

## Liquid crystals

**Gretchen Kerr Anderson**

*We all live in a kind of continuous dream (...) When we wake up, it is because something, some event or even a small annoyance, has altered the boundaries of what we took for reality.*

*Annihilation, Jeff VanderMeer*

After confirming that she still has enough time, María Carla decides to set off. Fortunately, the distance from her home to work is short. With a few folders of documents under her arm and her briefcase in hand, lost in her thoughts as she walks, she doesn't even realize that she is already standing in front of the campus of the University of Holguín.

She ascends the staircase that separates her from the main building, and as she does so, she hears the beep of her smartwatch. It's eight o'clock sharp. She enters the Department of Foreign Languages, where her colleagues greet her, and signs her attendance card. Someone offers her coffee, but she politely declines. Finally, she heads to her desk and picks up the sealed package with the exams before continuing on to the door of the third-year English classroom. Inside, the voices of students flutter about as they nervously chat about that day's exam. María Carla reaches out to open the door, but at that precise moment, someone stops her.

When she turns around, she finds herself face to face with a pair of women with snowy hair and extremely pale skin, who wear dark glasses despite the early hour and are dressed in strict black suits and ties. Beneath these outfits, well-developed biceps and triceps hint at athletic bodies that verge on extreme bodybuilding. The professor estimates that the women must be at least 1.90 meters tall because, to look them in the eye from her modest 1.70 meters, she nearly strains her fourth vertebra by arching her neck upward. The first thought that crosses her mind, given these peculiarities, is that they are foreign visitors

who have come for an exchange with the language students, as used to happen. So she tries to sound as cordial as possible when she says.

—Good morning! My name is María Carla Rodríguez. I am a Phonetics and Phonology teacher, and this is my classroom. Where are you from?

The women don't even flinch at her words. They simply look her up and down through their dark lenses, and one of them asks her companion:

—Is it her?

—Everything seems to indicate that it is —the other replies.

Then she pulls out a medium-sized tablet and shows the professor a website, specifically the page of a digital magazine specializing in science fiction and fantasy, where a publication from that very month appears.

—Did you write this? —she asks, pointing at the screen.

—If you're referring to the science fiction micro-story The Planet Zorgh, then... yes, I wrote it. It was published less than two days ago on that site— María Carla responds, increasingly confused about what is happening.

—Do you have more information about that planet?

María Carla observes the women as she tries to understand what is going on. Why are they interested in her science fiction story? And why such insistence on the planet Zorgh? She had come up with that name herself for this particular tale, so she has no extra information about it unless she makes something up. Strangers, albino, giant and muscular, and dressed in black... this already smells like intrigue to me, she thinks; with those Samson-like muscles, I don't think they look like they make a living writing. Editors sitting behind a desk with pencil and paper in hand? No... not at all.

—I'm sorry, but I don't have any other information about the planet Zorgh, nor do I have more stories related to it—she finally replies. —But let me ask, who are you? Why are you so interested in what I write? And most importantly... how do you know me?

The women exchange glances and gesture a couple of times, as if having a silent telepathic conversation. Then one of them turns to María Carla and says:

—We are Agath and Thale, from the Timeless Society, of the Council of Chroniclers of the Multiverse. We have been searching for you; you are the transcriber of sector 211 of the Ityr Galaxy, from Universe 9.804. We need information about the planet Zorgh. The Council has sent us.

María Carla cannot believe what she is hearing. According to these women, the story she invented is a transcription of something that is actually happening in another parallel universe? “They must be crazy”, she thinks, “or they’re pulling my leg”. The professor glances at her smartwatch and then back at her interlocutors.

—I’m sorry, but it’s almost 8:30 and I have an exam to administer. Suggestion: I don’t know who you are, but if you want to unleash all that creativity, you should sign up for some science fiction writing workshop. Good luck with that.

She gestures as if to leave, but is interrupted again, this time by Agath:

—Don’t make us use force, transcriber. You will come with us.

Carla begins to feel exasperated.

—I’m not a transcriber! —she shouts, then immediately regrets her outburst and adds, in a lower tone—. I teach English at the university. In my spare time, I write science fiction as a hobby, and let’s just say I’ve been lucky that some of my less mediocre stories have been published in not-so-serious genre magazines. But I’m not even a writer!

—How do we explain it from your planet’s perspective? As far as I understand, your civilization hasn’t even reached level one on the scale. The scientists of this world have not managed to formulate the Unified Theory. They don’t know about the spontaneous generation of virtual particles, antigravity, or hyperspace travel through multistrands. I don’t think she can comprehend all those quantum formulas— Thale spoke.

—We can induce the answer through telepathy— Agath suggested.

—It won't work. The human nervous system is very rudimentary. It won't pick it up— Thale replied.

—Wait...— Agath placed her hand on her temple, and a muffled sound was heard, like the startup of a computer processor. — I'm currently navigating through your planetary data bank: the Internet. I found something...

Turning to María Carla, she asked:

—Carla, have you heard of the Omicron Theory?

María Carla blinked in confusion.

—The Omicron Theory? No, I haven't... What does that have to do with me?

Agath exchanged glances with Thale before continuing.

—It's crucial for understanding the fabric of reality across different universes. Your story may hold more significance than you realize.

—I don't watch the news, of course I haven't heard anything about it! — María Carla exclaimed. —What is that? Some new strain of COVID-19?

The professor kept a close eye on the movements of the two women standing in front of her.

—According to Cristián Londoño Proaño, the Earthling who discovered the phenomenon, all science fiction or fantasy stories developed by writers are reflections of other realities and worlds that exist in the Multiverse— Agath explained.

—Are you telling me that everything someone writes happens in a timeline or parallel universe? — María Carla asked, incredulous.

—Exactly. Those moments of inspiration for writers are flashes of events occurring in other realities. They simply transcribe them. There are no good or bad writers, only transcribers with varying degrees of interdimensional reception ability— Agath continued.

—Of course, no one knows this. Everyone thinks their stories are products of their creativity—Thale interrupted. — Even if it's about writers who claim to be writing realism, that event is happening on Earth in a parallel dimension. Given that there

are billions of realities, galaxies, and planets in the Multiverse, finding a specific transcriber can be quite problematic.

—That's why the Timeless Society exists, part of the Council of Chroniclers of the Multiverse. We travel through multistrands searching for specific transcribers, — Agath added. —What you narrate in your micro-story seems to originate from Sector 211 of the Ityr Galaxy in Universe 9.804. It's an exceptional case since only three individuals and/or beings or entities have been contacted so far, including you, who are capable of receiving what happens in that quadrant, which apparently exists outside all laws of the Multiverse, Physics, and even time-space itself.

María Carla felt her mind racing as she processed this information.

—So you're saying my little story about Zorgh is somehow connected to real events happening somewhere out there? And I'm one of only three people who can tap into that?

—Yes —Thale confirmed with a nod. — And we need your help to understand what's happening there.

María Carla took a deep breath, trying to wrap her head around this bizarre situation.

—But how can I help? I just made up a story!

Agath stepped forward again, her expression serious. “That's precisely why we need you.

—Your stories align with the information records left by the last transcriber of that quadrant,” Agath explained, watching as María Carla processed the overwhelming amount of information they had just dumped on her like a proverbial bucket of cold water.

—Okay, okay, let's suppose what you're telling me is true. Why can't you reach Zorgh through the... multistrands? — she asked, trying to regain some control over the conversation.

—Do you remember what you wrote in your story? —Thale prompted.

The English professor flipped through one of the phonetics books she was carrying under her arm. She recalled writing that tale during her break at the university and remembered having tucked the manuscript between the pages of one of her textbooks.

—Here it is— she said, pulling it out and reading aloud:

*The planet Zorgh was an enigmatic place, surrounded by a mist of strange particles that swayed in unknown patterns, in an unpredictable cosmic dance. These particles were the antithesis of matter, and contact with them could result in instant annihilation. Zorgh was a macabre relic, the last breath of a dead universe. Surrounded by the infinite darkness of the Big Freeze, the celestial bodies around were merely cosmic corpses awaiting their final fate: zero entropy. The sun had long since vanished, swallowing life in the jaws of a frozen darkness.*

*The mists of antiparticles surrounding Zorgh were a toxic shroud of death. Any material being that ventured through these immense and empty regions would be instantly devoured by the very antithesis of existence. The inhabitants of Zorgh were a strange amalgamation of pure energy, intertwined in a complex telepathic network. Their minds, a single conscious entity resonating through the void, were the last light in the darkness surrounding the planet.*

*These beings, united in collective consciousness, became the only vestige of a universe on the brink of extinction. Of thermal death. Their bodies, transformed into pure energy, shone like stars through the nebula of antiparticles that enveloped their world. As the last spark of life extinguished in the universe, the inhabitants of Zorgh maintained their presence as a persistent shadow; their telepathy, a defiant echo in the void, a lamenting song for the lost universe.*

*Finally, the energy of Zorgh faded away, absorbed into the cold Big Freeze. The last telepathic voice was extinguished, and with it, the last evidence of life in that dead universe disappeared.*

Now it is Thale who explains:

—According to what you narrate, you know what the phenomenon of particle-antiparticle annihilation is. There in your story lies the answer. We cannot go to that dead quadrant of universe 9.804 because we would be destroyed. It's like an impossible hanging from nothingness. A place that should not exist.

—And even more shocking—Agath adds—we have not been able to determine what happens on the surface of the planet, nor with these beings of pure energy, because it is a wandering world of space-time. That's why you narrate in the story that the last telepathic voice was extinguished, but I assure you it was not. It is merely submerged in the sea of Dirac, from which it continuously emerges and hides, making these calls that you describe as its telepathy, a defiant echo in the void, a lamenting song for the lost universe, which propagates through the multistrands and resonates in all dimensions of the Multiverse. That's why the Council sends us. We want to know if the wandering planet Zorgh and these beings constitute a threat. What you heard is all we know.

Carla remains silent for a few minutes, analyzing everything that has been said. Suddenly, she jolts when she remembers that she has been standing there for a long time, in front of the classroom door, talking to these strange women while she should be administering an exam. If the dean happened to pass by, she would receive the worst reprimand of her life. But to her surprise, when she looks at her smartwatch, it still reads 8:29 AM.

—We are in a time loop—Agath says.

—And don't ask how— Thale adds with a smile, causing María Carla to notice her strangely pronounced and curved fangs.

—You are very strange women, if I may say the obvious... —sighs the phonetics professor as she adjusts her ample Latina hips into jeans that are about to burst at the seams on the first step of the staircase right in front of her classroom.

She would have wished for a table and a chair, but for that, she would have to go to one of the establishments, and she really didn't want to observe what was happening around her with this "time loop." Would people look like when you put a video on stand-by? Or would it be some kind of repetitive slow motion? She

didn't want to know, so she opted to arrange the textbooks, her briefcase, and the packet with the exams on her lap, took out a notebook and a pen, closed her eyes for a few seconds, concentrated, and... The joint laughter of both women brought her back to reality.

—See how predictable humans are?

—Why do you assume we are women? Or in any case, of the female sex?

—Oh, aren't you? And what are you? — María Carla asks. Her quota of astonishment and disbelief for that day had been exhausted. Her visitors look at each other.

—Transcribe... —says Thale, leaving the question hanging in the air.

—Without interruptions, please.

The professor takes the pen again and begins to write:

*The sky appeared as a blurry and decrepit canvas, as if it were fading into time with a single brushstroke. Zorgh was a living planet where gigantic mushroom-like bodies with putrid trunks rose from the marshy ground, clinging to the substrate of liquid methane swamps, crowned by enormous pulpy hats adorned with intricate patterns.*

*Beneath these hats hung pulsating sacs of flesh that contained their vital organs and allowed them to filter methane from the atmosphere for sustenance. Additionally, their bodies released tiny fluorescent spores that levitated in the air and danced in the sky like small stars.*

*These beings of Zorgh were the first manifestation of life on the planet, and they had achieved the unthinkable: elevating their consciousness to a collective network known as the noosphere, a kind of supermind, while their bodies remained anchored to the ground, giving life to a self-aware being created by the union of all Zorgh's minds, which, in turn, had created itself.*

*The noosphere controlled the energy of the antimatter nebula surrounding the living planet, and these elevated consciousnesses, like energetic and incorporeal entities, soared through space like auroras borealis resonating with echoes of color, vibrating in all directions.*

*I felt soft textures and sweet scents merging in my mind, giving me a perception of terrifying beauty. “We are and have always been part of the All,” the voices whispered; it was a melody that was terribly macabre. Terribly beautiful. “Our existence extends beyond the timelines and matter itself.”*

*“How is it possible that you survived the Big Freeze of your universe and the antiparticle fog that envelops the planet?” I asked, my voice traveling distorted through bosonic strings and quantum foam, breaking like a warm wave at the borders of that unknown, enveloping being.*

*“We are the Ones Who Are.” My subconscious struggled to comprehend these words as the music, harmony of the spheres, perfect mathematical equation, glided through the ether and settled in my mind with its notes. “Join Us,” they vibrated. It was as if colors had a life of their own. These auras moved in swirling waves, each wave radiating a resonance; as if the sound waves of that symphony, of that lament, had come to life. They were vibrant, changing in size and shape, like a visual representation of the music of the cosmos.*

*As I observed these auroras, my senses fused into a synesthesia, a spiral of quarks and leptons; each one, each aura had its own texture, scent, and flavor. An orgasm of the senses, a cascade of light, a prismatic rainbow—soft as silk.*

*The scents were unimaginable, a blend of exotic spices and extraterrestrial flowers that overwhelmed me. The beings of pure energy spread through space, resembling anisotropic liquid crystals: sharp, asymmetrical, varying like a kaleidoscope, reflecting lights like a prism; they blurred like ripples on a pond. “Join Us,” they vibrated. Their invitation resonated in my mind; it was tempting, and I accepted, feeling my consciousness detach from my body to join the collective current and travel beyond time and space...*

María Carla Rodríguez, professor of Phonetics and Phonology at the University of Holguín, was found by a student at 8:30 AM, collapsed on the first step of the staircase, with her briefcase and textbooks scattered at her feet, alongside the sealed packet containing the exam that was never administered that day. In her hands, she held a pen, suggesting she had been writing something; however, there was no paper or note in the scene to confirm it.

The doctor diagnosed a cerebral hemorrhage, and she was taken to the intensive care unit, where she remained in a vegetative state, connected to equipment that kept her alive while her body lay motionless, fixed to the stretcher, much like the beings of the living planet who were anchored to their substrate. Now, the transcriber's consciousness had integrated into theirs.

From time to time, her students and family would visit her. On other occasions, there were a couple of... women? Albino figures who seemed to stop time with their presence. They attempted to communicate with her, probing her mind with their telepathy, but it was futile.

—The third transcriber assimilated by the living planet and the superconsciousness. —said one of them, visibly annoyed.

—I told you it was dangerous. —replied the other—. But at least we now know what's in that damned world...

Both agents shrugged and, in a blink, disappeared from the site, and time resumed its normal flow. What many who were there that day swore was that above the professor's head, floating, albeit very subtly, there was sometimes a kind of translucent crystal. Liquid and anisotropic.

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