

# **Just So**

**a speculative solarpunk ecofiction**

Annette Hakiel

“Yes. We are almost done.”

—my husband, after I complain of our progressing ages.

Lock the door, lie down, and take off your mask; let it dangle by the hook—just so. There will be no need to remove your clothes, dear; I would have already just done so. You’ve been devastated your entire life, dear, haven’t you?—or have you forgotten almost losing the world, as I am now in this moment placing my left leg over your tattooed right shoulder, moving your right hand down by my left hip, slowly, then pulling down the sheets off of you, and watching as you slip off the bed to push a towel against the bottom slit where yellow LED light sneaks through the base of the doorway where we should put a door snake, to insulate, for our building has been retrofitted for deep energy, and it’s been electrified, but we can’t seem to figure that part out yet. And one more towel at the foot of the bed, for later? Yes? I don’t have to worry about pregnancy; I’m older, as are you. Take out your teeth.

And there you are, the *future you*, as if you’ve been marooned, S, and you’ve never minded? As if the world having been saved doesn’t matter. As if the chemtrails over the park streaming red, blue and green don’t matter. Don’t conjecture. Don’t contemplate or estimate. Stop it, S; you’re no good at it. S: it’s useless. You, licking wholeheartedly at the small red oxbows collecting around the outer threads of the rinsed pickle jar and furtively lapping a mediocre year of Bordeaux Superior (the season still too hot) without realizing that you’re fixated, still, on my delicate pink eyelids; future you, resisting that itch to speculate with me upon the existence and survival of our outside world. There’s no need to any more, don’t worry about any late Anthropocene holocausts, there aren’t any, or won’t be any more, and so: sink into me.

Yes, I see it... Yes, do it, S. Perhaps the automated lights along the streets will have already turned on, powered by wind and sky and a battery made out of two lakes, in the distance, the lakes themselves man-made, an eel farm, and covered by floating solar arrays; perhaps there are silly teens spray-painting the otherwise ignored public works of art outside, no longer sculptures of any confederates or racists in this syndicosocialist utopia, for those have all been torn down in some wonderful monumental mixed-maniac dysphoria.

Perhaps for all we know in the future suicidal businesspersons who couldn’t find a better job after the revolution hit leap out of buildings downtown all afternoon kind of like they did in ‘01, for different reasons; for all it matters, love, perhaps the true bones of someone’s lord and savior have at last been discovered to rotate around the sun in exactly the same fashion as everything else, his parables having been thought now as lessons in sustainable development: no overfishing; the strategic use of nets, and the use of the World Wide Web, radio in extension services and the word; two fish as a family limit and injunction against overfishing; the building of bridges to walk over waters; also the use of bread and food and beverage to bring people to a central location where an overseas farmer’s market might rise up, after which, a whole city.

But none of that would matter to future you. It would be a given. Don’t you dare start gambling on it, S; you mustn’t. Let’s say you luck out with that crypto backed by trees. It doesn’t matter – pay it no mind: sprawl across the bed in the haphazard positions so your limbs are numb and you can’t tell which is which...

S, you have been devastated, it’s true. S, you’ve been betrayed, but you never said anything. That’s why later I’ll watch you breathe lightly in bed, why I’ll keep an eye on you as the still loud but now electric and AI driven eighteen wheelers still hums through the valley in the distance delivering goods, toilet paper, the vaccines, at this pandemic we’ve been living through...and you

tremble...the moon light suddenly flooding your completely oblivious body, with the way your put together perfectly (S, how can you not forgive yourself?) your floppy grey-wing-tipped hair, you sculpted shoulders, your articulate wrists.

Yes, I'll climb into our future bed, S, I'm sure of it. S, I'll touch your shoulder. You would have one cocktail to celebrate and nothing else. Yes, I see it, I'll still worry about your breathing, for you smoked, and this air, or what it was, smog choked, and I'll first touch your skin-sweet, muscular shoulder, the way only I can right at this moment in the future, an old married couple together, celebrating the momentous event, the world has been saved but for a moment and we've reached that point, temporarily, that you were glad I worked on and cared deeply for, even with my schizophrenia, but by work through poetry and community, and but for which you barely mentioned, except in dreams. As if you could have forgotten the world...

From past to present, yes, S? You'll forget all of it. You're good at this. You do it better than you could consciously do this. I still love for my eyes to behold you, still, yes, for I love you, and you more reasonable than you think you are, so it will be easy for you: from sports stats to wars, celebrity divorces, time of sunrise or sunset, number of minutes until the garbagemen is brandishing algorithms for what is recycling and what is trash, the can loudly clattering down this street every Tuesday at 4 am, or the time until he is suddenly wielding the lids against the privileged hippistas (the new hipsters) pillaging the curbside piles, those three who dumpster dive every week on our street and who decide to eat, in a cartoon understanding of recycling, food that's already been thrown away. And why is it still? We haven't picked up composting, our building. But they do it at the MRF...they sort all that, with machines, and with AI. And we will have the food waste monitors. So, love, then forget you, this future you, then forget especially all that came before—you can't even fathom it. You will never understand it, you're bad at understanding such far out things. So: forget it, S. Just enjoy. You weren't made for such a tremendous doom, so make our and this world afresh, made for you to glory in it. And just glory, glory...

You were made for the bed—so forget everything but this bed before you and the naked woman you will be with.

Later, you will call to me, “Hey, chicken butt! Miss Sassafra!”

Later, you will call to me, “Hey Thighs like White Elephants, I got some coffee!”

Do I trust you? after all these years, do I?

Does it matter? do you trust me?

So play dumb, only, don't play, S. No more games. Just only: an oblivion.

Yes. There is more than just one kind of oblivion. So choose wisely. Choose this one, the one where we still have Earth, each other, in the future, and the days later where I will have let the vegetarian bean soup burn and completely evaporate on the induction stove top (you've finally agreed to eat less meat). Where I'll fail to do even one dirty dish that either one of us failed put them in the water-saving sink, barely manage to shower, though we do that less now, and after that, finally put clothes on, the same clothes we have for the last forty years, the clothes made in sustainable, durable fashion. But it will all be for the better. Both of us should live like hermits, during this strange second worldwide lockdown, binging for at least four whole days on nothing but canned beans and sex and cheap wine (we have the access to tap water, so no worries there) as if it were a form of sensory deprivation and submersion of each other, completely sunken into each other's flesh and animalistic urges, like two beasts stuck in one locked cage bound to either kill or screw.

Later, don't let yourself leave the apartment, unless it's to buy toothpaste. Much too hot out. This much is necessary. And you won't be alone. At last! You won't be alone! All those years in your office, alone and working! Under the energy saving air conditioner. Behind the smart solar glass walls. Up high in this mixed use wooden constructed tower, first of its kind here. So let yourselves pivot; you will pivot in small circles. Eat the string cheese straight from its biodegradable plastic seaweed wrapping with nothing else if you must, then eat the wrapper, in our kitchen, if you must, under the glorious solar glass chandelier we got for our fiftieth. Gorge on carrots, farm fresh, or split peas if you can. Get used to the smell of our own bodies, and sweat. We are considered native New Yorkers, the soft-form sea wall set in place, cement objects for shellfish. Stare at the water, now replenished with oysters and dolphins. Be one with your body, that body you so often ignore... a life of the mind, law, and words, you have lived.

You retired today.

And although the world has been shut down again, we reached the point of Drawdown, even if temporarily; that curve has been bent, back on itself. And people know what to do and act and do so swiftly with regards to the virus— are prepared this time for this new pandemic. Some were surprised; we had saved forty-five percent of nature after all, and we thought there would be less zoonotic disease. But it happened again. This time no one blamed any foreign state. So remember the urge to urinate, eat, defecate, drink, smoke your cigar, just this once, only when you must, and the idea actually comes to you from some small molecular need. S, it's like you've been marooned your entire life. You're on no schedule. It's like you've been devastated your entire life, S. We never had children, S, and it's the end of summer. No progeny. But will still be ancestors. We call them on our devices. Carbon emissions have already peaked, now the ppm has leveled off. What was it all for? Three more fighter jets on bio-safe fuel stream past the sky, streaming colors in red, green, and blue, and we show them, the nieces and nephews, now adults. Even the flag has been proposed with colors changed, more stars. Let me and your future self make prisoners of our love for a week. For there are no more prisoners of law. Good. They closed them, the prisons. Yes. You fought the good fight. Fought for civil rights. You note here you have a free schedule, though you will still do offer services *pro bono publico*. I know this, I asked after you. That's the way to do it. That's the way it's going to happen, I'm sure of it.

I'm sure of it, S.

But, yes here in the future, the party is over. We saw the celebratory low emission fireworks on the East River Estuary, now bestowed with personhood. Everyone opened their windows and clapped and cheered, blowing horns.

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Oh, for the love of god—if that disembodied creature exists—you've let your mind be noble, now let your body, just, be.

And for the love of god—if that disembodied creature exists—let me hear it.

Open your window S.

Open it.

By the grace of all things holy that I know you do not believe in, let me hear it: I want to hear you laugh and sigh sighs of relief. Cry. Clap, cheer, and cry.

S, a wind is picking up.

Have you noticed? The wind, it is getting stronger. I think a light storm is brewing, but no more cyclones, or worsening tropical storms, just some gentle rain.

I look across the alley, I finish the dishes, put down the dish towel, heave. No. no S, I've changed my mind. You haven't opened the window yet...and it's not raining.

There's our line hanging with clothes and sheets, such a regular sight these days, dangling with our shirts, outside between the two buildings, saving energy, especially in this heat, and underneath the solar glass archways above every ally and street, harvesting infrared and ultraviolet only.

If only I could be the one, S. The one to praise your soul, S. Your soul. For life, I hope so. If only I could muster...may you be the one to bury me.

S, this is happening while you're older. Much so.

S, S, in the future do you remember me? Have we aged, together? gained or lost weight? grayed? Divorced? Do you notice me still? Am I...alive?

There you are: staring into your mirror.

In the future.

Pick up the comb, S...pick up the wooden comb.

But no, S, you just stand there.

Because it was not that you dislike life, no, that wasn't it. And it's not that you cared so much for living, but that you had grown used to it. Yes, S, that is how you put it then, that future then: You didn't love life, (no, how could you?) but you had grown accustomed to it, and that is why you don't contemplate the act of suicide as a way out. You consider yourself a good existentialist.

But, S. Dear, S! You are a bad, bad existentialist.

S, my pet! You pick up the comb! This is the way it is, the way it must, alas be: for me to know you, all of you, to watch you, to keep an eye on you, to completely understand you, to know you even more than the biblical understanding of the word know, and for you to not even be conscious of my existence.

No.

Because I'm a ghost, I'm gone. Because I know these things will happen: you pick up the wooden comb. You pick it up because you want to comb your hair, but when you move your hand all you're doing is a good impression of a man combing his grey, grey hair. Instead of parting it on the left, you part it on the right.

And this is how we lived through it all, loyal, stubbornly optimistic. And even if one dies.

And this is how we loved, just so.

No.

No, in the future, but the less distant future, I am not there with you, I, like others, am gone, and the lost people in the West—including those who go about their daily chores but are in the process of losing earth—don't spend these days wearing out the sitting room carpets of their apartments, pacing over fading floral designs, all the while wondering in which one of those two rooms they inhabit it would be best for them to die, whether by their own hand, of nuclear war, the next COVID 19, mass shooting, or droughts, fires, famines, deep freezes, storms, or blackouts brought on by climate change. Such a morbid occupation is generally the exclusive hobby of 90s miserable Goth children, the histrionics of the 20s, incorrigible hack poets of the romantic period, and the feckless.

And people who are losing earth don't often commit suicide, it's true. They may, on rare unmeditated occasions decide it's all too much and step in front of a bus, but they certainly do

not contemplate it. Their heads are filled with other things besides thoughts of death, and aren't moping about the house with a death wish on their mind.

There are still readily identifiable traits that can tip a person off that someone is a lost one. For instance, first and foremost, the occasional but always breathtaking placidity of that future person's eyes — which may cause any inclement weather to be seen reflecting therein — is often a key indicator that a body has lost earth, or losing earth, and losing hope, as is the degree with which the eyelids start to slope pathetically over said eyes whenever certain songs of longing and yen, from Clair de Lune to a well-chosen Patsy Cline tune, plays overhead on the Alexa. But a sure sign that someone has trying desperately not to realize they are losing Earth but has lost it (hope) and all they know is the way the chest can't help but to rise and fall, everyday, repeatedly, for a this future person persists and does not commit suicide. It is still illegal and they respect the law. Life is sacred. And all of humanity and the species other than human should live in coexistence.

S, you will believe (and rightly, in my humble opinion) that, in terms of location and behavior, the perceived high incidence of these lost ones, those people losing earth (also called doomists, denialist, inactivists...those who insist that we are all doomed from climate change, or just simply those with severe crippling eco-anxiety) are in areas where poor weather conditions predominate is an improvable truism. These lost people in the now aren't moving to rainy, windy, and/or cloudy cities, such as those in the north on either coast, and around the Great Lakes necessarily, it's just the weather is getting even crazier everywhere, and there's more fresh water. But in fact, with the lockdown, it's hard for many of them to move anywhere at all.

The newly lost, for instance, are notable for their peculiar lack of ability to lift up their own arms.

It's true that those who have been lost and forlorn for quite some time tend to sit in one spot and lean, usually against a horizontal surface such as the counter at a deli, library, butcher, café, or the some random American county DMV office, and languish. For years it seems. As such they often grow either very fat or very thin when compared to their original state. Lost people of the west, above all else, are waiting; they know they might wait forever, that is, wait until eternity or longer for the final end.

But in order to do so, in order to lean on, say, some random American county DMV counter with a still the way that man does, with a sad look of dismay and wait, patiently to lose earth, the lost person must be alive. And anyway, they aren't always doing so. That is, they aren't always engaged with leaning.

Leaning on at a counter at the DMV may be inhibited by, for instance, an irreligious inordinate jerk sports nut refusing to take off his Yankee's hat for a driver's license photo, stating with conviction that first, it would be against his religion, and second, it would ruin someone's home run streak. Even though he took off his mask.

As one is refusing presently at the front of the line in which you are in as I watch you from above.

Lost people are often found in lines, it is true. As are you. You go about your daily routines and bump into them, rarely talking about the very worst things. Losing home. Losing our planet, losing earth, losing loved ones. But lost ones rarely give the impression of impatience or impertinence in any obvious way. Crass, belligerent remarks like "hurry up, dickwad," or "c'mon buddy, let's fucking get this over with, gimme a break," are rarely uttered by these forlorn. It's not that they take their fate at the back of the line with monk-like patience, or even complacency, on the

chin, or even great stride. And it's not like they think that they will be eventually rewarded with the true object of their longing if they are patient enough. Lost people barely think of such a reward. But what I mean to say is that lost people rarely tap their foot, check their phone, stand contrapposto or with limbs akimbo, too reticent to approach the very question, having already accepted their status in an unremarkable but comfortably recognizable limbo.

If you were to follow one, you might see the round hump of their sloped shoulders, the slow movement of their soft, befuddled hands.

And so for them to methodically move from kitchen, to office, to bedroom, to deliberate on whether or not to use a bullet, a noose, a knife, such thoughtful consideration towards the future is too much of a level-headed thing for a lost person to do, to exacting and proactive. Lost people don't pace and consider suicide. Such a thing would be utterly antithetic to their struggle.

Anyway, lost people—people losing earth— are more likely to imagine other people's death than their own death. Climate change being for them a distant reality if not fiction.

Part of their plight, and indeed, identity, is that they are willing witnesses to their own distress, to the fact of their lostness, their incessant noise that the climate game is either a hoax, or a game already up, a kind of deficiency of which they are excessively possessive.

And so when future you, not so future to as have already won back hope for Earth, and who has just gotten home from our morning errands (you had needed a new photo ID), walks from room to room of your apartment where your organic eggs are cooking, it isn't because you are entertaining gloomy thoughts of your own death and feel you have lost or given hope on earth.

You have lost something else.

"Well, if you tell me what you're looking for, maybe I can help you," L—, the maid who is paid very well and your helper, tells you as a you scavenge and the faint scent of burnt toast emanates from the bright kitchen.

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You have moved back into to a rainy Northern America Eastern coastal city somewhere parallel to the near the Great Lakes, which is not far off from the northern American city that was your hometown, to work. You know, on some level, that we might very well die here, but didn't come here to die.

For you, the pursuit of beauty, poetry, justice, truth, things are undying.

Except, of course, your life. But you can't help that. And you don't, in any circumstance, proactively encourage your own demise.

It would only prove that people like you weren't man enough. Or woman enough.

The lost ones though, how they pretend to others, or try to, and for the rest of their life, that either they are not bothered by 'it' or that 'it' was a forgone conclusion for such an eager heart such as theirs ('it' of course being the desperate failed pursuit of eternally or at all obtaining the love-object, human eternity).

So as you shuffle between several different rooms of his apartment located in one northern US state—looking now in the thin slot between your undusted vintage mahogany roll-top desk and the wall of your home office, and next in between the pages of the sci-fi novel you were reading last night on his armchair that has moments of a terraformed Mars—the rain coming down outside is completely incidental, and is no direct indication of the sogginess or sleetiness or torrentialness of your inner state, your shoulders slouching slightly, the smallest bit of panic

very at home in your slim chest, with the maid staring bewilderedly at the back of your heroically, dumbfoundingly large head.

For those that are truly lost, lost earth, even the simple act of turning the spoon in the coffee, the simple act of remembering in the shower if one has already soaped up or not or already washed one's hair, the simple act of politely nodding back and responding to the man at the booth, these things can become unbearable. And life is, yes, dear readers, unbearable, but especially those in a state of having lost or are losing earth. But who is wont to deny the spoon, the shower, all for the beguiling heartache of the lost of the immensity of the enduring feeling of ideal and perfect lack? So is it really any surprise that *you*, dear future *widowed husband*, who has lost his papers—papers!—are as distraught and quietly forlorn as you are today?

Resigning yourself to live a life, connect with those you find yourself next to by happenstance (perhaps once again), thinking life is not filled with grand triumphant human schemes, but that this was it: imperfect and casual, familial talk—you are beginning to believe that.

“My papers, L—. Very important papers. That's what I'm looking for,” you quickly answer her. You call your many digital devices papers, they are that thin now as though you still remember using actual paper. You still call the balcony the porch.

“Ok. What papers.”

“Important papers! White pages, with writing on it. Papers that I need.”

“Don't be an asshole,” L—, whom I trust to tell the truth, tells not too distant future you, as you search, turning her attention instead to the kitchen's burning toast.

And “Holy holy holy holy holy holy!” You are chanting romantically, to me, in some nether-world, lost to the second pandemic which hit quickly after the first, quoting Allen Ginsberg, for even the asshole is holy.

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It's not that me and you, my dear future widowed husband, have imagine our death. That often.

“Breakfast!” the she sings out from the kitchen as the electric toaster, just cajoled, as it must every other morning, with the help of the blunt end of butter knife, finally yields a somewhat inharmonious ding.

All a tumult, unindividuated, and without center, you wash your eyes over the horizontal surfaces of your home office.

You looked in every one of the eight manila “folders” on your desk, bag, trash bin back beside your desk, in the pile of “papers” of which you have no idea from where it originates but that is on his shelf regardless, then again the trash bin, then again in your bag, then again the eight manila folders on your desk, then again behind the desk and in between the pages of the books you were reading last night. But everywhere you turn there are distractions, sirens, stacks of the wrong papers, objects conspiring against you so that even this most trivial task has become epic; even though one now calls out to you about breakfast and for you to hurry up, you cannot.

With legal pads, sheets of printer paper, forms, and digital files flung everywhere, it's as if you are lost at sea, it's as if you have become Ulysses.

You stand in place and survey the mess of your home office once again from the doorway and sway in place slightly. “Thanks, but I don't have time!” You holler, again impatiently wasting food.



You sit back down at your desk.

Lost people may experience occasional dizziness.

Stumped by some mythology of loss that they cannot see past, having failed to differentiate themselves from the soupy atmosphere of ideals eco minded or otherwise idyllic, these people tend to drift, apparently aimless and move through their discombobulated life, as a child heavy in dream. A perceived but inarticulate sense of displacement haunts their psyche, and they carry with them a burden of innumerable tiny crosses which shine in no direction but mark all the absence in their starless skies –an indefinite and formless constellation of loss...mapping nothing.

Whence this cloud? Wherefore this befuddling, unnavigable mass, this impenetrable thing that has somehow become life? Their life? Their hopeless, shameful life – shameful for the very fact that they generally have everything needed to live a normal, productive, fulfilling life, whatever family that raised them, a well paying and intellectually stimulating career, the ability to travel, not to mention the heartbreak, yes, including the heartbreak that is supposed to accompany such things as a full wisened life? How did we get stuck here? In this fate to knowingly live without? Into a place where they should be happy, perhaps more than happy, a place where “ordinary nameless apprehensions”, baffling losses, misgivings, and hilarity still ensue without regard or relation to the one they still long for, and yet the meaning, if that’s what it is called the real wisdom or whatever has never come, the meaning seemingly forever differed?

Your missing file was not in the pages of the science fiction book you were reading last night. You rub your forehead then quickly pull the “Juliana v US”, the historic children’s climate case, that file from beneath your ass, on the chair away from the rest of the rubble, specifically placed there last night for the sole purpose of not misplacing it this morning. (The lost one’s innate affinity for the concepts of magnetism, propulsion, and force often play out in the chaos of their messy offices and bedrooms.)

And with that, you, after the hassle of this morning’s errands, runs past the kitchen to the door, without even kissing poor my photograph, not necessarily unloved, but unmourned and sitting there in the kitchen holding a plate of toast and jams – goodbye.

You cross the street that is no longer flooded like it will be years in the future, you hop quickly down two blocks south to get to the subway. Although an ecab would keep you drier if you found one quickly and drop you off right in front of the building where you need to be at now, you’re running late, and the subway is assuredly faster, with no traffic. It’ll be just crammed full of people’s rain-moist bodies smooched next to each other, inches away, if not touching on another; complete strangers on top of one another during rush hour.

But I wanted Earth back. I wanted us there. I wanted to be alive. I wanted back Earth.

I wanted to love you, in the future, balanced like keys or a mask, those on the hook, just so.

## Citations

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Annette Hakiel  
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