

## Erin Jane Nelson

All of the species began sinking down to Psychopompopolis shortly after 2020—that year of perfect vision when humans finally saw clearly the ecological time bomb they had created for the seven continents. Quickly, the government and survivalists began to stockpile resources, fence up borders and set out to sort their populations into lists based on ideals of usefulness and genetic purity. There had been burgeoning nationalism for years, and the world leaders had been itching for a cataclysmic nuke 'em up war. Now the rising tides, the weather, and the blazing sun were an enemy everyone could combat. At first, it was just rapid population growth that was the liability. Then quickly, the current population density became a liability—and their pets too. We all wanted to stay—becoming crafty at hiding stores of resources and mistrustful of neighbors and friends. On the brink of civil war, the powerful and the prepared evicted cities' worth of residents out of the countries indiscriminately, their own manifest destiny families, armed and angry, got to stay inside.

Forced outside the fence of these new bunker nations, we tried to survive on the doomed fifty mile strips of land between the ocean and the fences, but the water began to rise quickly in that year and we knew we didn't have long. We were desperate, but organized and peaceful, led mostly by women. Conflicts and alliances unfolded in the first several weeks and those who survived realized it was in our self-interest to yield and cooperate. We began to migrate with the hope that other regions may have had different survival strategies and would welcome us in. Some chose to walk North or South along the liminal no-man's coastal lands, but most attempted migrations across bodies of water. The waters were dangerous and many boats were toppled by the ever stronger currents and weather. Those of us who did make it to another country would often be met by coastal patrols who rarely ushered us to land for consideration. The nice coastal patrolmen would simply ask us to turn around if they could not take us, but many would come straight at us, piercing the sides of boats with underwater axes, popping rafts, setting landmines. The sinking was inevitable at that point.

I sunk after 38 days of migration in a small fishing boat we stocked with MREs and other essentials, my small family by my side. We made two attempts at coming to shore after heading North and East out of Atlanta before we got unlucky in a northern greenish sea. The base of our boat brushed along a tripwire ten miles out from the coast and we were blasted at the rear of the ship. The water was icy against my skin, and I immediately wondered if my dog, who was travelling with me, also felt cold, or if his fur was helping a bit. Anything to keep my mind off drowning. Just as the feeling of desperation for breath, that nauseating panic rush, began to overtake me, I felt a tug at my wrist and a slippery finger in my mouth. I opened my eyes: a tentacle. And then I blacked out.

When I came to, my vision was not as I remembered it. I could see and connect the seeing to knowing—to process information in my mind—but I felt these other inputs, other channels, other minds also thinking within and adjacent to my own thoughts. Though I could sense these inputs, they were not of me, not for me. I commanded myself to blink and I felt eyes close and open not only in the front of my face, but down my cheeks, along my arms? I tried again. Holy shit, I have eyes everywhere. I move an arm, and I can somehow see from the vantage of the arm, but also tune into its frequency, its own consciousness—is it laughing at me? I will my focus into that arm to understand why it's tickled. The moment I redirect my thoughts, I begin to feel unnerved and suddenly I'm hit with an orchestral wave of thoughts and feelings. I'm abruptly plugged into this web of "selves" as though I'm on a busy street but all the people and cars and buildings are other souls, other memories, other consciousnesses—not all of them human or even legible to me. All of the eyes and brains and arms begin to light up and register and hum with activity.

My singular mind begins to understand that I am now one amongst many in this new body—I've merged, but I don't have the language to describe what I've become part of. There is no way for me to prove this, but I can feel tens of consciousnesses inside me. I feel my dog's presence in one limb, my husband's on another—we are still home together but now in this unit of disembodied sensibilities. It becomes clear that my body is no longer mine—that it is no longer human. I am breathing underwater and I have become something new, become with others in a strange container. I blink the eyes all over this body again and open them, focusing externally. Where even are we? And then I can make out a horizon, the shapes, the scene: there is a strange, bustling Atlantis in front of me. I feel the edges of the body ripple with a new excited color.

Piles of bleached coral, tens of orange Croc sandals, nets, laundry detergent jugs, and other identifiable garbage from the world I sunk down from cobbled together to form a topography of rolling hills with caves and alleys and open passages like a city. Everything buoyant is tied to a rock or another non-buoyant part of the mound, such that certain elements of these hills almost bob and sway together like a handful of balloon. Bisecting the middle of this world in a long valley is an endless, sinewy gray tube mounted with surveillance cameras and barcodes, encrusted with algae and barnacles. Though

I'm not sure where this information comes into my consciousness, I recognize this as a transoceanic fiber-optic cable. A realization that seems to wash over my mind, as a thought spoken from some other foreign memory. Perhaps a benefit of these new cognitive roommates, I supposed. Congregating around the long stretch of cable, I see strange, amorphous masses with tentacles of all different lengths—some short and curling around them, others reaching up or out by tens of feet. Their skin seems to gradate colors and textures as they hover, bobbing slightly from side to side. Many of them have one brightly glowing tentacle wrapped firmly around the cable as though they are charging or communing with the information now passing through them somehow. My first glimpse of—from within—a Psychopomp.

As I was listening and looking out, I felt the presence of my dog and my husband wash over my brain again. I couldn't interact with them in the way I once knew, but I just understood that they were proximal to me and that they were mutually aware of my proximity, almost as if I could feel their warmth and feel myself giving off a warmth back towards them. It wasn't an embrace or a gaze or any kind of physical understanding of their presence, it was something more intimate, more auroral and strange. In this new way of being with them, I would have never known how to imagine in my old form. The feeling was similar to looking fixedly into the eyes of someone you know well, somehow the rest of their body melts away and your sense of them being autonomous and separate disappears. Or the feeling of a small prod of a knee or a foot or an elbow in the night as you shift around in a shared bed, smelling the calm familiarity of your mingling scents. Feeling them in this way brought me an immense relief, and I could feel the skin of our Psychopomp's body blooming red and warm in small patches.

Since that initial awakening in our new form, some imprecise amount of weeks have passed here in Psychopompopolis. In that time, I've learned quite a bit about my new host body—its history and functions. After years of tinkering with their own genetic makeup, an undiscovered species of advanced cephalopods learned how to use their bodies as hosts for other creatures' consciousnesses, in particular human consciousness, though I know there are other species' minds here as well. Humans had known for years that, in particular, octopuses and giant cuttlefishes had exceptional intelligence despite being evolutionarily so distant from mammals. The mechanics of their intelligence were always unclear to us, though a propensity for play and invention and puzzle solving was well-established for decades. As humans were on land accumulating external understandings of the world, discovering and decoding outwardly, my guess is that cephalopods have been doing something similar privately, internally, genetically with their own biochemistry for just as long.

The most accomplished at this are these highly advanced forms of cephalopods that humans never discovered. Those are the creatures that we have fused with here, though there are simpler octopuses and cuttlefish that come around this place from time to time. Evolutionarily, these new creatures are to octopuses are what a human is to a chimp. The Psychopomps, which I have heard them named casually by my cognition neighbors, are amazing, highly-emotionally intelligent, and mind-blowing beings.

One of the main features that allowed them to avoid human discovery is their hacked and reprogrammed chromatophores: the skin cells that change color and perform rudimentary camouflage in octopuses, or what now seems rudimentary camouflage given what the Psychopomps can do. They've developed chromatophores that aren't static in their ability to represent a singular pigment in one moment, instead the new chromatophores are relational, responsive almost miniature screens that can make their skin seem photographic—often refracting, or blending, or disappearing completely as they move through space. I also believe that they are able to simultaneously broadcast different types of images or colors depending on the chemical makeup of the creature looking at them. I know that they understand the human species' role on this planet and understand what human discovery would mean for their safety. These are highly advanced shapeshifters that understand the world they live in and the other creatures that inhabit both land and sea—protecting their sovereignty and abilities is paramount.

Though I'm not sure how long they have been aware of humans beings, I do know that they have had an explosion of innovation similar to the human industrial revolution, because it is the very fact of the industrial revolution that provided them with one of the most integral tools of their development. In the late 1800s, countries began laying telegraphic cables across oceans to improve the speed of global human communication. Psychopomps began to investigate these and realized they could listen in to the cable's activities. At first it was just whirrs and clicks, but after several years, they were able to begin to understand basic Morse code. They had no idea what human language was at the time, but understood that the cables were conveying messages. Though they had been slowly reworking their genetic codes for centuries, the ability to compute information and language became a collaborative area of development and improvement.

Once the telegraphic cables were replaced with telephonic cables, the Psychopomps were ready for new inputs and clues. Finally, they could listen in to human communication and were able to begin to differentiate words. They did not have a great sense of what these words meant, of course, but they were able to begin parsing out the sounds of a language. They learned that if one person was talking to another and couldn't convey a word clearly by speaking it, they would break down the components of the words by describing the sound of a letter (for instance: "I said B as in BOY, didn't you hear me, B-O-Y?"). Early transatlantic cables had very poor quality so this was common. The Psychopomps even realized they could slightly tweak or bend the cables to worsen the quality of the connection, making this repetition and spelling-out more common.

Around this time, debris began to sink down to their realm more and more often. This had of course happened in the past, but now entire masses of human garbage would appear out of the blue. The Psychopomps had known there was a land-bound equivalent of themselves with advanced communication and transportation tools. They had noticed ships centuries ago and had even found what they believed to be human bodies, sunk down from the surface. Though they had been trying to understand the anatomy and cognition of humans from these deceased specimens, they were unable to learn much until the cables and trash. The garbage provided new archeological tools.

In the late 1980s to early 1990s, the cables changed again. These were more complex than previous cables, but the Psychopomps worked and adjusted their DNA for years until they were able to break into the new fiber optics. Once they did, they had access to a new level of voyeurism than they had ever imagined possible: the internet. As the internet grew and changed, images, videos, and content flooded their reality. They were quickly able to learn language once they were able to connect images with sounds, and though they didn't understand the properties or meanings of all the subject matter, they could rapidly reinvent their cognition, which I believe has far surpassed the limits of human cognition at this point. Needless to say that they have spent the last thirty years learning as much as they can about us through these cables and even using some aspects of human knowledge and discovery to enhance their own biohacking.

Naturally, they also learned about the incredibly competitive and violent nature of humans. I should mention here that the Psychopomps, though highly intelligent and at the top of their food chain, are not opportunistic or territorial in the ways you see with octopuses. It's the more inquisitive, private, sensing qualities of the octopus that have carried over into the new species. They live much longer than octopuses (something they are constantly improving through genetic advancement similar to human advances through medicine), though still have a defined lifespan, the length of which none of us is quite sure of given their constant tinkering and improvement.

Part of the uncertainty of their possible lifespan depends on to what extent they will adapt and enhance their bodies to the effects of climate change on the ocean. When the water first started warming and acidifying, the Psychopomps used the new pH to help improve their nutrient absorption and change their own acidity to better match the ocean levels. Though food sources may become more scarce, the Psychopomps have protected other cephalopods for so long that many of them hunt and bring food back to Psychopompopolis to help keep their protectors fed. Much like a pet cat leaving a kill on the doorstep of its owners. Presumably, as scientific developments continue to be broadcast over the cables, they will continue to use this information to their adaptive advantage. Of course, since 2020, the cross-continental sharing of information has sharply decreased, and it seems as though countries have mostly locked down their resources, intellectual and otherwise, to prepare for the coming changes on land.

When the Psychopomps began to notice that humans were rapidly coming to terms with the ecological destruction they had set in motion, they immediately predicted that there would be mass territorialism and competition for remaining resources. It was around this time that humans were beginning to experiment with neural mapping through computers, such that a mind might control a machine. The research and developments in this, as well as AI singularity, gave Psychopomps some of the tools to initiate experiments with absorbing other beings' consciousnesses into their own. Years before the 2020, the Psychopomps had begun doing this with other cephalopods with some success, improving steadily over the years. Once the migrations began, they were able to catch sinking live human subjects to test. It took many months, but eventually they could transfer and host the consciousness, neural maps, souls—whatever you want to call it—inside themselves.

As a former human, it's hard for me to understand their impulse for helping us, especially in light of all they were able to learn from watching the demise of the beautiful, emotional thing we formerly described as "our humanity." We ruined a planet for millions of species. Though some will out-survive us (it's likely the Psychopomps will.) many will cease to exist because of us, many of our children's children will cease to exist suddenly. There will be a point at which

our individual exceptionalism undoes all the aspects of "species survivalism" we so hubristically thought we understood. Why would anyone or anything want to preserve the human species?

I can't answer that for them, but those of us who once lived as humans have a general theory that's been agreed upon, at least inside this container. The Psychopomps, like many other living animals, appreciate novelty, play, and displays of sensibility with no apparent outcome. In addition to gaining access to information over the cables, they were also able to understand culture, emotions, empathy, mystery, aimlessness, all these seemingly useless expenditures of time and energy and materials just for the hell of it. Humans always tried to explain these things from a perspective of logic, productivity, efficiency, and usefulness. We believed that laying these cables was in pursuit of those same goals. And to some degree, globalization has provided many of those outcomes, but it's also created this mechanism of sharing and displaying all of those magical, useless aspects of sentience. This is the stuff the Psychopomps mostly related to and wanted to feel.

For centuries, they have been changing their own genes precisely to understand new ways of feeling, of being, of experiencing, of embodying sentience. At times, they've used this for survival, and curiosity, and productive ends—especially since the cables arrived. But mostly, they were eager to feel and understand the sensations and memories contained in human, dog, octopus, cat, or worm consciousness. To feel the memory and warmth of romantic love between human beings—something Psychopomps do not experience—to feel the intimacy a dog feels with its pack, and so on. They learn by making space inside themselves for understanding, for letting go of self-preservation and opening up their internal reality to a flood of unknowns. Taking in traumas, and anxieties, and fears, and angers, and all the negative experiences that come with these lives. Instead of asserting and assigning logic and meaning onto the outside world and the other beings that inhabit it, they have ingested the world inside of themselves at the moment these creatures would have otherwise died.

And there are certainly limits to this new existence afforded to me inside my Psychopomp. For one, the central control of the body as a unified whole is still presided over by the mind and will of the Psychopomp itself. When emotional, certain occupants can perform and affect various movements and reactions, such as blinking or moving a tentacle, but no hosted mind has sway over complex actions or decision making. The body functions without our minds having to worry about it, our need for protection, food, water, air—those basic impulses are gone. With those functions out of my mind, I am left to simply reflect, and feel, and remember, and observe, which is what my host most wants from me anyway. I believe the Psychopomps consciously limited our ability to control and react to protect us from ourselves, and I'm happy to be freed from that burden and anxiety. There are new relationships between my mind and this new body, but I don't have the language to describe them. I simply know them as I experience them from within. This state is certainly a liminal one. Though I can no longer decide to walk outside and feel the hot Georgia air on my skin, or smell sap, or pass my fingers through my dog's fur, or kiss, or cry, or drink wine, there are nonetheless immensely rich sensory experiences in my new form, and new ways to feel and be with those I loved in my past embodiment. When I think about the chaos and violence and fear that must be happening back on dry land, I am so relieved to know I was able to experience this way of being before I die again. Little do those who now roam and fight for domination over the hot, dry, unforgiving ground know that those they deemed overpopulating are now enjoying this watery, peaceful, unbelievable place. As they lie and wait for their parched, wretched end, scared as hell to meet death, we are down here, provided for and protected. Knowing that death will one day come, but as is always the human wish, I will die next to, within, at the same moment as those I love. None of us will be left behind to mourn the loss of the other. Someday, we will peacefully close these tens of eyes, tired from watching and knowing and feeling all the hundreds of aimless magical realities, and all pass on from this place as one. Bye bye, Psychopompopolis.

[Erin Jane Nelson is an artist living in Atlanta, Georgia. She studied at The Cooper Union School of Art in New York and The Malmö Art Academy in Sweden. Recently, her work has been shown at Andrew Rafacz Gallery \(Chicago\), Atlanta Contemporary Art Center \(Atlanta\), Honor Fraser \(Los Angeles\), Galerie Division \(Montreal\), and Hester \(NYC\). She co-directs Species, an artist run gallery in Atlanta.](#)