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Weird Border Crossings in China Miéville's "Looking for Jake", "The Tain" and "Säcken"

Thomas Knowles

Introduction

China Miéville's fiction abounds with borders and border crossings. In his 2009 novel *The City & the City*, Miéville made the policing and crossing of borders the organising principle of his characters' lives. The overlapping cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma, and the legendary "third place" Orciny, where their divisions are undone, suggest a multitude of allegorical readings of divided cities including Jerusalem, Berlin during the Cold War and Belfast. To my mind they also made manifest the many borders which we unconsciously police in our everyday lives: the novel's citizens' ability to screen out people and places from the overlapping foreign territories might be an extreme metaphor for the ways in which we filter out or "unsee" the homeless on our daily commute, for instance. In *The Kraken* (2010), the borders between land and sea are unsettled, not by the deluge of a flood, but by the piecemeal infiltration of the city by saline insurgents, immigrants and deities, while *Embassytown* (2011) explores the borders between species, languages and universes. *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *Scar* (2002) and *Iron Council* (2004) meanwhile are full of bodily border crossings including posthumans, steampunk cyborgs and interspecies love and sex. Joe Sutliff Sanders (2015) sees Miéville's Young Adult fiction as destabilising the traditional borders between adulthood and childhood—borders which risk fetishising that threshold and distance. In *Un Lun Dun* (2007) the young heroine bucks the trend of much classical children's fantasy by refusing to foreswear her access to the land of magic and enter permanently into the mundane, adult world. Paul March-Russell sees the instability of borders between both nations and genres in Miéville's fictions as a recapturing of "childlike wonder—without

losing the hard sceptical edge of control and manipulation—that underscores the speculative tradition of tales concerned with invisibility" (2015, 155).

Miéville's fascination with borders is not confined to his novels, however, and in this chapter I wish to explore their resonances in three short pieces of fiction—"Looking for Jake" (1998), "The Tain" (2002) and "Säcken" (2014)—paying particular attention to ontological, psychological and species border crossings. The complex intertwining of these border crossings with ecology and capitalism are staged by these short fictions in such a way as to render tentacular our enmeshed being in this epoch which some are calling the Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Chthulucene (Haraway 2016). As the introduction of this collection notes, the short story as a form has special affinity to border themes: its condensed nature and resistance to closure may invoke the presences and absences of the eerie with disturbing/destabilising effects. The three stories here analysed accentuate this tendency through Miéville's characteristic combination of horror, science fiction (sf) and fantasy. Such generic border crossings have been called by Miéville and others the "new weird", and it is to this literary mode that I turn now.

From Weird to New Weird

In his 2009 essay "Weird Fiction", Miéville writes that weird fiction is characterised by awe in the face of the material world—a fascination capable of rendering obliquely visible the "bad-numinous" which underlies everyday perception (510, 513). Noting its relationship to the Romantic sublime, Miéville calls the weird "a radicalized sublime backwash" for its tendency to seep through the border erected by Edmund Burke between the sublime and the beautiful (511), and for its much-parodied penchant for inundating the reader with adjective-laden, purple prose—especially that of H. P. Lovecraft. But this might also be read as hesitance—an aesthetic delay of the noun and a proper humility in the face of the weirdness

of objects (512). H. P Lovecraft is undoubtedly the best known practitioner of the weird in fiction, but we may include writers such as Robert Chambers, Alfred Kubin, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, M. R. James and many, many more (Miéville lists more than thirty writers in his opening paragraphs, and this is by no means exhaustive). Identifying the trauma of the First World War as foundational for much weird fiction, Miéville suggests that the most terrible and formless horror that weird fiction may be called upon to describe is the violence done by humanity (515). Miéville's own fiction, filtered through the intellectual and formal concerns of the British New Wave of science fiction, rejects the hallucinogenic racism of Lovecraft and the fascism of Machen to produce a radical new weird that engages with globalisation, consumer capitalism, climate change and climate justice, as well as the psychology of trauma. Xavier Aldana Reyes distinguishes between the "contemporary weird" and the "new weird", with the former being more derivative of Lovecraft and more closely aligned to horror, and the latter tending to be characterised by genre fluidity or indeterminacy, with its horrors connected to but not directly derived from the Lovecraftian weird tradition (2016, 208). In "Transitions: From Victorian Gothic to Modern Horror", Roger Luckhurst asks: "Is it that modern horror is what remains when Christian dread has drained from the Gothic body?" (2016, 117). Lovecraft's monsters emerge from outside of traditional folklore and mythology in combinations which Miéville compares with the science-fictional "novum", in the process establishing the tentacle as the horror-limb *du jour* of the twentieth century (2009, 512). As we shall see, "Looking for Jake, "The Tain" and "Säcken" depict monsters that are the product of human activity, dream or delusion, but which do not correspond with the traditional Gothic pantheon of the supernatural—vampires, werewolves, witches and so on. Even where Miéville invokes the vampire, in "The Tain", this is merely a human name for beings that are radically other.

Another subgenre in fiction that is relevant to a discussion of Miéville is that of the eerie. Mark Fisher (2016) writes that the literary modes of the weird and the eerie are to be found at the peripheries of genres such as sf, the Gothic and horror. One might suggest that the apprehension and dread, but not necessarily terror of these modes is particularly resonant in the border zones of genre. Fisher distinguishes the weird from the eerie in the following way: "The weird is constituted by a presence—the presence of that which does not belong […]. The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or a failure of presence", which might include the discovery of agency where it is not expected, or the absence of agency where we would expect to find it (61).

The trauma of individual identity might be thought of as central to the short story. In *I Am Your Brother* (2013), Charles E. May points to the foundational myths of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel as those that enabled Romantic writers, including those penning early forms of the short story in English and other European languages, to explore the primal separation of self from world, object and other. This separation, of course, sets up borders between the physical body and its mind, borders between perception and hard physical reality, and between what the self can know and discover and what other selves can likewise know and discover. The first short stories then—if we take the early nineteenth century as its true beginning in English, as March-Russell (2009) and Philip Hensher (2018) do—were stories about borders. For May, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798)—notwithstanding its being a poem—is the archetype of the early-nineteenth-century short story, featuring as it does a reimaging of Cain's bloody affirmation of separation—so separate, in fact, that he may kill the other, his brother. According to this reading, Coleridge's mariner kills the albatross simply because he can, as reaffirmation of that terrible freedom in separation (May 2013, 5–8). Miéville combines the weird and the eerie in his short stories to unsettle, undermine and overcome the internal borders of the self in order to ask with Donna

Haraway: "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social?" (2016, 30). For the proto-new weird writer M. J. Harrison, "the writer of the New Weird seeks 'a liquefaction of boundaries'" (Harrison cited in Luckhurst 2005, 240). This is in part a hybridisation of genre—part fantasy, part sf, part horror, speculative and weird. But there is a strong ecological current in these texts, too. Ann and Jeff Vandermeer describe the new weird a as a "re-enquiry into approaches and issues raised by the [science fiction] New Wave of the 1960s" (2011, xix), while Edwards and Venezia note how "Miéville's interest in examining species boundaries" allows him to "wedge open a space in which to consider radically Other subjectivities and wholly alien ways of thinking" (2015, 5).

Edwards and Venezia also point to the importance of the concept of "breach"—not just, most obviously, in *The City & The City*, where failing to "unsee" the other city results in the swift and arbitrary justice of the shadowy force called Breach—but throughout Miéville's works (12–13): breach of law, breach in a military sense, in terms of the intrusion of the Real, and in terms of physical/psychological rupture and combination; breach is also the place at which possibilities for new ways of thinking and being emerge. One could think of breach as a kind of perpetually unresolved dialectic, which is also a way of thinking about borders—both material and metaphysical. Borders are spaces where freedom may flourish, but also where the law and other forms of power may periodically crack down with ferocious force.[1] Miéville writes of a "morally opaque tentacular" in the weird mode which resists the Manichean binaries of good and evil. The yoking together of unlike objects/entities/ideas in weird fiction might be thought of as the literary equivalent of breach, transgressing taxonomic, linguistic, species boundaries and philosophical precepts (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 14).

In *Art and Idea in the Novels of China Miéville*, Carl Freedman reads Miéville's novels as meditative interventions in Marxist theory. Freedman argues persuasively for *The City & The City* in particular as a disquisition on nationalism, imperialism and uneven development that is informed by the author's deep knowledge of international law (2015, 85–103). The vulnerability of even the most zealously-policed borders to international capital becomes brutally apparent to the novel's protagonist, but there are other more insidious borders that seem to remain in place, and uneven development is revealed to be a shockingly local, as well as global, phenomenon.

The weird in fiction, according to Ann and Jeff Vandermeer, "represents the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane" (2011, xv). In the weird fictions of the twenty-first century, the numinous might be an alternative to capitalism—something outside the scope of what Mark Fisher has called "capitalist realism" (2009, 2). Miéville's Marxist-inflected works certainly provoke us to think otherwise socially and economically, but they also destabilise the imaginative and discursive borders between species. The legacies of Lovecraftian horror accompany such fictional border crossings, but so too do inquisitive, broad-minded and sympathetic writings such as those of Donna Haraway, whose Chthulucene emphasises the chthonic over Lovecraft's alien Cthulhu mythos. For Miéville, representing non-human intelligence is, for human beings at least, literally impossible, but he does think that you can fail pretty wonderfully through suggestion, hints and not saying too much (Staggs, 2011). For Ann and Jeff Vandermeer, a strength of weird fiction is its ability to "acknowledge failure as a sign and symbol of our limitations" (2011, xv). It is through such "failings" that the short stories "Looking for Jake", "The Tain" and "Säcken" interrogate the borders of human sympathetic communities—"[e]ntertaining monsters while not always seeing them as monstrous" (xv). Ann and Jeff Vandermeer liken the story of weird fiction to the "story of the

rise of the tentacle, a symbol of the modern weird" (xvi). Miéville frequently invokes the tentacle, but subverts our expectations by embracing or otherwise engaging with, rather than fleeing from, the ubiquitous horror appendage. In the afterword to the Vandermeers' volume of *Weird Tales*, Miéville invokes the Anglo-Saxon *wyrd* only to reject its totalizing wholeness in favour of *wyrm*; wriggling, independent, tentacle-like forms that bore through the Lovecraftian riddle of life in and after death. The holes that summon worms make permeable borders like life and death, human/animal/insect, self and other (Miéville, 2011b).

"Looking for Jake": An Absence that Summons Presence

"Looking for Jake" is a story in the long tradition of transmogrified Londons. For Sebastian Groes, "London is covered by a thick crust of poetry, urban legends, historical narratives and literary fictions, and mythologies", and this story renders a London labyrinthine, monstrous, dehumanizing and machinic—a postmodern city in which "reality" is unknowable (Groes, 2011, 1; 14). Its narration is, we discover, a letter addressed to the titular Jake, composed in the narrator's home on Kilburn High Street—a flat above an electronics store from which they cannot see the street below, but with a view of gas overflow towers, likely to be those at Kensington. The slippage from the "you" addressed at times to Jake, which reminds us of the compositional frame, and the first-person "I" by which most of the narrative is delivered, collapses the epistolary framing of more traditional Gothic and weird tales. From his obscured vantage point, the narrator guesses at or invents the life that they cannot see. At some point, before or during the beginning of an unspecified catastrophe, Jake has gone missing, and the narrator, who is neither named nor gendered, recounts events before, during and after the catastrophe.

"Looking for Jake" slowly reveals itself as a post-apocalyptic tale, although as March-Russell (2009, 161) has noted, the accumulation of weird detail—self-generating litter with

puckered, umbilical mouths; a vast beast, heard shaking the foundations of its multi-storey prison; the disappearance of a multitude of Londoners, including Jake—produces an indeterminate disaster, and one which could merely be an epiphenomenon of the narrator's paranoid state. The fact that the narrator appears unmolested by the strange creatures that have invaded London, kidnapped or killed thousands of people, and de-populated the sky of birds, lends credence to this reading, and March-Russell's invocation of the literature of trauma seems apposite, too. As we shall see, though, the semi-apparent linking of this story, the first in the collection *Looking for Jake and Other Stories* (2005), with the last, "The Tain", works to unsettle our reading of the disaster as a purely psychological one. So too does the linking of the story's disaster to historical disasters and atrocities such as Bhopal and Chernobyl. That the possible link between the two short stories is not made overtly, but rather by implication in being collected together, and through various echoes, half-rhymes and mirrorings, unsettles the borders between discreet stories and fictions. Is the London of "The Tain" the same as that of "Looking of Jake"? Miéville has spoken in interview of his amusement at hearing the question "is it the same universe?" asked of fantasy fiction (Miéville 2015). These two stories, bookending the collection, seem to deliberately hint at, and yet refuse to answer, such questions of the containment of narrative.

The reader of "Looking for Jake" oscillates between scepticism as to the ontological status of the events reported and sympathy for the narrator's paranoid reading of London and modernity. Entwining the narratives of the disappearance of one person, and the mass disappearances of the former inhabitants of London, creates undecidability as to the status of what the narrator reports. At first the reader is kept in suspense as to what catastrophe or series of catastrophes might have taken place, and the main thrust of the story appears to be the narrator's loss of Jake. A few pages in, though, a threshold is crossed, and the dark hints, strange allusions and partial descriptions that have been mounting up, break out in a minor

explosion of the weird into the ostensibly realist fictional space: "I already crept downstairs today, Jake, to pick up my copy of the *Telegraph* from across the road. The headline is: 'Autochthonous Masses Howling and Wet-Mouthed'. The subhead: 'Pearl, Faeces, Broken Machines'" (Miéville 2011a, 8). Such is the metonymic and metaphoric language of dreams and delusion, and the narrator's sense that the whole world is subtly changed by whatever has taken place chimes with the paranoiac return of the rejected other and world of which Freudian psychoanalysis, and particularly the uncanny, treats (Tambling 2012, 126). What at first seems to be an eruption of the weird into the realist fictional space, however, turns out to have been present from the start: rereading the story one is alert to the weird from the second paragraph: "I know that an *early riser* flew right past me" (Miéville 2011a, 3) has an entirely different resonance in light of the rest of the story. Reading with Lacan, this can also be thought of as an eruption of the Real into the Symbolic, and this certainly chimes with the narrator's inability to directly describe the creatures which have appeared in London after the unspecified disaster. Miéville, or at least his narrator, is also interested in the borders that separate and join words—the Kilburn where they live becoming "Kill Burn", and the alternately flickering letters of a faulty "Bingo" sign spelling out "Go In". Added to this are the borders of the boroughs of London which are both reified and destabilised by the catastrophe: Oxford Street remains a bastion of relative normality after the unnamed disaster, but it is a place where people exchange hand-written notes for goods that are mysteriously delivered overnight, whereas Kilburn, we are told, has always been dangerous. Of course, the exchanging of notes for goods and mysterious overnight deliveries on Oxford Street, contrasted with a deprived and relatively deserted area like Kilburn, could be a paranoid description of capitalism and the economic borders that uneven development throws up within cities.

Such undecidability in "Looking for Jake" unsettles the borders between personal and mass trauma, as well as the temporal and spatial extent and effects of catastrophe. The narrator invokes Chernobyl, Bhopal and the Charge of the Light Brigade, conjuring the crimes and suffering caused by the unequal exercise of power in the recent and more distant past and suggesting that disasters are multifarious and overlapping—that the disaster of (imperial/colonial/capitalist) human history has already happened and continues to unfold. The denials, cover-ups and avoidance of responsibility associated with Chernobyl, Bhopal and the Charge of the Light Brigade provide the paranoid key for the interpretation of this disaster. The story works as a depiction of traumatised psychology, but perhaps also as a traumatised response to the unfolding disaster of modernity; the feeling lingers that this is another of the twentieth/twenty-first century's man-made disasters, or that despite the seemingly supernatural element it is somehow humanity's fault. The surreal way in which people carry on, almost as though nothing had happened, not really asking one another what's going on, gives the story a Kafkaesque feel. Disaster seems to be mass-produced, manufactured and distributed, broadcast, able to ignore extant borders and create new ones. In this way, this disaster behaves like capital: its free flow is unrestrained by national and historical borders, and yet its effects, good and ill, are distributed unevenly in ways which reify borders of class, region and race. The narrator tells us that they have "always imagined the occurrence in very literal terms", offering a description of a machine capable of altering the numinous,

> a vast impossible building, a spiritual power station shitting out the world's energy and connectivity. […] the cogs and wheels of that unthinkable machinery overheating, some critical mass being reached…the mechanisms faltering and seizing up as the core

> explodes soundlessly and spews its poisonous fuel across the city and beyond. (Miéville 2011a, 9)

They go on to list Union Carbide's "torturing, killing bile" vomited up at Bhopal and the "cellular terrorism" of Chernobyl, making this story's disaster contiguous with those. The epicentre of the disaster in Kilburn seems to be the Gaumont Cinema, former palace of the moving image, at first occupied by the ravages of low-stakes gambling—a pale shadow of the monstrous gambling that takes place in the City of London—and then by the mysterious new arrivals, beckoning ominously through the flickering Bingo/Go In sign. The narrator seems to share something with the invaders, rendering them impervious or else uninteresting to London's weird new denizens. In this sense, and in the narrator's willingness to go out and meet the other, which they already seem to realise is a part of themselves, "Looking for Jake" prefigures and mirrors "The Tain". It might be helpful to think of the story as taking place within the border between internal and external reality, an uncanny meeting point that J. G. Ballard—an acknowledged influence on Miéville—called inner space.[2] Ballard was obsessed by terminal zones and border spaces such as beaches, suburbs, business parks, private housing estates, and, presiding over all of these interests, the border between inner and outer worlds where they meet. For Mark Fisher, "inner space" is a "profoundly misleading description", Ballard's characters' explorations in fact opening up an "intensive zone beyond—outside—standard perceptual thresholds" (2018, 44). The streets of London in "Looking for Jake" are rendered eerie by absences and presences: something sinister in the darkness; hissing and gentle gibbering; the sound of wet cloth on the wind signalling an "early riser" (Miéville 2011a, 3). But the narrator confesses, "I imagine some of these things. I don't know how people are disappeared, in these strange days, but hundreds of thousands, millions of souls have gone" (6). Meanwhile, the weird is also invoked through things that

should not be, such as self-generating rubbish and building-sized beast forms. As already noted, there is plenty of opportunity to read paranoia and delusion into this narration, but the vision of the world and London that is given to us is also uncomfortably close to the one that we think we know. The fuzziness of the borders that ought to separate dream, delusion and waking reality in this story suggest that a paranoid reading of London's signs will serve the reader equally well during the narrative and, more disturbingly, once the book has been closed.

"The Tain": Misrecognition and Material Identity

"The Tain" riffs on Jorge Luis Borges's "The Fauna of Mirrors" from *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1957). Doubling, splitting and other uncanny effects are combined with what might be taken to be a despairing portrayal of complete surrender in the face of insurmountable odds. Borders between beings, worlds, inner and outer realms, self and other are destabilised, abolished and reconfigured. As suggested above, this story feels somehow related to the opening story of the collection, "Looking for Jake"; in both stories, the protagonists move closer to alien invaders—others—and in the process, discover them to be uncannily close to home, close to themselves. "The Tain" is equally and more overtly concerned with borders—most obviously, the border between this world and the world we see reflected in the surface of mirrors, polished metal, glass and water. Between these worlds is the titular tain, which word resonates with connotations of possessiveness and taking, as well as referring to the mixture of quicksilver and tin that gives to mirrors their reflective properties. If "Looking for Jake" might be read as a personal psychological disaster, combined through a process of condensation with historical and ongoing disasters, and projected onto contemporary London, then "The Tain" offers an ostensibly (narratively) "real" disaster in the form of a story told (initially) in the third person. But the border between reality and projected state of mind is

troubled again in this story because the invasion has come from the mirror world; human beings' reflections—called "imagos" and "patchogues"— have broken through to take revenge upon their unwitting masters. And yet after the narrative close of the story, in another echo of "Looking for Jake", the possibility of madness is raised by a quotation from a genuine psychological text, "Illusions Induced by the Self-Reflected Image" by Luis H. Schwarz and Stanton P. Fjeld, published in1968 in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*. "The Tain" can be read as a narrative reflection of "Looking for Jake", but the latter also returns the gaze of and troubles the former. What does this two-way mirroring between stories achieve?[3] In considering the two stories together, I suggest that a Freudian/Lacanian reading in terms of identification opens up weird and eerie pathways to ecological being through making contact with sentient intelligences that are "unutterably other to human understanding" (Edwards and Venezia 2016, 19–20).[4]

The narrative of "The Tain" is revealed through third-person sections concerning the uncertain quest of the human (?) character Sholl, and the first-person narration of one of the "patchogues", who are among the first of the mirror-world beings to break through into our world. Throughout history these advance troops, which humans refer to as vampires, remain in human form and act as spies plotting for the full invasion of imagos that will come when all the mirrors break and the bond between humans and their reflections is broken. When they do break, the imagos prove to be enormously powerful and make short work of the human forces arraigned against them. This turns out to be a pyrrhic victory for the patchogues, though, who can no longer assume their true forms because they are trapped in the fleshly, human prisons that they have worn for so long.

The story is set in London during the aftermath of the imago invasion. The human Sholl, in an echo of "Looking for Jake", is mysteriously untroubled by the conquering imagos and patchogues, none of whom will touch him, excepting only the unnamed patchogue who is

his double. In fact, Sholl's double turns out to be a human being who was adopted by the imagos after killing his own escaped imago reflection. At first we may wonder why Sholl is safe from the imagos, hinting at complicity, perhaps. But Sholl and his would-be imago double are both doubly othered. Importantly, the human patchogue's narrative passages are narrated in the first person; we are given direct access to their feelings of isolation and alienation, whereas Sholl experiences community, the group, for the first time in a long while when he exits Hampstead tube station and is "rescued" by a group of soldiers he has befriended, and when he returns to their camp to celebrate. This has the effect of making the human patchogue more relatable—the other is more us—while Sholl's motives remain hard to read. Later on, the human patchogue's behaviour in reverse-London—the now almost empty world from which the imagos sprang—mirrors that of Sholl; they both stare into reflectionless puddles and wonder why the other patchogues will not touch Sholl, unable to comprehend why the other imagos retreat from his touch.

Sholl forms a plan, in part through the successful interrogation of his human patchogue double, to confront the imagos' general—the Fish in the Mirror—in its stronghold at the British Museum. The assault on the British Museum, in which all of Sholl's soldier escorts die, might be figured as an assault by the ego upon the inner castle of the Lacanian ideal "I"—the *Id* in its fortress. But Sholl does not intend violence: "*This is a surrender*, Sholl thought. *That's how this should be told*" (Miéville 2011a, 297).[5] This capitulation might be thought as a conscious unlearning of the mirror stage. What, "The Tain" seems to ask, if we literalise the metaphor: the ideal "I" is a misrecognition because it is a genuine other since the reflection is produced by enslaved but sentient matter. This is eerie, "there is no inside except as a folding of the outside; I am an other, and I always was" (Fisher 2016, 12), but it is also ecological. Sholl's surrender, which he offers unconditionally on behalf of humanity, is an anticipation of dwelling with, co-becoming, interspecies living and dying

well (Haraway 2016, 47). Human beings must learn to look to the objects in, through and around us and recognise them as materially us; we must learn not to look for anthropomorphic reflection and call an end to our specular tyranny.

"The Tain", then, troubles the border between matter and sentience: puddles after the rain need "watching like animals", and Sholl has been "watching the business of clouds" and poisonous smoke trees (Miéville 2011a, 227). Miéville's weird catastrophe offers a way of understanding climate change and its alienating, eerie effects: "London was never so alien as after the rain" (253). In the underground train stations of this conquered London, the last of the rats and mice are hiding from predatory imago fragments—disembodied human hands, genitals and lips that devour mercilessly whatever crosses their path. During the earth's sixth mass extinction event, living under the sign of the Anthropocene, we as readers are forced to imagine the horror of a world in which the only other living things that we will see are fellow/other human beings and the reflections of ourselves in media and other mirrors. "The Tain" offers instead the possibility of ontological and psychological border crossings which may allow us to surrender to our material, enmeshed, tentacular condition.

"Säcken": The Law and the Horror of Forced Interspecies Becoming

In "Säcken", the two English lovers Joanna and Mel go on holiday together to a lake house in the countryside near Dresden in Saxony, but Joanna has lots of work to do. Joanna is an academic—a historian—and Mel, much younger than Joanna, is possibly her student. The weird in fiction is heralded by the crossing over from the ostensibly realist fictional space into a place where something that does not belong is encountered. In H. P. Lovecraft's fiction, this effect is grounded in the realistic elaboration of the story, through the accumulation of details, all of which must contribute to the atmosphere and the plot of the story (Campbell 2012, 157). In "Säcken", the couple's journey to the lake house, and their

first few days there, are described with precision, but the accumulation of minor details begins to unsettle the realist picture and presages a monstrous eruption of the weird. As we saw in "Looking for Jake", however, Miéville's own writings on the weird might suggest instead that the fragments of realist description are instead shrugged off by the underlying weird of the universe (cf. 2009, 512).

At first, elements of a kind of clichéd supernatural are barely hinted at only to be resisted: for instance, the couple see a cat cross their path on a visit to a nearby village, but Miéville stops short of telling us that the cat is black. A middle-aged woman in a saggy dress is a "Frau", Joanna feels certain, but certainly not a witch. On their journey to the lake, Mel and Joanna are watched by "languid" farm animals, which in and of itself may not seem eerie, but the epigraph to *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015), in which "Säcken" is collected, is the following passage from Isle Aichinger's famous short story "The Bound Man" ("Der Gefesselte"): "The horses dreamed on their feet and the wild animals, crouching to leap even in their sleep, seemed to be collecting gloom under their skins which would break out later". As in "Looking for Jake" and "The Tain", the disasters and crimes of history are noted as part of the landscape—the historical terrain through which the characters move. In "Säcken" it is the history of religious conflict and the firebombing of Dresden by the Allied forces during the Second World War that is invoked. But then we encounter the remarkable cleanliness of the lake. The absence of human detritus is aesthetically appealing, and Mel thinks it is something to do with German culture, but it actually seems to mark a border crossing into another realm. This might be read as a subtle instance of the eerie: a failure of presence, of the evidence of human habitation: the lake should be "throwing up crisp packets and plastic" as it would in England (Miéville 2016, 146). "Throwing up", and the reference to the lake as a "chop", offer the barest hints of an eerie agency in the

landscape, as later, "[e]ven in the sunlight the dark water *amputated* her hand only a few centimetres down" (146, emphasis mine).

What the lake does throw up is a small wooden icon of an ape, which Mel, in the face of a blast of foul air from across the water, timed with the moment that she picks it up, casts into the surrounding overgrown bushes. The denizen of the lake has "noticed" Mel, and later she senses it watching her as the sound of a cockerel crowing—long before dawn, and that only she can hear—disturbs her sleep. As we move into horror and the weird, "[s]omething huge and wrong and wet" (152) pursues Mel into the lake house, and she is only saved from it by Joanna waking up to her screams. Bucking the horror trope, Mel immediately demands that Joanna drive her to the airport and the couple part in anger, with Joanna refusing to believe that it is anything more than a bad dream and Mel saddened by her disbelief.

What came into their bedroom was the titular Säcken, and it will soon eat Joanna, a cat and finally Mel. The absence of litter on the shore of the lake at first suggest a space eerily uninscribed by human history—an absence where there should be presence—but the appearance of the ape icon, and subsequently the Säcken which had ejected or lost it, in fact tells a story of horrific inscription of landscape and history by unjust law. Mel's researches reveal that a Säcken was traditionally a leather bag into which a criminal was sewn with a live dog, cock, viper and ape, before being thrown into water so that the ensemble drowned together in agony and terror. Mel wonders whether, if the binding was sufficiently tight and the leather waterproof, the poor creatures suffocated instead. The Säcken was originally a Roman punishment for parricide, but after Joanna's disappearance, Mel discovers that the practice was re-established in mediaeval Germany, and that the last known occurrence was in Saxony in the eighteenth century, where a young woman was sentenced to this barbaric fate for the crime of infanticide. In the lake house bedroom, the Säcken whispers to Mel of its

"lack"—an inexhaustible hunger that drives it to consume. It seems likely that there is no litter on the lake shore because the Säcken consumes all that enters its waters.

It is the borders separating subjective experience that "Säcken" interrogates, and those borders are horrifically overcome in the form of an ancient and cruel punishment regurgitated from the lake and revisited upon the present. It is suggestive of the borders between conceptual realms: when is the law like religion or magic? To those not beholden to law, its adherents might be indistinguishable from the followers of other invisible powers. Likewise, those suddenly and horrifically bound by its powers, such as the first victims of this story—the horrific mashing together of animal and human life makes the case for their inclusion as victims—must experience its power as brutal, arbitrary, unreasonable, weird as in *wyrd*. The hunger of the Säcken is similarly arbitrary and implacable—Mel's mistake might be to attempt to heal such a wound, to return what she calls the sack's "notice" (164). The word "notice" in this story resonates with eerie and weird potential. The lake or its impossible denizen notice a visitor to its shores, thereby setting in motion a series of events which seem inescapable, as though fate or some other force has taken horrible notice of them. The Säcken itself might be thought as the product of the law's notice. We might think of this as a Kafkaesque notice—that of an indifferent and implacable bureaucratic force. Thinking back to "Looking for Jake" and "The Tain", such notice might be paid to individuals and communities by the economic forces of capitalism, or by the environmental changes wrought by climate change. Joanna's mistake might be to dismiss Mel's experience of the landscape as dream or madness; Joanna fails to enter imaginatively into the possibility of the eerie or the weird that Mel is attuned to. In fact, Mel is convinced that Joanna does know that something is wrong, but it may be that other immaterial forces with very real effects are intervening here. Joanna is perhaps more attuned to the notice of capital and responds to Mel's wish that they should both abandon their holiday with mere financial concern, "You

think this was all cheap?" (155). Earlier in the story, the narrator notes that Mel had only made a token contribution to the holiday, and that she had quit her job in order to be there. In this ontological battle, it is Joanna's inability to see what Mark Fisher (2016, 11) calls the "metaphysical scandal" of capital that allows her to believe in its effects, but not in those of an eerie lake, that dooms them both.

In her attempt to make good the Säcken's lack, Mel immediately thinks of the wooden ape icon; the sack is incomplete without the symbol of its lack—the ape that proved too expensive and/or rare for the agents of the law in eighteenth-century Saxony to include in the sack. But Mel cannot find the icon, so instead she substitutes a live cat, which is allowed by the law. The lake swallows up the cat, and Mel is granted a period of respite. The lack, though, is endless, just as for Lacan, metonymy is marked by lack; the substitution of the ape icon is further substituted by a cat, Joanna and then Mel, but the chain of substitutions is endless. Mel tries to understand what the sack desires: forgiveness or blessing, restitution under law, or the baby whose death or murder first attracted the notice of the law. Ultimately, meaning belongs to the other, not the self, and so Mel must see into the yawning maw of the Säcken, its splitting seams law's mouths, and find terrible recognition there. When Mel fed the cat to the lake, she became law's agent and thus reconfirmed the Säcken's notice. In the final moments before she is swallowed, Mel hears a cat bark and a rooster hiss, then a voice she recognises (Joanna's) makes the sound of a cockerel: they are all horribly equal under law.

Another way to read the crossing of ontological, species and jurisdictional borders in "Säcken" is with Haraway's suggestion that "[d]ecisions must take place somehow in the presence of those who will bear their consequences" (2016, 12). A cat, Joanna and Mel bear the consequences of the barbaric revival of a Roman punishment some two hundred and forty years later; trauma is distributed through time and breaks down borders—species borders,

religious and cultural borders, the borders that purport to separate our physical and psychological being. We will soon be cohabiting with other species in a world whose atmosphere may be all but unbreathable, a world of floods, scorching heat and competition for space. A world without apes where cats will have to do. Law and capital are eerie entities without material presence that nonetheless make themselves known through reality effects, including climate change. The dating of the last säcken does not seem incidental here, coinciding as it does with the industrial revolution and the layer of carbon dioxide in the earth's crust that for some mark the end of the Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene. Law, as an agent of capital, will continue to feed its boundless lack, even as we suffocate in a leather sack of our own making.

Conclusion

"Looking for Jake", "The Tain" and "Säcken", each in different but concomitant ways, instantiate, undermine, recreate and overcome borders. Their respective disasters and traumas, the condensation of multiple historical and contemporary catastrophes, ultimately prove to be insoluble, ungraspable. They are powerfully resonant of the feeling of living through the unfolding of multiple yet, at times, intangible disasters. As I have tried to show, they are what we might call, borrowing again from Ballard, extreme metaphors for that great metonymic chain of interwoven and overlapping disasters that is the time of Anthropocene, or Capitalocene, or Chthulucene, and which is no respecter of borders. Miéville's fictions remind us that we are and have always been other, whichever side of whichever border we happen to find ourselves. Shorter fictions have arguably been the "natural" home of the weird since its inception, and although Miéville's novel-length works have received greater critical attention, it is arguably in his short stories that the Lovecraftian and New Wave inheritances speak loudest. The relative narrative and descriptive sparseness of the short story form, and—

at least since the Modernist short story—its indeterminacy and epiphany, are ideally suited to invoking the presences and absences of the eerie. In this way, Miéville's two most recent novellas, *The Census Taker* (2016) and *The Last Days of New Paris* (2017), seem to bear greater resemblance to his short stories than to the novels that preceded them. The foreshortened temporality of the short story evades the potential in a narrative of longer duration for the weird and the eerie to lose their charge through familiarity, preserving the fluctuating capacity for our perceptual realm to be breached by that which lies beyond.

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Notes

[1] It is interesting to note, in this context, that the title of a recent collection of short stories inspired by the "Jungle" at Calais was called *Breach* (Popoola and Holmes 2016).

[2] See, for instance, the Ballardian cult in *Kraken* (2010), which eagerly anticipates the inundation of London. For Ballard on inner space, see "Which Way to Inner Space?" (1962).

[3] There are further mirrorings and reflections between Miéville's short stories: the unnamed narrator of "Looking for Jake" invokes the Orpheus myth, offering a sympathetic reading of

looking back, which is picked up again as one of four possible readings of the myth in "Four Final Orpheuses" (2012).

[4] Weakland (2015) and Hourigan (2011) have offered Lacanian readings of *Embassytown* and *The City & The City*, respectively.

[5] Probably coincidental, but the Old Irish story *Táin Bó Cúailnge* includes two surrenders.