

xëñøgêñésis

by Soh Kay Min

xenogenesis is a response to Weixin Quek Chong's work for the exhibition, *larval limbic*. Adopting the aggressive mimicry strategies of the orchid mantis that is a key point of reference in *larval limbic*, this experimental piece of writing reassembles and reinterprets texts from Octavia Butler's science fiction trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, another key reference in the work. *xenogenesis* will undergo three mutations and take different forms in the subsequent weeks.

You are viewing: mutation 2.



xēmōgēnēsīs

*a mutant novella
of aggressive mimicries*

xë̃møgë̃mésis̃

Book of Camille

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In tribute to Octavia E. Butler
and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–1989)

For Lilith, Meimei, and Camille—
who each exceed the ones who came
before them and the ones who will
come after them. Against linearity,
in fractal progression.

I am taken by my kind host around their garden, and shown, among other things, a flower, a red orchid, that catches and feeds upon live flies. It seized upon a butterfly while I was present, and enclosed it in its pretty but deadly leaves, as a spider would have enveloped it in network.



Would you go to the garden if you could?

Six divisions ago, on a white-sun water world, they lived in great shallow oceans. They were many-bodied and spoke with body lights and color patterns among themselves and

among themselves. There were few flowers, and those mainly bromeliads and orchids, high in the trees. On the ground, a colourful stationary object was likely to be a leaf or some kind of fungus. The undergrowth was thin enough to walk through without difficulty except near the river where in some places a machete was essential—and not yet permitted. There was no end to the forest. The trees and smaller plants changed. Some varieties vanished, but the forest continued. The garden, waiting to be recolonised by queer creatures. It was a heavy coat of green fur on the hills and later on the nearly vertical cliffs of the mountains. There were old trails, ledges along cliff faces that perhaps dated back to a time before the war. Below, a branch of the river cut through a deep, narrow gorge. Above, the mountains were green and sheer, bordering a blue and white band of sky that broadened ahead of us. The water ran high and fast below, green and white, breaking over huge rocks filled with so much life and death and potential for change.



*Plant a town. Prepare a place.
People will come.*

Have you planted a town?

I chose a spot near the river. There I prepared the seed to go into the ground. I gave it a thick, nutritious coating, then brought it out of my body. I planted it deep in the rich soil of the riverbank.

One day you need a plant you don't know, in order to connect pieces in yourself, or in a person you're trying to be with.

Seconds after I had expelled it, I felt it begin the tiny positioning movements of independent life. There was a single cell within that great store—a cell that could be “awakened” from its stasis and stimulated to divide and grow into a kind of seed.

Over the next few days, I found the cell, awakened it, nourished it, and encouraged it to divide. When it had divided several times, I stopped it, separated one cell from the mass, and returned that cell to stasis. But whether or not the town had to develop a longer and more complex root system than most towns, everything it needed was within its reach. Here the town could grow and always have companionship. It would need that companionship. While it was young, it would be particularly voracious. And it would need the space the valley afforded it to grow and mature before it had to deal with mountains.



What if it were possible to row a boat to freedom?

This land had once been connected to the mainland—had become first a peninsula, then an island as the river changed course and cut through the connecting neck of land. But the river seemed so large. As they followed the bank, the far bank changed, seemed nearer, seemed more heavily forested here, more deeply crowded there, ranged from low bluffs to flat bank that slipped into the river, blending almost seamlessly with its reflection. Some combination of truth and approximation, or just a pleasant fiction. Somewhere east of south, somewhere

west of north. In the humidity, everyone perspired freely. Then it began to rain. Upriver was the oldest part of the island, the part with the greatest number of huge old trees, many with broad buttresses. She could pick out individual trees—treetops anyway. Those that towered above the canopy, the slouched trees coming in and out of fuzziness.

Proxi was a cool red star with its three planets hugging close around it. The red calmed them—the sun here was not the right colour.

you are bright honey,
very bright, but stubborn, you think you can choose
your realities, you can't

It began to rain suddenly, and they sat dry and united by the darkness and the noise outside. The rain poured down and the insects took shelter with them, biting them and sometimes flying into the fire which had been built up again for light and comfort once the cooking was done.

At night they climbed and bled and swam into planes
of logic where a word
shifted weight several times images spiralling out
in every direction
meimei was falling so slowly that she could see
everything
in time i see

green apartment corridors and doors
turned into the bag to pick up an old avocado, the
bulb on his head
bigger than ears and nose
hunger

you can't contain this it is not possible really

To me, the conflict was spice.

**WE CALLED OUR NEED FOR CONTACT WITH OTHERS
HUNGER.**

**THE WORD HAD NOT BEEN CHOSEN FRIVOLOUSLY.
ONE WHO COULD HUNGER COULD STARVE.**

*It's a good thing
your people don't eat meat.
If you did, the way you talk about us,
our flavours
and your hunger
and your need to taste us,
I think you would eat us
instead of fiddling with our genes.*

~

Camille demanded an end to the meatless diet. Per wanted meat, per wanted it now. Per had no idea how long per was in wanting, then consuming, those eleven meals. First, per had had to become absolutely still. Exit the body, breath by little breath, enter suspended animation. Become living matter, more plant than animal. *Can you hold your breath, Lilith? Can you hold it by an act of will until you die?*

Papa found something the other day that I think is just about as funny as your Lilith. Papa was walking along by our fence, and there, in the sun, sat just the queerest-looking thing!

Past the land, glittering in the light of what seemed to be the sun, the water was too laden with sediment to appear blue, though above it, the ceiling—the sky—was a deep, intense blue. There was no smoke, no smog, only a few clouds—remains of a recent rain. Across the wide river, there was the illusion of a line of trees on the opposite bank. A line of green. Away from the river, the predominant color was green. Above was the very real green canopy—trees of all sizes, many burdened with a profusion of other life: bromeliads, orchids, ferns, mosses, lichens, lianas, parasitic vines, plus a generous complement of insect life and a few frogs, lizards, and snakes. In spite of the sun, the moon and the stars; in spite of the rain and the trees that had obviously been there for hundreds of years, there was only brown and green forest—the illusion of wilderness and isolation.

Per had gone alone to a place on the river where there was a heavily laden breadnut tree. Per had climbed the tree, not only to get the fruit, but to enjoy the solitude and the beauty of the tree. Per had never been much of a climber even as a child, but during her training, per had developed climbing skill and confidence—and a love of being so close to something so much of Earth. Something that alien. That ugly. That powerful. The sensitive plant also grew here. Its leaves shrunk from a touch, and shrivelled up to nothing when plucked. That flower and this plant must have a nervous system closely allied to that of animals. The orchid to which I have referred has a delicate discrimination in the matter of per food. Per must, in the fashion of an Earthly faith, kill per own meat—rejecting any dead fly that may fall upon per leaves.

Per had found a dry, thick liana root to sit on. It hung like a swing, dropping down from the canopy, then curving upward again to lock itself into the branches of a nearby smaller tree before dropping to the ground and digging in. Green was everywhere. Per felt enveloped in a solidly Earthly thing. A forest on an island. A tropical forest in a space ship. A simulation of a tropical forest of Earth had to be complete with snakes, centipedes, mosquitoes and other things—things per could consume, as long as she remained patient, suspended animation. The root was thicker than some trees and the few insects on it looked harmless. It was an uncomfortable seat—twisted and hard—but Lilith was not yet ready to leave. Not before per had had per fill of food and pleasure so sharp and sweet it cleared everything else from per mind.

You just ought to see Lilith catch flies.
Per will wait till per sees a fly sitting not very far away,
and then per will begin to move toward the fly.

Lilith moves so slowly that per can hardly see it move at all,
but, just as per reaches the fly, per will give a sudden jump
and catch the fly with those two queer forelegs,
and then go to eating.

~

*Why did you leave?
It was a womb.*

Per remembered much of per stay in the womb. The time had come to be born. Per did not learn pain until it was time for per to be born. Per could feel and taste changes happening around per—the slow turning of per body, then later the sudden headfirst thrust, the compression first of per head, then gradually along the length of per body. Per hurt in a dull, distant way. It was a pass-fail course. A live-die course. In per Human way, per had been very hungry, starving, for any touch. When per fluctuating electromagnetic field touches that of another person, plant or entity, emotion is per perception of data encoded in that field.

~

*Can it talk?
In images, in tactile, bioelectric,
and bioluminescent signals,
in pheromones, and in gestures.
It can gesture with ten limbs at once.*

They'll digest anything that isn't alive

*But its throat and mouth parts
won't produce speech. And it is deaf.
It must live in places where
there is a great deal of noise.*



A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt or... tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling. A half-known mystery beautiful and complex. A deep, impossibly sensuous promise. Per was a rush of flavours and textures—sweet milk, salty skin smooth in some places, rough in others. Lilith's flesh was exciting. There was something wrong with per—something per did not understand. It was both frightening and seductive. It told per Lilith was dangerous, though per was also essential. Deadly and compelling. Lilith had never missed any fly that per had seen. Every bit of fly is eaten excepting the wings and legs. If Lilith made a mistake and got a piece of a wing or leg into per mouth, per always pulled the piece out again. The rhythm of per heartbeat, the rush of per blood, the texture of per flesh, the easy, life-sustaining working of per organs, per cells, the smallest organelles within per cells—all of this was a vast, infinitely absorbing complexity.

The beauty provides form for meaning, and though it does help my body, form to form, I'm not only what my senses perceive, and my disease not just physical absence, which virus fills.

*Their delight in one another ignited and burned.
They moved together, sustaining an impossible intensity,
both of them tireless, perfectly matched,
ablaze in sensation, lost in one another.*

*They seemed to rush upwards.
A long time later, they seemed to drift down
slowly, gradually,
savouring a few more moments wholly together.*

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Mutated with texts and found footage from:

[@animalsandsynthesizers](#); Mary Ellen Bamford, *The Second Year of the Look-About Club*, 1889; Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, *Slow Down, Now*, 2011; [Fusion Exotics](#); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 2016; James Hingston, *The Australian Abroad: Branches from the Main Routes Round the World*, 1879; Christian Alessandro Perez: [Orphan\(rift\)](#), *Cyberpositive*, 1995.