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Opening Extract from...

Perdido Street Station

Written by China Miéville

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C H I N A
M I É V I L L E
PERDIDO STREET
STATION

PAN BOOKS



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'I even gave up, for a while, stopping by the window of the room to look out at the lights and deep, illuminated streets. That's a form of dying, that losing contact with the city like that.'

Philip K. Dick, *We Can Build You*

Veldt to scrub to fields to farms to these first tumbling houses that rise from the earth. It has been night for a long time. The hovels that encrust the river's edge have grown like mushrooms around me in the dark.

We rock. We pitch in a deep current.

Behind me the man tugs uneasily at his rudder and the barge corrects. Light lurches as the lantern swings. The man is afraid of me. I lean out from the prow of the small vessel across the darkly moving water.

Over the engine's oily rumble and the caresses of the river small sounds, house sounds, are building. Timbers whisper and the wind strokes thatch, walls settle and floors shift to fill space; the tens of houses have become hundreds, thousands; they spread backwards from the banks and shed light from all across the plain.

They surround me. They are growing. They are taller and fatter and noisier, their roofs are slate, their walls are strong brick.

The river twists and turns to face the city. It looms suddenly, massive, stamped on the landscape. Its light wells up around the surrounds, the rock hills, like bruise-blood. Its dirty towers glow. I am debased. I am compelled to worship this extraordinary presence that has silted into existence at the conjunction of two rivers. It is a vast pollutant, a stench, a klaxon sounding. Fat

chimneys retch dirt into the sky even now in the deep night. It is not the current which pulls us but the city itself, its weight sucks us in. Faint shouts, here and there the calls of beasts, the obscene clash and pounding from the factories as huge machines rut. Railways trace urban anatomy like protruding veins. Red brick and dark walls, squat churches like troglodytic things, ragged awnings flickering, cobbled mazes in the old town, culs-de-sac, sewers riddling the earth like secular sepulchres, a new landscape of wasteground, crushed stone, libraries fat with forgotten volumes, old hospitals, towerblocks, ships and metal claws that lift cargoes from the water.

How could we not see this approaching? What trick of topography is this, that lets the sprawling monster hide behind corners to leap out at the traveller?

It is too late to flee.

The man murmurs to me, tells me where we are. I do not turn to him.

This is Raven's Gate, this brutalized warren around us. The rotting buildings lean against each other, exhausted. The river smears slime on its brick banks, city walls risen from the depths to hold the water at bay. There is a vile stink here.

(I wonder how this looks from above, no chance for the city to hide then, if you came at it on the wind you would see it from miles and miles away like a dirty smear, like a slab of carrion thronging with maggots, I should not think like this but I cannot stop now, I could ride the updrafts that the chimneys vent, sail high over the proud towers and shit on the earthbound, ride the chaos, alight where I choose, I must not think like this, I must not do this now, I must stop, not now, not this, not yet.)

Here there are houses which dribble pale mucus, an organic daubing that smears base façades and oozes from top windows. Extra storeys are rendered in the cold white muck which fills gaps

between houses and dead-end alleys. The landscape is defaced with ripples as if wax has melted and set suddenly across the rooftops. Some other intelligence has made these human streets their own.

Wires are stretched tight across the river and the eaves, held fast by milky aggregates of phlegm. They hum like bass strings. Something scuttles overhead. The bargeman hawks foully into the water.

His gob dissipates. The mass of spittle-mortar above us ebbs. Narrow streets emerge.

A train whistles as it crosses the river before us on raised tracks. I look to it, to the south and the east, seeing the line of little lights rush away and be swallowed by this nightland, this behemoth that eats its citizens. We will pass the factories soon. Cranes rear from the gloom like spindly birds; here and there they move to keep the skeleton crews, the midnight crews, in their work. Chains swing deadweight like useless limbs, snapping into zombie motion where cogs engage and flywheels turn.

Fat predatory shadows prowl the sky.

There is a boom, a reverberation, as if the city has a hollow core. The black barge putters through a mass of its fellows weighed down with coke and wood and iron and steel and glass. The water here reflects the stars through a stinking rainbow of impurities, effluents and chymical slop, making it sluggish and unsettling.

(Oh, to rise above this to not smell this filth this dirt this dung to not enter the city through this latrine but I must stop, I must, I cannot go on, I must.)

The engine slows. I turn and watch the man behind me, who averts his eyes and steers, affecting to look through me. He is taking us in to dock, there behind the warehouse so engorged its contents spill out beyond the buttresses in a labyrinth of huge boxes. He picks his way between other craft. There are roofs

emerging from the river. A line of sunken houses, built on the wrong side of the wall, pressed up against the bank in the water, their bituminous black bricks dripping. Disturbances beneath us. The river boils with eddies from below. Dead fish and frogs that have given up the fight to breath in this rotting stew of detritus swirl frantic between the flat side of the barge and the concrete shore, trapped in choppy turmoil. The gap is closed. My captain leaps ashore and ties up. His relief is draining to see. He is wittering gruffly in triumph and ushering me quickly ashore and away and I alight, as slowly as if onto coals, picking my way through the rubbish and the broken glass.

He is happy with the stones I have given him. I am in Smog Bend, he tells me, and I make myself look away as he points my direction so he will not know I am lost, that I am new in the city, that I am afraid of these dark and threatening edifices of which I cannot kick free, that I am nauseous with claustrophobia and foreboding.

A little to the south two great pillars rise from the river. The gates to the Old City, once grandiose, now psoriatic and ruined. The carved histories that wound about those obelisks have been effaced by time and acid, and only roughcast spiral threads like those of old screws remain. Behind them, a low bridge (Drud Crossing, he says). I ignore the man's eager explanations and walk away through this lime-bleached zone, past yawning doors that promise the comfort of true dark and an escape from the river stench. The bargeman is just a tiny voice now and it is a small pleasure to know I will never see him again.

It is not cold. A city light is promising itself in the east.

I will follow the trainlines. I will stalk in their shadow as they pass by over the houses and towers and barracks and offices and prisons of the city, I will track them from the arches that anchor them to the earth. I must find my way in.

My cloak (heavy cloth unfamiliar and painful on my skin) tugs at me and I can feel the weight of my purse. That is what protects me here; that and the illusion I have fostered, the source of my sorrow and my shame, the anguish that has brought me to this great wen, this dusty city dreamed up in bone and brick, a conspiracy of industry and violence, steeped in history and battened-down power, this badland beyond my ken.

New Crobuzon.

Part One

Commissions

Chapter One

A window burst open high above the market. A basket flew from it and arced towards the oblivious crowd. It spasmed in mid-air, then spun and continued earthwards at a slower, uneven pace. Dancing precariously as it descended, its wire-mesh caught and skittered on the building's rough hide. It scrabbled at the wall, sending paint and concrete dust plummeting before it.

The sun shone through uneven cloud-cover with a bright grey light. Below the basket the stalls and barrows lay like untidy spillage. The city reeked. But today was market day down in Aspic Hole, and the pungent slick of dung-smell and rot that rolled over New Crobuzon was, in these streets, for these hours, improved with paprika and fresh tomato, hot oil and fish and cinnamon, cured meat, banana and onion.

The food stalls stretched the noisy length of Shadrach Street. Books and manuscripts and pictures filled up Selchit Pass, an avenue of desultory banyans and crumbling concrete a little way to the east. There were earthenware products spilling down the road to Barrackham in the south; engine parts to the west; toys down one side street; clothes between two more; and countless other goods filling all the alleys. The rows of merchandise converged crookedly on Aspic Hole like spokes on a broken wheel.

In the Hole itself all distinctions broke down. In the shadow of old walls and unsafe towers were a pile of gears, a ramshackle table of broken crockery and crude clay ornaments, a case of mouldering textbooks. Antiques, sex, flea-powder. Between the stalls stomped hissing constructs. Beggars argued in the bowels of deserted buildings. Members of strange races bought peculiar things. Aspic Bazaar, a blaring mess of goods, grease and tallymen. Mercantile law ruled: *let the buyer beware*.

The costermonger below the descending basket looked up into flat sunlight and a shower of brick particles. He wiped his eye. He plucked the frayed thing from the air above his head, pulling at the cord which bore it until it went slack in his hand. Inside the basket was a brass shekel and a note in careful, ornamented italics. The food-vendor scratched his nose as he scanned the paper. He rummaged in the piles of produce before him, placed eggs and fruit and root vegetables into the container, checking against the list. He stopped and read one item again, then smiled lasciviously and cut a slice of pork. When he was done he put the shekel in his pocket and felt for change, hesitating as he calculated his delivery cost, eventually depositing four stivers in with the food.

He wiped his hands against his trousers and thought for a minute, then scribbled something on the list with a stub of charcoal and tossed it after the coins.

He tugged three times at the rope and the basket began a bobbing journey into the air. It rose above the lower roofs of surrounding buildings, buoyed upwards by noise. It startled the roosting jackdaws in the deserted storey and inscribed the wall with another scrawled trail among many, before it disappeared again into the window from which it had emerged.

Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin had just realized that he was dreaming. He had been aghast to find himself employed once again at the university, parading in front of a huge blackboard covered in vague representations of levers and forces and stress. Introductory Material Science. Isaac had been staring anxiously at the class when that unctuous bastard Vermishank had looked in.

'I can't teach this class,' whispered Isaac loudly. 'The market's too loud.' He gestured at the window.

'It's all right,' Vermishank was soothing and loathsome. 'It's time for breakfast,' he said. 'That'll take your mind off the noise.' And hearing that absurdity Isaac shed sleep with immense relief. The raucous profanity of the bazaar and the smell of cooking came with him into the day.

He lay hugely in the bed without opening his eyes. He heard Lin walk across the room and felt the slight listing of the floorboards. The garret was filled with pungent smoke. Isaac salivated.

Lin clapped twice. She knew when Isaac woke. Probably because he closed his mouth, he thought, and sniggered without opening his eyes.

'Still sleeping, shush, poor little Isaac ever so tired,' he whimpered, and snuggled down like a child. Lin clapped again, once, derisory, and walked away.

He groaned and rolled over.

'Termagant!' he moaned after her. 'Shrew! Harridan! All right, all right, you win, you, you ... uh ... virago, you spit-fire ...' He rubbed his head and sat up, grinned sheepishly. Lin made an obscene gesture at him without turning around.

She stood with her back to him, nude at the stove, dancing back as hot drops of oil leapt from the pan. The covers slipped from the slope of Isaac's belly. He was a

dirigible, huge and taut and strong. Grey hair burst from him abundantly.

Lin was hairless. Her muscles were tight under her red skin, each distinct. She was like an anatomical atlas. Isaac studied her in cheerful lust.

His arse itched. He scratched under the blanket, rooting as shameless as a dog. Something burst under his nail, and he withdrew his hand to examine it. A tiny half-crushed grub waved helplessly on the end of his finger. It was a refflick, a harmless little khepri parasite. *The thing must have been rather bewildered by my juices*, Isaac thought, and flicked his finger clean.

'Refflick, Lin,' he said. 'Bath time.'

Lin stamped in irritation.

New Crobuzon was a huge plague pit, a morbific city. Parasites, infection and rumour were uncontainable. A monthly chymical dip was a necessary prophylactic for the khepri, if they wanted to avoid itches and sores.

Lin slid the contents of the pan onto a plate and set it down, across from her own breakfast. She sat and gestured for Isaac to join her. He rose from the bed and stumbled across the room. He eased himself onto the small chair, wary of splinters.

Isaac and Lin sat naked on either side of the bare wooden table. Isaac was conscious of their pose, seeing them as a third person might. It would make a beautiful, strange print, he thought. An attic room, dust-motes in the light from the small window, books and paper and paints neatly stacked by cheap wooden furniture. A dark-skinned man, big and nude and detumescing, gripping a knife and fork, unnaturally still, sitting opposite a khepri, her slight woman's body in shadow, her chitinous head in silhouette.

They ignored their food and stared at each other for a

moment. Lin signed at him: *Good morning, lover*. Then she began to eat, still looking at him.

It was when she ate that Lin was most alien, and their shared meals were a challenge and an affirmation. As he watched her, Isaac felt the familiar trill of emotion: disgust immediately stamped out, pride at the stamping out, guilty desire.

Light glinted in Lin's compound eyes. Her headlegs quivered. She picked up half a tomato and gripped it with her mandibles. She lowered her hands while her inner mouthparts picked at the food her outer jaw held steady.

Isaac watched the huge iridescent scarab that was his lover's head devour her breakfast.

He watched her swallow, saw her throat bob where the pale insectile underbelly segued smoothly into her human neck . . . not that she would have accepted that description. *Humans have khepri bodies, legs, hands; and the heads of shaved gibbons*, she had once told him.

He smiled and dangled his fried pork in front of him, curled his tongue around it, wiped his greasy fingers on the table. He smiled at her. She undulated her headlegs at him and signed, *My monster*.

I am a pervert, thought Isaac, *and so is she*.

Breakfast conversation was generally one-sided: Lin could sign with her hands while she ate, but Isaac's attempts to talk and eat simultaneously made for incomprehensible noises and food debris on the table. Instead they read; Lin an artists' newsletter, Isaac whatever came to hand. He reached out between mouthfuls and grabbed books and papers, and found himself reading Lin's shopping list. The item *a handful of pork slices* was ringed and underneath her exquisite calligraphy was a scrawled question in much

cruder script: *Got company??? Nice bit of pork goes down a treat!!!*

Isaac waved the paper at Lin. 'What's this filthy arse on about?' he yelled, spraying food. His outrage was amused but genuine.

Lin read it and shrugged.

Knows I don't eat meat. Knows I've got a guest for breakfast. Wordplay on 'pork'.

'Yes, thanks, lover, I got that bit. How does he know you're a vegetarian? Do you two often engage in this witty banter?'

Lin stared at him for a moment without responding.

Knows because I don't buy meat. She shook her head at the stupid question. *Don't worry: only ever banter on paper. Doesn't know I'm a bug.*

Her deliberate use of the slur annoyed Isaac.

'Dammit, I wasn't insinuating anything . . .' Lin's hand waggled, the equivalent of a raised eyebrow. Isaac howled in irritation. 'Godshit, Lin! Not everything I say is about fear of discovery!'

Isaac and Lin had been lovers nearly two years. They had always tried not to think too hard about the rules of their relationship, but the longer they were together the more this strategy of avoidance became impossible. Questions as yet unasked demanded attention. Innocent remarks and askance looks from others, a moment of contact too long in public – a note from a grocer – everything was a reminder that they were, in some contexts, living a secret. Everything was made fraught.

They had never said, *We are lovers*, so they had never had to say, *We will not disclose our relationship to all, we will hide from some*. But it had been clear for months and months that this was the case.

Lin had begun to hint, with snide and acid remarks, that Isaac's refusal to declare himself her lover was at best cowardly, at worst bigoted. This insensitivity annoyed him. He had, after all, made the nature of his relationship clear with his close friends, as Lin had with hers. And it was all far, far easier for her.

She was an artist. Her circle were the libertines, the patrons and the hangers-on, bohemians and parasites, poets and pamphleteers and fashionable junkies. They delighted in the scandalous and the outré. In the tea-houses and bars of Salacus Fields, Lin's escapades – broadly hinted at, never denied, never made explicit – would be the subject of louche discussion and innuendo. Her love-life was an avant-garde transgression, an art-happening, like Concrete Music had been last season, or 'Snot Art! the year before that.

And yes, Isaac could play that game. He was known in that world, from long before his days with Lin. He was, after all, the scientist-outcast, the disreputable thinker who walked out of a lucrative teaching post to engage in experiments too outrageous and brilliant for the tiny minds who ran the university. What did he care for convention? He would sleep with whomever and whatever he liked, surely!

That was his persona in Salacus Fields, where his relationship with Lin was an open secret, where he enjoyed being more or less open, where he would put his arm around her in the bars and whisper to her as she sucked sugar-coffee from a sponge. That was his story, and it was at least half true.

He had walked out of the university ten years ago. But only because he realized to his misery that he was a terrible teacher.

He had looked out at the quizzical faces, listened to the frantic scrawling of the panicking students, and realized that with a mind that ran and tripped and hurled itself down the corridors of theory in anarchic fashion, he could learn himself, in haphazard lurches, but he could not impart the understanding he so loved. He had hung his head in shame and fled.

In another twist to the myth, his Head of Department, the ageless and loathsome Vermishank, was not a plodding epigone but an exceptional bio-thaumaturge, who had nixed Isaac's research less because it was unorthodox than because it was going nowhere. Isaac could be brilliant, but he was undisciplined. Vermishank had played him like a fish, making him beg for work as a freelance researcher on terrible pay, but with limited access to the university laboratories.

And it was this, his work, which kept Isaac circumspect about his lover.

These days, his relationship with the university was tenuous. Ten years of pilfering had equipped him with a fine laboratory of his own; his income was largely made up of dubious contracts with New Crobuzon's less wholesome citizens, whose needs for sophisticated science constantly astounded him.

But Isaac's research – unchanged in its aims over all those years – could not proceed in a vacuum. He had to publish. He had to debate. He had to argue, to attend conferences – as the rogue, the rebellious son. There were great advantages to renegacy.

But the academy did not just play at being old-fashioned. Xenian students had only been admitted as degree candidates in New Crobuzon for twenty years. To cross-love openly would be a quick route to pariah status,

rather than the bad-boy chic he had assiduously courted. What scared him was not that the editors of the journals and the chairs of the conferences and the publishers would find out about Lin and him. What scared him was that he be seen not trying to hide it. If he went through the motions of a cover-up, they could not denounce him as beyond the pale.

All of which Lin took badly.

You hide us so you can publish articles for people you despise, she had signed at him once after they had made love.

Isaac, in sour moments, wondered how she would react if the art-world threatened to ostracize her.

That morning the lovers managed to kill the nascent argument with jokes and apologies and compliments and lust. Isaac smiled at Lin as he struggled into his shirt, and her headlegs ripped sensuously.

'What are you up to today?' he asked.

Going to Kinken. Need some colourberries. Going to exhibition in Howl Barrow. Working tonight, she added mock-ominously.

'I suppose I won't be seeing you for a while, then?' Isaac grinned. Lin shook her head. Isaac counted off days on his fingers. 'Well . . . can we have dinner at The Clock and Cockerel on, uh . . . Shunday? Eight o'clock?'

Lin pondered. She held his hands while she thought.

Gorgeous, she signed coyly. She left it ambiguous as to whether she meant dinner or Isaac.

They piled the pots and plates into the bucket of cold water in the corner and left them. As Lin gathered her notes and sketches to go, Isaac tugged her gently onto him, on the bed. He kissed her warm red skin. She turned in his

arms. She angled up on one elbow and, as he watched, the dark ruby of her carapace opened slowly while her headlegs splayed. The two halves of her headshell quivered slightly, held as wide as they would go. From beneath their shade she spread her beautiful, useless little beetle wings.

She pulled his hand towards them gently, invited him to stroke the fragile things, totally vulnerable, an expression of trust and love unparalleled for the khepri.

The air between them charged. Isaac's cock stiffened.

He traced the branching veins in her gently vibrating wings with his fingers, watched the light that passed through them refract into mother-of-pearl shadows.

He rucked up her skirt with his other hand, slid his fingers up her thigh. Her legs opened around his hand and closed, trapped it. He whispered at her, filthy and loving invitations.

The sun shifted above them, sending shadows of the window-pane and clouds moving uneasily through the room. The lovers did not notice the day move.