collection: *Mother burns fragrant handfuls of carefully preserved flowers, Father fills tiny cups of recycled tin with cheap rice wine juxtaposed with Cables run like mangrove roots from dozens of sockets in his shaved scalp* makes this story a classic Anderton magic trick.

She has a powerful imagination. It is a rare writer who can immerse us so completely in worlds as odd as those depicted in “Always a Price”, which I think of as Anderton’s Fuck Cancer story and “Tied to the Waste”, a glorious story I first read when working with Joanne as mentor. I’ve never forgotten it.

Joanne understands how societies work, and how easily they can fall apart, and how much it hurts when this happens, demonstrated with great compassion in stories like “Shadow of Drought” which mixes horror with the ordinary, tapping into the despair and hopelessness that drought brings and “Fence Lines”, where she explores the importance of safety in a dangerous world and the lengths to which people might go to achieve it.

Anderton’s writing allows us suspension of disbelief, even when reading of the creation of life out of rubbish such as in “Tied to the Waste” because her story logic is so good. Things happen for a reason, even within the context of a seemingly impossible world. In one of my favourites in the collection, “Out Hunting for Teeth”, Anderton is unsettling and deeply disturbing, yet still logical.

She has a real mastery of the surreal, is what I’m saying, and somehow manages to make the surreal seem normal.

At the heart of every story is caring. I call Anderton-world a beautiful dystopia, because even in nightmare scenarios, like “Out Hunting for Teeth”, there is still that belief in the triumph of human nature, and that belief love exists, and will exist, as long as we do, so that even when she is describing horrific things (and she doesn’t hold back for the sake of the reader) there is a certainty of the human spirit that shines through.

What this means is that reading this book will fill you with horror, wonder, awe, sorrow, delight, surprise and admiration.

Kaaron Warren
February, 2013

SAMPLE

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MAH SONG

A rain of stars heralds the descent of the Nine Lords, and the rest of my family celebrate. Mother burns fragrant handfuls of carefully preserved flowers, Father fills tiny cups of recycled tin with cheap rice wine. Later there will be sticky cakes of preserved red beans, and the entire crop of my mother's window-grown spinach served wilted, and heavily salted.

I do not join the celebrations. Instead, I go in search of Aroon. It's important to see him before the Mah Song takes him again.

He sits in his room, as he always does, plugged into a world we cannot see. Cables run like mangrove roots from dozens of sockets in his shaved scalp. They continue beneath the floorboards to intersect with the ancient optical and copper streams that twist through the ruined city.

"Aroon," I whisper, and crouch beside him. "Little brother." I touch his shoulder to get his attention. "How long before they land?"

He is sitting as if in meditation, legs crossed, hands on his knees, palms up. Beneath his shirt the fan in his chest whirs gently, like calm breathing. He turns toward me and his eyes are glowing: flicking green and red numbers in his right eye, a complex array of charts in his left.

"Hello big sister," he replies. He closes one eye and concentrates for a moment. "Two days." His voice is unsteady, but it's not nerves. Long gone are my little brother's childhood days, when he clung to my leg and wept each time the Lords descended. It's hard to believe he is only ten years old. He carries himself with such dignity now.

His voice is unsteady because the last sacrifice hasn't had time to settle into his body. A complex design of pins on either side of his

neck, each lit by a tiny bulb of a different colour. I don't know what they do, and he has not offered to tell me yet.

My heart drops. Two days is so soon. "Shall we walk by the river, then? I have credits enough for khanom jark. A whole one each."

A faint smile, nothing like the grins and sticky fingers I remember so clearly. "The taste of coconut is nothing but data," he says. "Chemical reactions translated by the brain." He traces the plugs in his head. "There's too much inside me now, to leave any space for taste. Do not waste your credits on me." He blinks unevenly, one eye after the other. "But that's not the point, is it? I forget, sometimes. Yes, we must walk. It's time."

I give him the space to get ready. As he goes through the complicated process of disconnecting himself, my preparations are far more mundane. I tie back my dark hair without brushing it and change into slightly cleaner clothes. The night is humid, but the sleeves of my blouse are long, to hide the scars — old and new — across the underside of my forearms.

The result of my failed Mah Song tests.

"What shall we pray to the Lords for?"

I turn. Mother stands in the doorway, arms crossed, all her good humour gone.

"Good health," I answer, head down. That's what the Lords are for. "And a Mah Song to carry our prayers."

"Or a husband?" Her tone is bitter. "One less mouth to feed."

I am the third of three daughters. I should have been born Mah Song — according to my mother, at least. That burden does not rightly belong to the miracle son she should have been too old to carry to term. She had me tested, over and over. My scars are ropey, like the wires the monks shoved beneath my skin when, really, I was too old and had failed too many times to try.

Aroon tells me memory is only data. The stink of the temple, the razor in a monk's wrinkled fingers, are just like the taste of coconut. If I want, I can erase them.

The inoperative nodes sewn into my arms convince me otherwise.

It's no cooler outside, but the air feels lighter. Aroon has gathered all his cables into a scarf, wound cloth around his forearms and

dressed plainly. He can't do anything about his eyes, so he still draws attention. His gait is awkward thanks to a sacrifice in his hip, but at least he can walk, and enjoy the night.

Every time the Lords descend, and I take him to the riverbank for sweets, I wonder if this is the last time.

I buy substandard khanom jark and we sit beneath the bare tree branches in our usual spot to eat it — where the fence has rusted clean away, and we can dangle our feet over the river's grey water. The palm leaf it's wrapped in is dry and cracked, the coconut tastes like dust, and the sweetness isn't from sugar. Two bites, and I toss it to the monitor lizards lurking below.

"It's an energy converter," Aroon says, pointing to the sacrifice in his neck. "The first step towards making me self-sufficient. I've felt no hunger since it was installed, so I believe it's working."

"It won't be long, will it?" I lean against him, and he tips his head so our temples meet. He vibrates, ever so softly. His fan. Not fear. "Until the last sacrifice. The one where the Lords take you away."

"Two more descents," he answers, eventually. "Maybe three."

I close my eyes to the lights from the Ayutthaya slum behind us, the foaming river, and the toxic, empty lands running off to the horizon on the other side. "But we're not ready."

Mah Song do not live long, and they grow less human with every descent. I can't stop this, any more than I can take my brother's place, but I'll be damned if I'm going to sit back and watch him disappear before my eyes. We've worked together since he was just a very little boy to come up with a way to save him. And now, when we are so close, when we've finally found something that might actually work, the Lords are back.

He threads his fingers with mine, and I'm not sure who is comforting who. "The data key will work, sister. It just needs repairing. Fix it up, and it will have the space to hold several small boys like me." A deeper smile this time, almost genuine. "Remember, we are all just data. The Lords want this body, but this body is not all I am."

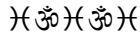
"And then what?" I whisper. "Once we upload you to the key, what will you do? A key can't talk, or walk. A key can't hold my hand. How can you think I'd doom you to a life like—"

“We don’t have any other options,” he interrupts, so calmly. “I’ve been scanning, every minute of every day, tapping deep into the ruins, as far as I can access. The key is all we have. It’s insane, and rotting away, but you can fix that. You know how. You know where to get the parts.”

I say nothing. No one argues with a Mah Song.

“Promise me you will, big sister. When I’m gone, look after me?”

Nodding, I resist the urge to rub at the nodes in my wrists, and the freshly cut skin, taut and sore against them. Yes, I know how. I can fix all kinds of things.



Two days go by so quickly, and too soon Aroon is gone. Oh, he still sits in his room in his meditative pose, and his eyes flash so many signals in green, but he isn’t with us. Not really. The Mah Song trance has taken him.

So it’s time for the procession to begin.

We dress him in simple white pants. I pry away the cap that covers the fan in his chest, and loosen the thin wires that crawl across his stomach and shoulders, freeing them from the fine layer of skin that had started to grow over them. They look like tattoos — a complex pattern of colour and line.

Then Father seats him on his steel-pipe and plastic-mesh Woh, the four strongest men from the street lift him one at each corner, and he is carried from the house.

I refuse to chant and stamp and wail like everyone else. Instead, I return to his room, wait until I’m sure no one has followed me, and pick up one of his toys; a metallic lizard standing on its hind legs, spines down its back, mouth open in a ferocious expression. We dug it out of the ruins together, when Aroon had enough space in his brain for play.

I pull off the head, tip the body upside down, and the data key lands in my palm.

The data key is shiny, wiggling, and resembles an insect. A head of flicking bulbs and connectors, a golden body riddled with tiny

tubes and resistors, a tail of copper and plastic-coated wire, and wings of tissue and blood.

The data key is old world tech — a complex mixture of electronic and organic circuitry, similar to the Nine Lords themselves. At least, that's what Aroon tells me. He located it after the last descent, buried deep, its signal shielded. It attacked me when I dug it out, but it rather likes Aroon. He's not too different, after all.

I pinch its body between forefinger and thumb, and it stabs wildly at me with the sharp tip of its tail. Eons trapped, all alone beneath the earth, have driven it insane. Aroon tells me not to personify it like that. The key doesn't have a mind, not really. Its organic processors have rotted away, fragmenting its protocols and ruining whatever information it once stored. That's all. It's perfectly repairable. In fact, for the past two days we have discussed, over and over, how I will do just that. Fix the key, plug it into my little brother, and he will do the rest.

Even so, I can't help but feel sorry for it.

"Phailin!" Mother calls from the street. The procession is about to begin. I wrap the key in cloth, and shove it into my pocket.

When I emerge, the Lords have filled the sky.

The Nine Lords remind me of the ruined city beneath us, except polished, clean and alive. Aroon calls them satellites and orbital stations, but these words don't mean much to me. As they hover above us they look to me like upside-down buildings and empty streets. Arches of pale steel. Engines burning like close suns. Smooth, reflective glass. Rippling liquid crystal in more colours than I have names for. Their searchlights scan over us, the beams hot and intense. Green lasers flicker across our rusting streets. They are accompanied by an ever-present hum, a taste of metal in the air, and the incense of burning plastic.

"Phailin."

My mother waits beside Aroon's Woh. She has acquired a small huddle of tourists — an older couple, and their son. They stand out. Tall and thin where my mother is short and round, black suits with clean shoes instead loose sarongs and slippers. They have a look I know well by now: wide-eyed, slightly terrified, definitely in awe. It's the look of a wealthy tourist, caught in my mother's web.

“My daughter,” Mother tells them. “Sister of Aroon. And almost a Mah Song herself.”

I curl my lip at *almost*. My mother does more than pray for a son-in-law, she actively hunts them. Tourists are her speciality. My two elder sisters have both left Ayutthaya in their company.

The procession begins, and the tourists’ son falls into step beside me. The crowd grows as we proceed. All around us is chanting, singing, and everywhere red. Red cloth, red face paint, red candles and fireworks.

Behind me, Mother is shouting over the din. “She came so close. Mah Song blood in her, don’t you doubt it. Sadly, she’s still alone. Spends all her time caring for her brother when she should be caring for a husband and child of her own.”

The tourist smiles at me. “Philip.” He shouts to be heard, and holds out his hand. I take it only because I know Mother will be watching. He has fine, pale hair, his skin is uncomfortably pink, and his clothes are already heavy with sweat.

The procession ends at the top of the temple steps, and Aroon is set down. The monks emerge, carrying a giant pile of tech scavenged from the ruins and an array of knives. Head tipped back, not watching what he is doing, Aroon stands. Calmly, he selects what he needs to make his sacrifice. A bundle of clear cables, parts of broken circuit boards. A small, very fine knife.

Behind me, the drums start playing. Above me, the Lords start rattling. Aroon opens his mouth, grips his tongue with one hand and the knife with the other—

And I can’t watch.

I look at my feet, swallowing nausea, and anger, and an overwhelming hatred for the people around me.

“Oh my God,” Philip gasps, beside me, and I shift my attention to him. I’d forgotten he was there. “How can he do that? Doesn’t it hurt?”

“When the Mah Song takes him,” I say. “He knows no fear. No pain. No weakness.”

A moment, a pause, in which Philip presses his hand to his chest. “Amazing.” The word escapes on a reverent rush of air.

Sprinklers open in the skies all across Ayutthaya, and the Lords' healing, life-giving waters gush forth. It's a downpour, cold compared to the humid air, at once painful and refreshing.

The tourist lifts his arms to shield his head. I grab his wrists and force them down. He's surprisingly weak.

"Let it fall on you!" I hiss into his shocked face. "This is why you're here, isn't it? The Mah Song sacrifice to the Nine Lords, and they bless us in return. This rain is their blessing!" I release him, and draw a wet, shuddering breath.

He stares at me, blinking too much, not accustomed to the rain's sting. "This? Yes, yes of course. I don't know what I was thinking."

Around us, the sea of red bodies revel in the rain — singing, whirling, drinking, eating, kissing and even fucking, hidden in the tight alleyways. It is happening all along the river; nine temples for Nine Lords, a Mah Song sacrificing in front of each of them, and the people celebrating. Red electric lanterns are strung up between buildings, piles of gunpowder go up in sparks, and there is food everywhere — left out in the rain until it is sodden, disgusting, and so precious.

"It's just not what I expected," Philip says. "The Lords are far away. I've read all about them, I was so excited to finally see them. But now I'm here, I can hardly see anything at all." He shrugs and looks up.

I glance at the temple. "From here, sure. But if you are willing to make an offering you can see them closer — well, a part of them. In the shrine itself." A plan is forming, even as I say the words. This is perfect. The shrine is just where I need to be.

Philip goes through a complicated dance to remove his shoes before I can lead him up the temple steps. He blithely makes what seems to me to be a sizeable donation of credit, and the monks are more than happy to let us in.

Inside the temple is dark, and the moment we step out of the rain and away from the noise, I begin to regret it.

I never wanted to come here again.

Numbers flicker, needles tremble, and patterns of light flash across the switches set into the walls. A bloodied table in one corner — *don't look at it* — and tech piled everywhere, all scavenged from

the ruins and brought in tithes. We keep going. In my previous trips to the temple, the shrine has been empty. A great round room with an open roof, walls painted a too-perfect blue and decorated with pale masks — the sightless and impassive faces of countless children. The floor is tiled in crimson and steel, and dried flowers burn in large golden bowls.

This time, the shrine is full. The Lord above us is so massive it fills the sky, and this is its smallest part, slotted in through the hole in the roof when it came in to land. A tumble of wiring and bone, veins and rivets, skin and transistors, with several faces all merging into each other. Dials for eyes, plugs in place of open mouths. Imploring hands spread wide, palms up, holding keyboards or screens.

It could be a statue to worship, except that it is hideous. And it breathes.

“Amazing,” Philip whispers. “It’s just the way my research described it. A true bio-mechanical computer from the old world.”

“And parts of dead Mah Song,” I whisper, in reply.

This is my brother’s future. Does anything of these people remain behind their empty faces and rigid hands? Can they remember the taste of khanom jark by the riverbank?

I leave Philip peering at an outstretched keyboard, and circle around the Lord until he’s out of sight. The key is having a fit when I take it out of my pocket. I keep half of it wrapped, and run a practiced finger down its shivering body to open the casing. A smell like rot and the Lords’ own electric haze wafts out on tendrils of smoke.

The parts I need come from the Lord itself. This is the only place to find them whole and living, not ancient and decaying. I use the key’s tail to slice into the blue flesh around eyes and mouth then dig into the shallow cuts. They don’t bleed. From within the Lord I pull a fine thread of pink and wiggling wire. Carefully, I slide it into the key. It squirms inside, and I repeat the process.

I’m not accustomed to this kind of circuitry. The wires I use tend not to be alive. I’m a little disturbed when all the pink wiggling things bind together, winding themselves into ever more complicated knots before pushing out the old, decomposed wiring until I can pinch and remove it entirely.

“What are you doing?”

I spin, heart in my mouth, but it’s only Philip, peering down at me in his innocent-tourist curiosity. I close the key and pocket it as I stand. “Nothing.” I smile, but I’m shaking, and it doesn’t work very well. “Have you had a good look?”

“Oh yes. It’s incredible.” He still seems far too distracted by my pocket.

“Good. Let’s return to the party then, shall we?”

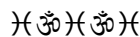
The key feels heavy as we leave the temple, heavier than it ever was before. It’s hope. Hope that my repairs have worked, hope that Aroon’s right and the key is big enough to carry all of his memories and personality, so when the Lord takes his body, the rest of him can stay here with me.

But as soon as I see him, all that hope falls away.

Because Aroon will never speak again.

He has split his tongue for the sacrifice and embroidered the inside of his mouth with optical fibre. Blood has dyed his once-white pants red. It colours the puddles on the temple floor around him. It will take days more to get the sacrifice just right. Days of tweaking, of bleeding, and with every adjustment, the Lords bless us.

How will I know if the data key works, if he can’t tell me?



Mother is a frenzy of activity, as wild as the full river. The house is as clean as a house built of metal sheets and ancient stones can be. She is using the Lords’ bounty to its full, cooking kanom-tom to snack on, cool khao chae, and half a dozen different curries. Philip and his parents accepted her invitation to dinner. I can’t imagine why they would want to eat here, when they’re staying in the raised tourist annex, further back from the river and accessible only by cable-car, but apparently we will make a delightful part of the tourist experience.

I don’t have it in me to sit, wait, and pretend to care. Instead, I wander down the alleyways between tin-shed houses baking in the afternoon heat. Life is springing up in the wake of the rains. Skeletal trees are green again, a thick blanket of moss softens every hard

surface. Bright yellow orchids burst out of grates in the road. The land of the other side of the river has changed completely. For a few short weeks, it will be clean, and every kind of crop will flourish there. Bridges of rope and iron have been strung up across the rapidly flowing water, ready to harvest the rice, already sprouting.

This is the power of the Lords' blessing. Only yesterday, Ayutthaya was a dark slum, rusted and dead. Now, it is a forest.

This is what my brother, and the other Mah Songs, buy us with their blood.

My brother. All I can think about is the data key, still safe in my pocket. I can't imagine engaging these tourists in conversation. I can't even imagine eating. Another thing Aroon won't do ever again. No space in his head for taste, and now none in his mouth for chewing. He probably doesn't even need to. That's what those power-converters in his neck are for.

"Phailin?"

I'm so distracted, I almost walked right into him. Philip, coming the other way. He checks himself, visibly surprised, then relaxes into a smile. "Oh — I'm so glad I saw you!" He turns and falls into step beside me.

I frown at him. "What are you doing walking around on your own?"

"I just wanted to see the temple some more." It's raining again, and Philip plucks at the front of his shirt as we walk. It's plastered to his chest, wet and heavy. "I must have got lost."

"You must have."

"How do you stand being wet like this all the time?" Philip shakes himself as we negotiate the puddles pooling in the rusty holes and uneven dips in the pockmarked iron road. His feet squelch in those ridiculous shoes. "I've never been so uncomfortable. And trust me, Phailin, I know about being uncomfortable."

I turn, ready to tell him I very much doubt that, when I notice something on his chest. The rain has made his shirt transparent, and his skin is a criss-cross of scars. That stops me in my tracks. Dark, ropy lines and large, circular plugs in shiny chrome.

"Don't let anyone else see those."

He lifts questioning eyebrows, and I nod at his chest.

“Only the Mah Song should augment themselves,” I explain, as he reddens further and does up the buttons of his sodden jacket. “At least, that’s what the monks teach us.”

“It’s not exactly augmentation.” He crouches to brush away vines tangling around his ankle. “As much as necessity.”

And that’s when I realise what he is, and why he is really here. “I’ve heard of people like you. But I didn’t believe you existed. So sick your own doctors can’t cure you. The blessing of the Nine Lords is your last resort.”

He nods. “My nervous system is breaking down. Slowly.” He doesn’t sound too sad about it. Just resigned. “It’s degenerative. Do you know what that means? It’s getting worse, gradually. Inexorably. Soon, I won’t be able to walk, and then stand, and then, finally, breathe.”

I swallow hard.

“It might be uncomfortable,” he continues, suddenly bright, “but this rain is amazing stuff. Since the first shower, my hands are steady. No tremors, not even one.” He runs his fingers through the wet knots in his pale hair. “Nano-enhanced bacterium, reprogrammed viral matter, and whole strings of hyperactive progenitor cells. No one really knows why the Lords come here to release it. I’ve read theories that it’s a misfiring repair function designed to literally rebuild organic matter from a sub-cellular level.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Lords. For a tourist.” I can’t share his enthusiasm.

“Research!” He beams at me. “I read all about it before I came. The Nine Lords aren’t the only relics, you know. There are other satellite and subterranean beings still in existence. But they’re the only ones who interact with us. Don’t you wonder why? What’s going on, behind those faces you showed me? What could they teach us, if only we could get them to speak?”

“Actually, I couldn’t care less. Your research means nothing to me. I only care that they need Aroon to cut himself, over and over, until it finally kills him. Slowly.” I take a deep breath, try to stay calm. “Think of it as... *Degenerative*. That way you’ll know how he feels.”

Silence. When I glance up, Philip is staring at me, red-faced and horrified. "He's just a boy, isn't he? To you, I mean. Just a boy, not a sacrifice, not a saviour. Not a wonder of bio-mechanical engineering."

"He's Aroon." I'm having trouble meeting his eyes. I've made him feel guilty, I can see that clearly. Part of me is sorry, because of the plugs in his chest and the death that's stalking him, but part of me is so very glad. I'm not sure which part I want him to see.

"I think we should be honest, don't you?" he says, after we push our way through a crowd that's gathered to catch fish suddenly hatching in a large pothole. "This was not my idea any more than it was yours. But we both know what's going on. Your mother wants a son-in-law. My mother wants a Mah Song grandchild."

I gape at him. "She *what*?"

He sighs. "I know. My doctors have sent me here because they can't help anymore. But it's hardly a permanent solution, is it? No one knows when the Lords will descend, and the boats are few and far between. We waited here for three months before the rain of stars came, and who knows how long before we can go home again? So she's decided if we had a Mah Song of our own, if we could make them come to us—"

I'm shaking my head. "It doesn't work that way. It's not inherited; just because Aroon is a Mah Song doesn't mean anyone else in the family will be."

"That's not the way your mother tells it."

"That sounds like her." I snort a bitter laugh. "Who's to say the Lords would come to you anyway? Have you ever seen one, before coming here? Ever danced in rain that can heal your wounds, grow forests out of nothing, and cleanse ancient poisons from the earth?"

He shakes his head.

"That's because they're our Lords, not yours. This land, this people. Our sacrifice."

He nods. "But I am my mother's son. She is willing to try."

"And what about you?" I squeeze my hands into fists, digging nails into my palm. It doesn't matter, by the time we get home the rain will have healed them. "Would you really wish that on your child? A slow death just to save yourself? One life for another?"

He just looks so damned torn.

“Could you really?” I whisper. “If you had the choice?”

Dinner is awkward.

Late that night, when all the house is sleeping, I take a small blade and sit on the floor in Aroon’s room. Light from the Lords filters in through the plastic-sheet windows in steady yellows and greens. It rained again while we were eating, and a cache of tiny geckos exploded out of the ceiling into Philip’s mother’s hair. I think their affection for us is waning, and I am grateful.

One life, to save another? I know what choice I would make. I’ve already started.

I work a node in my upper forearm free, catching the blood in an old, soiled towel. The pain is nothing, I tell myself the whole time. Just data. Even as my arm shakes. Just data.

Aroon has taught me many things. In between descents he scours the ancient networks, always plugged in, always searching. Technology and toys are his favourite things, but as his sacrifices increased and his mobility waned, I learned to do the digging and the fixing for him. I can weld the tiny limbs of tin soldiers back in place. I can paint the eyes on dolls. From soldering motherboards to healing organic filament, my skills are growing.

And I have been practising on myself.

Aroon doesn’t know this. He would never agree to it.

I pull out a gory plastic and copper mess from my skin. My nodes are inert; they never responded to the Lords in the temple, no light in their bulbs or signals from my brain. But I have repaired computers centuries old. The key is older than history, and I have given it new life — all by following Aroon’s instructions. Why can’t I do the same for myself? So I’ve replaced my parts and rethreaded the wires, and sent little shocks of electricity through my palm and dripped rain into the open wounds, in the hope that something, anything, will establish the connections between node and nervous system that the monks were unable to stabilise.

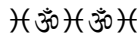
But the key doesn’t react to me. I shove its tail of wires in as deep into my nodes as they will go. “Come on,” I hiss. Nothing. I don’t even know what to expect. Voices from the ancient world,

stored on the key, transferred to whisper fragmented and damaged in my brain? A twitch, a flicker of bulbs, anything to indicate we've established a connection?

Still nothing. Either I didn't fix the key properly, or I'm just too broken.

I pull the key free and tie the towel around the wound. Either way, it's not enough. Even if I can transfer his mind to the key, I refuse to leave Aroon alone to rot in madness in an ancient memory device. If I can get these ridiculous nodes working, then I won't have to. I will save him. No matter the cost.

I replace the towel with bandages made from torn sheets and head out into the never-dark night. Back to the temple, in search of more parts.



There's a single family making offerings before the temple, arranging junk in a small pile and burning bowls of flowers. It's odd that the monks aren't there to accept them. The family chant softly, eyes closed and bodies rocking, and take no notice of me as I kick off my slippers and climb the steps.

Aroon, of course, doesn't notice me either. He jerks as I walk past him, lifts an arm, and digs his fingers into his cheeks, wiring away the face I know and love. Right on cue, the sprinklers open.

I duck into the temple just as the rain starts — and pause. It's unusually dark inside. The switches in the walls have been dimmed and even the lights from the Lord in the shrine have gone out.

I drop to all fours and crawl forward into the darkness. Until my hand touches something soft. Warm. I feel around. An arm, a limp hand, fistfuls of cloth. I bend forward, my eyesight gradually adjusting. It's one of the monks, lying prone beneath me. There is blood from a blow to his forehead. I can't tell if he's alive.

I sit back, uncertain. I should leave, now. Raise the alarm, now. But if I do that, I won't have the chance to get back inside here, unsupervised. The throbbing pain in my arm is insistent. I must do what I came here to do, and fix myself, so I can help my brother. Worry about the monks later.

But as I reach the shrine, I begin to hear noises. The scratching of metal and muttered curses. I creep closer.

It's Philip. Philip, naked from the waist up, examining the body of the Lord. Illuminated in the faint light from a single lamp, the plugs in his chest are ugly, ungainly things, and have none of the smooth beauty of Aroon's sacrifices. They poke out, the skin around them red and irritated, criss-crossed with stitches and staples.

I'm so shocked I just stand there, and he sees me.

"Phailin?" He looks tired. Great shadows haunt the skin beneath his eyes, his cheekbones are stark, ribs clear to see. I had not realised how thin he was before. "Why do I keep running into you?"

"What are you doing to the Lord?" I hiss, and take a shaky step forward.

He lifts a gun and points it at me. "Don't move."

We had never found guns. Maybe Aroon didn't look for them, or maybe they'd all been found and removed long before we were born. Even so, I know what one is. And what it can do. "Philip, don't—"

"Just stay where you are. Don't interfere."

I glance back over my shoulder. "The monks?" I whisper. "Was that you? Did you—?" I can't believe it. I can't even say it. Philip, who smiled so readily at me, who was so eager to see the temple, who read so much about the Lords he was desperate to see—

Suddenly, something doesn't feel right. "Wait." I hold his gaze and he narrows his eyes at me. "So eager to get into the temple, all that research? You said the Lords have the technology to cure you." I gesture at the Lord. "Is that why you're really here?"

"You were right, of course," he says, mouth a firm line and expression unreadable. "About the unlikelihood of a Mah Song child. It was the desperate plan of a desperate mother, and the only way I could think to convince her to bring me here. She would never have agreed to the truth." He runs his free hand across the Lord's closest face, and I realise it's the one I cut. "I have, indeed, done my research. And when I saw that little brother of yours, bloodied and pain-free on the top of the steps, I knew I was right. Only the Lords can save me. And not with their fickle rain but their technology. Their very selves."

Knives taken from the monks' testing table lie on the ground at his feet. I think I know what he has in mind. The same thing as me.

"But now that I'm here," he continues, and begins to sound uncertain, "it's nothing like the diagrams." His fingers still on the tiny incision I'd made. He turns to me. "Actually, come here."

My hand is over my pocket, where the key and knife are hiding, but he's watching me so closely I don't dare try to grab them. Not yet.

"You fix me," he says. "I saw you do it, here before. To the data key."

I must look as shocked as I feel, because he smiles, grimly.

"Did you think I wouldn't see? That I was too awestruck to notice you fix it, or that I was just a foolish tourist and wouldn't know what it was? I told you, I've done the research. I know a data key when I see one. Old world tech. Just like your Lords. So you can do the same for me. Take what you need out of the Lord, and fix me."

"Fix—?"

He shakes the gun at me. "I suggest you work faster than that."

As I approach the Lord, I gesture at Philip's chest. "I'm not even sure what those things are supposed to do. How can I fix them?"

He places a faintly quivering hand over his plugs. "They feed immune suppressants and stabilising neural charges straight into my spine. They don't fix the problem, just maintain it. They also hurt like hell and are constantly getting infected. Unlike your little Mah Song out here, I don't have a Lord to dull the pain."

I look down at the ugly blades scattered across the floor. "I don't think I can help you."

"What?"

I pull back my sleeve and unwind my bloody bandages. "It won't work."

"What are you doing?" Desperation in his voice now. A dangerous sound.

"I've been trying to do it too." I hold out my ruined arm. "My mother wanted me to be a Mah Song, but I failed her. Over and over, I failed her. But I've been trying to fix it. With everything Aroon's taught me, with all the parts he's found and now, tonight, I was coming here to do the same thing you are. Wire myself with living technology." I let my arm fall, and blood dots the floor. "But I don't know how. You say

we've lost the knowledge and only the Lords' have it now. Well, they haven't chosen to share it with us. They chose my brother in his pain-free trance instead. And we just have to accept that."

Philip stares at me, unable, unwilling to comprehend. "But—" I understand, oh how I understand.

"Well then." He spins, stares back out of the temple. "Maybe he can help me instead." He rubs at his chest and shakes his head. "Just have to wake him up, right?" He stoops, collects a knife, and heads out of the shrine. "Let's see just how pain-free this trance really is!"

"No!" I run after him, but my feet tangle in the tech on the floor and I trip. Even as I fall I grab at his legs but cannot get hold.

He staggers. It's easy to forget how weak he is. He slips to his knees, twists, points the gun at me and fires. But he's unsteady, and he misses. Instead, the bullet goes straight into one of the Lord's stolen faces.

For a moment, there's nothing but the ringing of the shot, then silence.

Until the Lord begins to move. A great shuddering fills the temple. The remaining eyes open, the hands flex, those plug-filled mouths twitch and begin to scream. I grip my ears. It's piercing, so loud, too loud, not only coming from the faces in the shrine but above us, around us. The Lord is screaming. It is full of anger, and of pain, and a desperate confusion. And why wouldn't it be? How much of the Lord is made up of Mah Song, and how much of the Mah Song remains within it? Children, all of them, frightened, modified children.

Philip scrambles to his feet and I follow. Tears pour down my cheeks, the Lord all rage and fear around me. I don't care about the gun anymore. Let him shoot me, it can't feel worse than this. So I leap onto his back and knock him down. I straddle him, grab his arm and beat the gun out of his grip. He's too weak to fight me without his weapon.

I grab a large piece from a scavenged engine and lift it above my head. But even as I look up, there's a figure in the doorway. Small, thin, silhouetted against the light from outside — flashing red now, a sky full of furious Lords — and instantly recognisable. Aroon.

Maybe the Lord is too busy screaming to keep Aroon in his Mah Song trance? Maybe the bullet damaged some vital piece necessary to create the trance to begin with? Either way, the boy that stands in the doorway is free. I can tell, instantly, just from the way he holds himself. He's human again.

I drop the engine and stagger over to him. He wraps his arms around me and I hold him close. He's shaking and bleeding all over me, but he doesn't hold me for long. He pulls back, takes my hand, and leads me to Philip.

Aroon can't speak, so he gestures instead. Philip's trying to stand, I push him down again. "Please?" he gurgles. "Hurts." I roll him onto his back. His plugs did not survive the struggle well — they've been pulled out of alignment, the red skin around them torn, leaking blood and clear, infected pus.

More hand waving from Aroon — desperate, hurried, fearful — and I run outside, to the pile of wires and blades and needles he's been using to sew himself with. I gather them all, barely noticing the chaos below. The Lords are sitting lower in the sky, their vents closed, sirens and lasers and lights beat down instead of rain. The streets are full of people, all heading for the temples, but no one is dancing. We don't have much time. Whatever Aroon is doing, he has to do it quickly.

I pass him his tools. His mouth moves but the noises that come out aren't words. The fibres sewn into his cheeks stretch in what I hope is a smile.

I help him, alternating between holding Philip down, finding Aroon what he needs, and completing the delicate tasks his fingers struggle with. With fibres, wires, nodes, circuit boards and organic matter taken from the screaming Lord itself, we open up the poorly made plugs in Philip's chest. It looks like a terrible mess to me, but Aroon seems to know what he's doing. He did something similar to himself once, to install that fan.

As we rewire Philip, I whisper to him. "Shh there, you're okay. Just a little more." I try to be soothing. "It's what you wanted, isn't it? The technology of the Lords to fix you?" After a while I'm not sure he can hear me anymore. Blood pools around us; my arms are

slick up to my elbows. “We’re all just data, after all.”

When Aroon and I have finished, Philip’s plugs are completely different. They lie flush against his chest, and they’re wired into his heart, lungs and spine with the Lord’s organic filament.

Aroon sits back, and holds out his hand. But I shake my head. “I don’t know if I did it properly,” I whisper. “I don’t know if I fixed the key right. What if it doesn’t work?”

He doesn’t move. Is that trust in his ruined face?

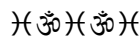
Voices outside, the temple shuddering, and I know we don’t have any time left. So I prod at the skin around the edge of his fan, to the hidden plug there. The one he made himself, not under the influence of the Mah Song. It’s different from the rest of his sacrifices. Rusty copper tipped with green.

I slot the key in. For a moment, nothing seems to happen. Then Aroon closes his eyes, tips back his head, and the key flutters, flashing. Alive.

It pops back out on its own. It’s warm, and solid, and still.

No time for doubt. People in the doorway, voices shouting, shadows and fitful light. I spin and slam the key into one of the plugs in Philip’s chest, as Aroon stands, and walks calmly into the shrine.

He never comes out again.



I lost track of Philip in the chaos — the monks from other temples, the sirens and the screaming and Aroon, choosing to destroy himself to repair the Lord. Someone dragged me away, so at least I didn’t see him in the very end. It hasn’t rained since, and barely enough food has grown to feed us. Already, there have been fights, and an entire neighbourhood poisoned by freshly dried rice.

The wounded Lord called a new Mah Song before it ascended. A tiny girl — she looked as young as three — who cried as they carried her in a terrible and solemn procession to have her first incisions made.

The tourist ships have left, following the river back out to sea. My mother disowned me. And now, I scavenge a poor living on the tech I can dig out of the city below. I still remember the places Aroon

sent me, and I will forever keep the skills he gave me. But there isn't much of a market for toys, and some weeks, I am forced to beg for what food I can. On the riverbank, where we used to walk, where we planned a way to help him escape. Aroon, my little brother and Mah Song. Gone.

Empty and alone, I sit at our usual spot, my legs dangling over the river. The lizards watch like they are waiting for me to fall in.

Then a man sits beside me. At first glance, I don't recognise him. He has a heavy cloth wrapped around his head, and bare feet. Then he hands me khanom jark. "I know it's only data," he says, smiling. "But I've missed the taste of coconut."

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Joanne Anderton lives in Sydney with her husband and too many pets. By day she is a mild-mannered marketing coordinator for an Australian book distributor. By night, weekends and lunchtimes she writes science fiction, fantasy, horror, and everything in between. She enjoys blurring the lines between genres, mixing a little science fiction in her fantasy soup and adding a generous pinch of horror.

She has published short fiction all over the place, online and in print, in Australia and overseas. Her stories have been shortlisted for the Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Short Story, and Best Science Fiction Short Story. Her debut novel, *Debris* was published by Angry Robot Books in 2011, followed by *Suited* in 2012. *Debris* was shortlisted for the Aurealis Award for Best Fantasy Novel, and the Ditmar for Best Novel.

Joanne won the 2012 Ditmar for Best New Talent, and the 2012 Australian Horror Writers Association short story competition.

The Bone Chime Song and Other Stories is her first collection (and she's very excited about it!), and won the 2013 Aurealis Award for Best Collection.

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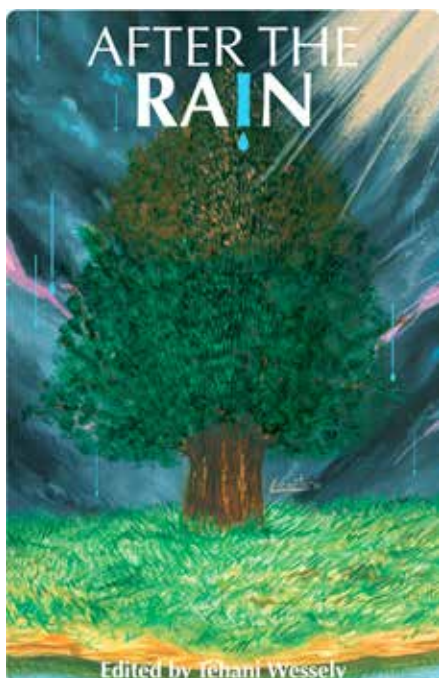
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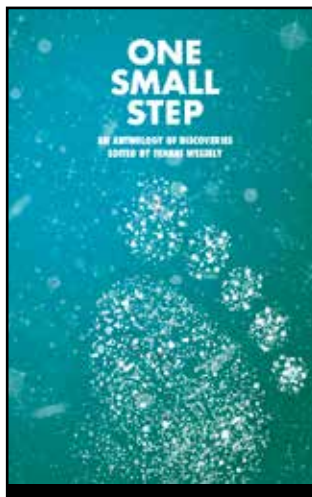
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