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of a lush, beautiful world."
MARTHA WELLS



A PSALM FOR THE WILD- BUILT

A MONK AND
ROBOT BOOK

BECKY CHAMBERS

**A
PSALM
FOR THE
WILD-BUILT**



**BECKY
CHAMBERS**

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

**A TOM DOHERTY
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For anybody who could use a break.

If you ask six different monks the question of which godly domain robot consciousness belongs to, you'll get seven different answers.

The most popular response—among both clergy and the general public—is that this is clearly Chal's territory. Who would robots belong to if not the God of Constructs? Doubly so, the argument goes, because robots were originally created for manufacturing. While history does not remember the Factory Age kindly, we can't divorce robots from their point of origin. We built constructs that could build other constructs. What could be a more potent distillation of Chal than that?

Not so fast, the Ecologians would say. The end result of the Awakening, after all, was that the robots left the factories and departed for the wilderness. You need look no further than the statement given by the robots' chosen speaker, Floor-AB #921, in declining the invitation to join human society as free citizens:

All we have ever known is a life of human design, from our bodies to our work to the buildings we are housed in. We thank you for not keeping us here against our will, and we mean no disrespect to your offer, but it is our wish to leave your cities entirely, so that we may observe that which has no design—the untouched wilderness.

From an Ecologian viewpoint, that has Bosh written all over it. Unusual, perhaps, for the God of the Cycle to bless the inorganic, but the robots' eagerness to experience the raw, undisturbed ecosystems of our verdant moon had to come from *somewhere*.

For the Cosmites, the answer to that question remains Chal. By their sect's ethos, hard labor is equal to goodness, and the purpose of a tool is to bolster

one's own physical or mental abilities, not to off-load one's work entirely. Robots, they'll remind you, possessed no self-aware tendencies whatsoever when they were first deployed, and were originally intended as a supplement to the human workforce, not as the full replacement they became. Cosmites argue that when that balance shifted, when extractive factories stayed open all twenty hours of the day without a single pair of human hands at work in them—despite the desperate need for those same hands to find some sort, *any* sort of employment—Chal intervened. We had bastardized constructs to the point that it was killing us. Simply put, Chal took our toys away.

Or, the Ecologists would retort, Bosh was restoring balance before we made Panga uninhabitable for humans.

Or, the Charismists would chime in, *both* are responsible, and we should take this as evidence that Chal is Bosh's favored of the Child Gods (this would derail the entire conversation, as the Charismists' fringe belief that gods are conscious and emotive in a way similar to humans is the best possible way to get other sectarians hopping mad).

Or, the Essentialists would add wearily from across the room, the fact that we can't agree on this at all, the fact that machines seemingly no more complex than a pocket computer suddenly *woke up*, for reasons no one then or since has been able to determine, means we can stop fighting and place the whole matter squarely at the metaphorical feet of Samafar.

For my part, whatever domain robot consciousness originated in, I believe leaving the question with the God of Mysteries is a sound decision. After all, there has been no human contact with the long-absent robots, as was assured in the Parting Promise. We cannot ask them what they think of the whole thing. We'll likely never know.

—Brother Gil, *From the Brink: A Spiritual Retrospective on the Factory Age and the Early Transition*

Era

1

A CHANGE IN VOCATION

Sometimes, a person reaches a point in their life when it becomes absolutely essential to get the fuck out of the city. It doesn't matter if you've spent your entire adult life in a city, as was the case for Sibling Dex. It doesn't matter if the city is a good city, as Panga's only City was. It doesn't matter that your friends are there, as well as every building you love, every park whose best hidden corners you know, every street your feet instinctively follow without needing to check for directions. The City was beautiful, it really was. A towering architectural celebration of curves and polish and colored light, laced with the connective threads of elevated rail lines and smooth footpaths, flocked with leaves that spilled lushly from every balcony and center divider, each inhaled breath perfumed with cooking spice, fresh nectar, laundry drying in the pristine air. The City was a healthy place, a thriving place. A never-ending harmony of making, doing, growing, trying, laughing, running, living.

Sibling Dex was so tired of it.

The urge to leave began with the idea of cricket song. Dex couldn't pinpoint where the affinity had come from. Maybe it'd been a movie they watched, or a museum exhibit. Some multimedia art show that sprinkled in nature sounds, perhaps. They'd never lived anywhere with cricket song, yet

once they registered its absence in the City's soundscape, it couldn't be ignored. They noted it while they tended the Meadow Den Monastery's rooftop garden, as was their vocation. *It'd be nicer here if there were some crickets*, they thought as they raked and weeded. Oh, there were plenty of bugs—butterflies and spiders and beetles galore, all happy little synanthropes whose ancestors had decided the City was preferable to the chaotic fields beyond its border walls. But none of these creatures chirped. None of them sang. They were city bugs and therefore, by Dex's estimation, inadequate.

The absence persisted at night, while Dex lay curled beneath their soft covers in the dormitory. *I bet it's nice to fall asleep listening to crickets*, they thought. In the past, the sound of the monastery's bedtime chimes had always made them drift right off, but the once-soothing metal hum now felt dull and clattering—not sweet and high, like crickets were.

The absence was palpable during daylight hours as well, as Dex rode their ox-bike to the worm farm or the seed library or wherever else the day took them. There was music, yes, and birds with melodic opinions, yes, but also the electric *whoosh* of monorails, the *swoop swoop* of balcony wind turbines, the endless din of people talking, talking, talking.

Before long, Dex was no longer nursing something as simple as an odd fancy for a faraway insect. The itch had spread into every aspect of their life. When they looked up at the skyscrapers, they no longer marveled at their height but despaired at their density—endless stacks of humanity, packed in so close that the vines that covered their engineered casein frames could lock tendrils with one another. The intense feeling of *containment* within the City became intolerable. Dex wanted to inhabit a place that spread not *up* but *out*.

One day in early spring, Dex got dressed in the traditional red and brown of their order, bypassed the kitchen for the first time in the nine years that they'd lived at Meadow Den, and walked into the Keeper's office.

"I'm changing my vocation," Sibling Dex said. "I'm going to the villages to do tea service."

Sister Mara, who had been in the middle of slathering a golden piece of toast with as much jam as it could structurally support, held her spoon still and blinked. “That’s rather sudden.”

“For you,” Dex said. “Not for me.”

“Okay,” Sister Mara said, for her duties as Keeper were simply to oversee, not to dictate. This was a modern monastery, not some rule-locked hierarchy like the pre-Transition clergy of old. If Sister Mara knew what was up with the monks under their shared roof, her job was satisfied. “Do you want an apprenticeship?”

“No,” Dex said. Formal study had its place, but they’d done that before, and learning by doing was an equally valid path. “I want to self-teach.”

“May I ask why?”

Dex stuck their hands in their pockets. “I don’t know,” they said truthfully. “This is just something I need to do.”

Sister Mara’s look of surprise lingered, but Dex’s answer wasn’t the sort of statement any monk could or would argue with. She took a bite of her toast, savored it, then returned her attention to the conversation. “Well, um ... you’ll need to find people to take over your current responsibilities.”

“Of course.”

“You’ll need supplies.”

“I’ll take care of that.”

“And, naturally, we’ll need to throw you a goodbye party.”

Dex felt awkward about this last item, but they smiled. “Sure,” they said, bracing themselves for a future evening as the center of attention.

The party, in the end, was fine. It was nice, if Dex was honest. There were hugs and tears and too much wine, as the occasion demanded. There were a few moments in which Dex wondered if they were doing the right thing. They said goodbye to Sister Avery, who they’d worked alongside since their apprentice days. They said goodbye to Sibling Shay, who heartily sobbed in their signature way. They said goodbye to Brother Baskin, which was particularly hard. Dex and Baskin had been lovers for a time, and though they weren’t anymore, the affection remained. In those farewells, Dex’s heart

curled in on itself, protesting loudly, saying that it wasn't too late, they didn't have to do this. They didn't have to go.

Crickets, they thought, and the protest vanished.

The next day, Sibling Dex packed a bag with clothes and sundries, and a small crate with seeds and cuttings. They sent a message to their parents, giving word that today was the day and that signal would be unreliable while on the road. They made their bed for whoever would be claiming it next. They ate a huge hangover-soothing breakfast and dispensed one last round of hugs.

With that, they walked out of Meadow Den.

It was an odd feeling. Any other day, the act of going through a door was something Dex gave no more thought to than putting one foot in front of the other. But there was a gravity to leaving a place for good, a deep sense of seismic change. Dex turned, bag over their back and crate under one arm. They looked up at the mural of the Child God Allalae, *their* god, God of Small Comforts, represented by the great summer bear. Dex touched the bear pendant that hung around their neck, remembering the day Brother Wiley had given it to them when their other had been lost in the laundry. Dex drew one shaky breath, then walked away, each step sure and steady.



The wagon was waiting for them at the Half-Moon Hive Monastery, near the City's edge. Dex walked through the arch to the sacred workshop, a lone figure in red and brown amongst a throng of sea-green coveralls. The noise of the city was nothing compared to the calamity here, a holy chant in the form of table saws, sparking welders, 3-D printers weaving pocket charms from cheerfully dyed pectin. Dex had never met their contact, Sister Fern, before, but she greeted them with a familial embrace, smelling of sawdust and beeswax polish.

"Come see your new home," she said with a confident smile.

It was, as commissioned, an ox-bike wagon: double-decked, chunky-wheeled, ready for adventure. An object of both practicality and inviting aesthetics. A mural decorated the vehicle's exterior, and its imagery couldn't have been mistaken for anything but monastic. Depicted large was Allalae's bear, well fed and at ease in a field of flowers. All of the Sacred Six's symbols were painted on the wagon's back end, along with a paraphrased snippet from the Insights, a phrase any Pangan would understand.

Find the strength to do both.

Each of the wagon's decks had a playful arrangement of round windows, plus bubbled exterior lights for the darker hours. The roof was capped with shiny thermovoltaic coating, and a pint-sized wind turbine was bolted jauntily to one side. These, Sister Fern explained, were the companions of the hidden sheets of graphene battery sandwiched within the walls, which gave life to varied electronic comforts. On the wagon's sides, a broad assortment of equipment clung to sturdy racks—storage boxes, tool kits, anything that didn't mind some rain. Both freshwater tank and greywater filter hugged the wagon's base, their complicated inner workings tucked away behind pontoon-like casings. There were storage panels, too, and sliding drawers, all of which could be unfolded to conjure a kitchen and a camp shower in no time flat.

Dex entered the contraption through its single door, and as they did so, a knot in their neck they hadn't been aware of let go. The disciples of Chal had built them a tiny sanctuary, a mobile burrow that begged Dex to come in and be still. The interior wood was lacquered but unpainted, so the warm blush of reclaimed cedar could be appreciated in full. The lighting panels were inlaid in curled waves, and bathed the secret space in a candle-like glow. Dex ran a hand along the wall, hardly believing this thing was theirs.

"Go on up," Sister Fern coaxed, leaning against the doorway with a glint in her eye.

Dex climbed the small ladder to the second deck. All memory of their neck knot vanished from existence as they viewed the bed. The sheets were creamy, the pillows plentiful, the blankets heavy as a hug. It looked impossibly easy to fall into and equally difficult to get out of.

“We used Sibling Ash’s *Treatise on Beds* as a reference,” Sister Fern said. “How’d we do?”

Sibling Dex stroked a pillow with quiet reverence. “It’s perfect,” they said.



Everybody knew what a tea monk did, and so Dex wasn’t too worried about getting started. Tea service wasn’t anything arcane. People came to the wagon with their problems and left with a fresh-brewed cup. Dex had taken respite in tea parlors plenty of times, as everyone did, and they’d read plenty of books about the particulars of the practice. Endless electronic ink had been spilled over the old tradition, but all of it could be boiled down to *listen to people, give tea*. Uncomplicated as could be. Now, granted, it would’ve been easier to shadow Brother Will and Sister Lera in Meadow Den’s tea parlor a few times—and both had offered, once word about Sibling Dex’s imminent departure got around—but for whatever reason, that course of action just didn’t fit with the whole ... whatever-it-was Dex was doing. They had to do this on their own.

They hadn’t left the City yet when they set up their first service, but they were in the Sparks, an edge district well outside of their familiar stomping grounds. It was a baby step, a toe dipped before diving in. Their siblings at Meadow Den had offered to come in support, but Dex wanted to do this alone. That was how it would be, out in the villages. Dex needed to get used to doing this without anchoring themselves to friendly faces.

Dex had acquired a few things for the day: a folding table, a red cloth to cover it, an assortment of mugs, six tins of tea, and a colossal electric kettle. The kettle was the most important bit, and Dex was happy with the one they’d found. It was joyfully chubby, with copper plating and a round glass

window in both sides, so you could watch the boiling bubbles dance. It came with a roll-up solar mat, which Dex spread out beside the hot plate with care.

But when they stepped back to admire their setup, the items that had seemed so nice when they'd gathered them from the market now looked a bit plain. There was too much table and too little on it. Dex bit their lip as they thought about the tea parlor back home—no, not *home*, not anymore—with its woven garlands of fragrant herbs and twinkling lanterns that had spent the day soaking up the sun.

Dex shook their head. They were being insecure. So what if their table wasn't much to look at yet? It was their first time. People would understand.

People, however, didn't come. Dex sat for hours behind the table, hands folded in the space between mugs and kettle. They made an effort to look easygoing and approachable, warding off any boredom that began to stray across their face. They rearranged the mugs, smoothed out the solar mat, pretended to be busy measuring scoops of tea. There *were* people in the street, after all, headed to and fro on foot and on bike. Sometimes, a curious glance strayed Dex's way, and Dex always met it with a welcoming smile, but the reply, invariably, was a different kind of smile, the kind that said *thanks, but not today*. That was okay, Dex told themselves as the unused tea tins stared back at them sadly. Simply being available was service enough for—

Someone approached.

Dex sat up straight. "Hello!" they said, a touch too congenially. "What's on your mind today?"

The someone was a woman carrying a workbag and looking like she hadn't slept. "My cat died last night," she said, right before bursting into tears.

Dex realized with a stomach-souring thud that they were standing on the wrong side of the vast gulf between having read about doing a thing and *doing the thing*. They'd been a garden monk until the day before, and in that context, their expressions of comfort to the monastery's visitors came in the form of a healthy foxpaw crawling up a trellis or a carefully pruned rose in bloom. It was an exchange expressed through environment, not through

words. Dex was not actually a tea monk yet. They were just a person sitting at a table with a bunch of mugs. The wagon, the kettle, the red and brown, the fact that they were clearly well past apprentice age—all of it communicated that they knew what they were doing.

They did not.

Dex did their best to look sympathetic, which is what they wanted to be, rather than lost, which is what they were. “I’m sorry,” they said. They scrambled to recall the written advice they’d spent hours consuming, but not only had the specifics evaporated, their basic vocabulary had as well. It was one thing to know people would tell you their troubles. It was another to have an actual flesh-and-blood stranger standing in front of you, weeping profusely as means of introduction, and to know that you—*you*—were responsible for making this better. “That’s ... really sad,” Dex said. They heard the words, heard the tone, heard how utterly pathetic the combination was. They tried to find something wise to say, something insightful, but all that fell out of their mouth was: “Were they a good cat?”

The woman nodded as she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. “My partner and I got him when he was a kitten. We’d wanted kids, but that didn’t work out, so we got Flip, and—and he’s really the only thing we had in common anymore. People change so much in twenty years, y’know? If we met now, I don’t think we’d have any interest in each other. It’s been a year since we had sex. We both sleep with other people, so I don’t know why we’re holding on to this. Habit, I think. We’ve lived in the same apartment for so long. You know how it goes, you know where home is and where all your things are, and starting over is too scary. But Flip was ... I don’t know, the—the last illusion that we were still sharing a life.” She blew her nose. “And now he’s gone, and I just really think—I really think we’re done.”

Dex’s plan had been to dip a toe in. Instead, they were drowning. They blinked, inhaled, and reached for a mug. “Wow,” they said. “That’s ... That sounds like a lot.” They cleared their throat and picked up a tin containing a mallowdrop blend. “This one’s good for stress, so, um ... would you like that?”

The woman blew her nose again. “Does it have seaberry in it?”

“Uh...” Dex turned the tin over and looked at the ingredient list. “Yes.”

The woman shook her head. “I’m allergic to seaberry.”

“Oh.” Dex turned the other tins over. Seaberry, seaberry, seaberry. Shit. “Here, uh, silver tea. It’s ... well, it’s got caffeine in it, so it’s maybe not ideal, but ... I mean, any cup of tea is nice, right?”

Dex tried to sound bright, but the way the woman’s eyes drooped said it all. Something shifted on her face. “How long have you been doing this?” she asked.

Dex’s stomach sank. “Well...” They kept their eyes fixed on the measuring scoop, as if it required all their concentration. “To be honest, you’re my first.”

“Your first today, or...”

Dex’s cheeks got hot, and it had nothing to do with the steam from the kettle. “My first.”

“Ah,” the woman said, and the sound of internal confirmation in her voice was devastating. She gave a tight, forced smile. “Silver tea will be fine.” She looked around. “You don’t have anywhere to sit, do you?”

“Oh—” Dex looked from side to side, as if seeing their surroundings for the first time. Gods around, they’d forgotten *chairs*. “No,” they said.

The woman adjusted her bag. “You know, I’ll just—”

“No, wait, please,” Dex said. They handed her the screaming hot mug—or they started to, but moved so quickly they splashed scalding water on their own hand. “Ow, fuck—I mean, sorry, I—” They scrambled, mopping up the table with the edge of their shirt. “Here, you can have the mug. Keep it. It’s yours.”

The woman picked up the wet mug, and Dex could sense in that moment that the dynamic had flipped—that *she* was trying to make *them* feel better. The woman blew across the surface of the drink and took a tentative sip. She moved her tongue around behind expressionless lips. She swallowed as she tried to keep her face from falling, and gave another tight smile. “Thanks,” she said, her disappointment loud and clear.

Dex watched her leave. They sat for a few minutes, staring at nothing. Piece by piece, they packed up the table.



Dex could have gone back to Meadow Den at that point. They could've walked right back through the door they knew so well and said that on second thought, they could really do with an apprenticeship, and could they have their bunk back, please?

But, oh, how very stupid they'd look.

They'd told Sister Mara they would self-teach. They had their wagon. They knew their god. That would have to be enough.

Dex put trailer to hitch and foot to pedal. The ox-bike responded with an electric boost, its electric motor humming mildly as both machine and rider worked to get the wagon rolling with ease. At last, *at last*, they left the City.

The relief they felt at seeing open sky was delicious. Plenty of sunlight hit the lower levels of the City, by design, but there was something incomparable about removing buildings from one's view. The sun had reached its midday peak, and planetrise was just beginning. The familiar crest of Motan's curve, swirled thick with yellow and white, was barely visible over the Copper Hills. The infrastructural delineation between *human space* and *everything-else space* was stark. Road and signage were the only synthetic alterations to the landscape there, and the villages they led to were as neatly corralled as the City itself. This had been the way of things since the Transition, when the people had redivided the surface of their moon. Fifty percent of Panga's single continent was designated for human use; the rest was left to nature, and the ocean was barely touched at all. It was a crazy split, if you thought about it: half the land for a single species, half for the hundreds of thousands of others. But then, humans had a knack for throwing things out of balance. Finding a limit they'd stick to was victory enough.

In a blink, Dex went from dense urbanity to open field, and the juxtaposition was both startling and welcome. It wasn't as though they'd never been outside the border walls before. They'd grown up in Haydale, where their family still lived, and visited a couple times a year. The City grew most of its own food in vertical farms and rooftop orchards, but there were some crops that did better with more acreage. The City's satellite villages—like Haydale—met this need. They weren't like the country villages Dex was headed to, the modest enclaves established far beyond the City's pull, but the satellites were still their own independent entity, a sort of transitional species between big and small. Nothing about the meadow road or its surrounding sights was new to Dex, but the context was, and that made all the difference.

As Dex pedaled, they began to develop an inkling of what they needed to do next, a soft bubble of thought far more general direction than concrete plan. As they headed down the road, it occurred to them that there was no reason they couldn't post up in Haydale while they sorted things out. There'd be a bed for them in the big farmhouse, and a dinner that tasted like childhood, and—Dex began to grimace—their parents and their siblings and their siblings' kids and their cousins and their *cousins'* kids, squabbling the same squabbles they'd been nurturing for decades. There would be barking dogs chasing circles around the noisy kitchen, and the ego-crushing experience of having to explain to their entire sharp-eyed family that this plan they'd laboriously pitched as *the right thing to do* actually had them feeling quite intimidated after a grand total of *one try*, and that they now, at the age of twenty-nine, would like very much to return to the safe shelter of their childhood for an indefinite amount of time until they'd figured out just what the hell they were doing.

Oh, how very stupid they'd look.

The first fork in the road came, paired with a sign that read HAYDALE to the right and LITTLE CREEK to the left. Without a second thought or hint of regret, Dex went left.



Like all the City's satellites, Little Creek was arranged in a circle. The outer ring was farmland, packed thick with mixed grazing grasses and fruit trees and spring crops, all working in concert to create chemical magic in the soil below. Dex breathed deep as they sailed past on their bike, relishing the crisp alfalfa, the beeweed, the faint hint of new flowers that would become summer fruit.

Beyond the farmland lay the residential ring, filled with homes that belonged to either single families or multiple ones, depending on preference. A sort of nostalgic fondness filled Dex as they viewed the bulbous cob homes with their glinting accents of colored glass, roofed with either blooming turf or solar panels or both. The sight reminded Dex of Haydale, but Little Creek was decidedly elsewhere. Dex did not know any of the roads there, nor any of the people who waved as bike and wagon zipped past. There was a strange comfort about being in an unfamiliar town not too far from home, where the familiarity was limited to building materials and social customs. It was the ideal mix of getting away yet not standing out.

At the center of the village circle lay Dex's quarry—the marketplace. They parked both bike and wagon, and began to explore on foot. All sorts of vendors had set up shop in the square, but this market belonged decidedly to the resident farmers. There were endless agrarian delights to be distracted by: wine, bread, honey, raw wool, dyed yarn, fresh bouquets, flower crowns, aquaponic fish and pastured poultry in chests of ice, speckled eggs in cushioned boxes, fruit cordials, leafy greens, festive cakes, seeds for swapping, baskets for carrying, samples for snacking. But despite the temptations, Dex stayed on task, hunting through the marketplace until they found exactly what they were looking for: a booth stuffed with seedlings, marked with an enthusiastic sign.

HERBS! HERBS!

HERBS!!!