

excerpt from *Galactiphasia: A collection of astral folktales*. Edited and translated by Odessa Harper. Published Gousses & Rames, Phaedra Colony. 4124.

...[A] particularly interesting trend in early post-neocolonial folklore is the repeated theme of mythologizing the means and nature of astronomical travel. Interstellar transport proliferated during this period, and early Martian and Venusian settlers would have been intimately aware of the experience and possess at least a basic understanding of the technology and science behind it; however, you would not think so, based on the many fables emerging from these settlements which paint space travel in a fantastical light, often bordering on the spiritual.

The origin of these stories is a matter of some debate. Some scholars consider them to be evolutions of Earthly mythologies which the first wave of settlers brought from their home planet and passed down to subsequent generations, organically mutated over years of retelling to address subjects more relevant to astral-colonial natives while still retaining distinctive historical details.<sup>1</sup> Others believe these tales were deliberately constructed to mimic pre-digital Earth mythologies out of nostalgia for the home planet.<sup>2</sup> In either case, the seeming anachronism in the portrayal of humanity's interactions with the cosmos suggests that across the first few centuries of human settlement beyond Earth, communities harbored a mood of resistance to the scientific realities that surrounded them. It seems likely that this fantastical, high-spiritual image of space emerged in response to the realization and correlating demystification of what for so long prior had been a collective dream for Earth-bound humans. The preeminent ethos for initial settlements in this period was an unyielding, survival-oriented pragmatism, often accompanying or followed by strict authoritarian movements.<sup>3</sup> While mainstream literary trends responded with overt disillusion, a small but enduring number of stories proliferated which clung to that bygone

<sup>1</sup> The earliest and best known proponent of this theory is Thess Bgnaier, in her book *Comparative Ethnographies of the Astro-diaspora*.

<sup>2</sup> See "Terraforming Culture: the artifice of our collective recollection" (4087) by Methonia Vöe.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. The Muskrat Laws of New Geneva; the mayoral term of Vrixgœuuol Hayes

sense of romanticism with which our more primitive forebears viewed the heavens we now call home...

*Forward by Odessa Harper*

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They weren't sailing in search of stars, to start out.

That first voyage was a cartography mission: mapping unexplored deep ocean. Neither of the two people manning the vessel was even doing the mapping themselves. They were contracted by the sponsoring company—Steph for her sailing experience, Ty for their technical expertise—to monitor all the billion-dollar radar and scanning equipment and do repairs if the need arose (god forbid).

Two strangers; weeks of endless ocean on a vessel designed with human habitation as an after-thought; absolutely nothing to do as the automated machines continued to perform their functions perfectly optimally.

Dull was the only word to describe it. Until it suddenly became anything but.

Pure happenstance the first time they came across one: a shining beacon miles wide lighting up an otherwise deserted stretch of uncharted ocean deep in the South Pacific, just about equidistant from the coasts of Chile and New Zealand.

Seeing the glow from a distance, they imagined they were approaching a collection of bioluminescent somethings—plankton, algae, whatever the stuff is that they show on National Geographic. But it wasn't like any pictures of the ocean in any magazine that either sailor—or anyone for that matter—had ever seen, floating in glow stick patches along the tide. This was instead like looking into a neon kaleidoscope, only a thousand times brighter; blinding sheens of orange, now purple, now green, now white, and twirling infrared shades the human eye could not

process, but which nevertheless seared themselves into your corneas and left rainbow sunburst imprints at the edges of your vision long after the source itself had gone.

They both watched the glowing mass grow and stretch with the curvature of the earth from the furthest tip of the aft deck. It was its own lake in the middle of the ocean; a lake made out of light. It made their eyes water and soon after begin to burn, even from leagues away still, yet neither could seem to wrench their gaze elsewhere. Hypnotized—whether like moths to a flame or lost sailors following the savior beam of a lighthouse—they tracked the odd phenomenon for every second of the ship’s glacial approach.

The ship’s sensors detected increasing temperatures well before its human occupants, but with no one presently monitoring the data, it went ignored until mild warmth progressed to unseasonable heat. It seemed impossible that the water was not boiling from the temperature in the vicinity of the light, but the only bubbles around were of their own wake; the waters ahead were shockingly smooth.

Common sense should probably have convinced them to turn back by this point, but common sense wasn’t on that ship that night. Even if it had been calling, neither sailor would ever look back wishing they had listened to it.

Approaching the light was like walking over the edge of the horizon to meet the sun as it rose. Within minutes, the black sky surrounding them was lit up like high noon. Closer still, and the landscape began to lose saturation, the blues of the sky and the ocean fading into paler and paler hues before eventually disappearing into a flat expanse of white, as though the pure force of presence was blotting out the existence of anything else. Or perhaps that was just how it felt in the moment, so consuming was the pull on their attention to a singular focus. Maybe they were going blind.

The boat engine gave out just about fifty yards from the border where the nothingness met the glow. That should have sparked alarm; at any other point of the voyage, any such sort of mechanical failure would have been a shot in the arm, an immediate jump to attention to find and fix the problem. But priorities change when you're standing next to a star.

Without the constant mechanical growl filling their ears, they realized belatedly that the air was filled with a different kind of hum. It could only be the light, emitting some kind of tone from itself. How? They could feel no vibrations on the current to account for the din. So close to the source, they should have felt the physical force of sound like standing next to a booming speaker. There was only stillness, yet the sound was certainly around them, surrounding them, filling their ears.

It was music. Rhythmless, atonal, fluctuating in pitch according to no pattern of composition—but music nonetheless.

The sailors didn't bother trying to restart the engine. They didn't have to: the tide, still present though its motion was barely perceptible, was guiding them gently in toward their intended destination.

Neither had any thought or expectation as they floated into closing the last few feet of distance. Eyes squinted to slivers against the burning, ears full of alien song, they were both too filled with wonder for their minds to turn observation into conclusion or even into question.

Up until the very moment when the prow of their sailing ship crossed the threshold. They would not have known they had finally breached this boundary by sight or sound; the light was too bright and the sound too all encompassing in the immediate surrounding to judge an external sensory difference.

But internally, both sailors knew the instant it happened as their stomachs flipped upside down and their hearts sprang up through chests and flew out through their mouths. Their ear canals inverted and their veins tied themselves together in knots. Their brains teleported outside of their skulls and traveled all away around the earth before returning and reattaching to their spinal cords. Their eyes saw things that could not exist and their ears heard sounds that they were not equipped to receive. Their blood turned to fire and then mercury and then crystal. The pores of their skin blew open wide to accept the matter of the universe inside of them, permit it to permeate through them, and then closed back up again. Every molecule rearranged itself and in an instant returned to perfect original order, no different than before yet colossally changed.

The two sailors awakened—or rather emerged, as they had not technically lost consciousness—from this journey once again on their same boat, sailing through open ocean in the dead of night. The engine thrummed healthily once again. The tide rolled and bounced them as it should be expected to do in these conditions. The navigational equipment, when they both scurried over to check the monitor, identified their position as 1.4 leagues North of their last documented coordinates.

They had been traveling southward, before.

Looking out across the sternward view, there was no sign of anything glowing on the horizon.

Neither of them spoke of what they had experienced, even though it was all and everything they could think of now. All the way back to shore, they went through the motions just enough to keep themselves alive and afloat. Mission be damned, assignments be damned. They had discovered far more out here than anyone had meant them to, and far more important.

They went ashore in Guayaquil and were back out to sea within 24 hours of docking in the bay—just long enough to resupply and to call in their resignations with the company that had sponsored the initial journey, then finally depart again before anyone had time to ask any question or to repossess the ship.

They could have gotten their own ship, probably, but it wouldn't have been nearly as well equipped for collecting data. Besides, a good scientist knows to change as few variables as possible when attempting to repeat an experiment.

They had all the necessary information to return to that exact same spot of open ocean: coordinates, satellite, route history, even water samples. There was no doubt when they returned that they were in the right place. The only explanation was that the star had moved.

Dejected, they sailed empty-handed to port—a different port, where they were unlikely to be recognized or detained and extradited for grand theft nautical.

There was no need for discussion or debate. Continuing the mission was implicit, the only question was where to look next.

They charted a course that would take them through as much uncharted territory as possible, avoiding known routes, with strategic resupply stops. The timing and distance all arranged to bring them back around to that first spot the following year on the exact same day that they had first encountered the star. Perhaps it returned on a cycle. An orbit.

In the meantime, they would search other corners of the ocean. They would sail around the world a thousand times, for the rest of their natural lives, searching for the chance to pass through another star.