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*There's many ways to hide a heart that bleeds
But I prefer the ease of rolling up my sleeves*

~ Shayfer James, "Godspeed."

Meliorism: The Solace of Humanity

Meliorism is the trust that human effort can better the world. When tragedy is borne, most will crumble under its weight. In trusting that what was broken can be repaired, humanity can never truly be lost. Through fiction, we are afforded glimpses into worlds ruined by war and cataclysm while learning of the power held by hope. When all is lost, we can seek solace in the fact that all can be reclaimed through steeling oneself and getting to work.

The story "Speech Sounds," by Octavia Butler, centers on Rye, a woman ripe with loss in a dystopian Los Angeles. The events of this story follow an unexplored global pandemic which has rendered the remainder of humanity selectively silent, varying from illiteracy to mutism. In this new world, Rye hopes to find family in Pasadena after losing her husband, her three children and her ability to read and write. Unlike most of humanity, Rye has managed to retain her intelligence and usually tries to diffuse situations before they escalate. However, her trust in others has deteriorated after having learned that people of this new world will quicker choose violence than civility. A society of the impaired presents an awful glimpse into mankind's intellectual struggle and Rye will have to question her beliefs when a strange man, called 'Obsidian,' offers her reprieve.

Jeremiah Tolbert's short story, "Four Kittens," spins the post-apocalyptic genre in a grittier imagining, throwing readers into the story by opening on a car chase. Readers follow an unnamed protagonist as he risks life and limb for a boxful of kittens he has stolen. Fleeting details of the state of the world leads one to believe that society has divulged into a wasteland of brutality and that pet-keeping is extremely rare if not inconceivable. Through the protagonist's wits and automotive knowledge, he has convinced himself to save the lives of four kittens from his former employer. His endeavors serve as an indictment of the world's devolution through which mankind journeys.

The post-apocalyptic genre is one which follows the events of humanity after an almost Earth-shattering disaster occurs. Usually centering around a single protagonist's life, they are described as trudging their way through a ruined world, devoid of hope and short of saving. Both stories, "Speech Sounds," and "Four Kittens," fall into this category, with Butler's work dabbling in science fiction simultaneously. These works share the similarities of reluctant survival; both protagonists struggle with their vulnerabilities but soldier on through barred teeth. Both worlds are at a point of reinvented purpose, the kind that prioritizes selfishness and suffocates the kindling of hope as it sparks. In each story, this forced worldview is shunted aside by the protagonists who refuse to die and give up on humanity.

In, "Speech Sounds," Rye finds herself muddling her way to Pasadena despite suffering from illiteracy. Text now meaningless and immediate family dead and buried, she marries herself to the hope of relatives in another city. In meeting Obsidian, a man believed to be a police officer, the goal she once had vanishes upon contact with another kind soul and she immediately makes living with him her new dream. The hope strong enough to move forward in an uncertain world is emphasized by Rye's attachment to another human being and her knowing that, "Now

she was not alone.” Her reluctance to travel with Obsidian underlines the fact that the acquisition of hope is hard-fought and is normally a battle with yourself. In a society where communication is all but done away with, she finds someone with which she can interact and that alone is enough for her to keep fighting.

Similarly, the protagonist of, “Four Kittens,” takes the hope of a new better future in tandem with instinct. His endeavors lead him to a state of physical and mental detriment of which he regrets only jokingly. The protagonist does not try to defend his actions, as he knows that on the surface, he has technically wronged somebody. Readers learn that the kittens defended are to be eaten if the protagonist fails in his mission. His actions are purely empathetic, claiming that he, “couldn’t stand there and watch Gunter eat these little guys.” This appeals to the basic sense of human decency, saving an adorable and helpless creature. While Rye finds her reason to live in another human, the protagonist of, “Four Kittens,” finds his in protecting a litter of kittens. In both stories, hope is found in the most unexpected places and is clung to with rapt fervor.

In the effort to seek a better life, Rye and the protagonist of, “Four Kittens,” allow themselves dependence and dreaming; Rye as she dreams of a life with Obsidian and the protagonist of, “Four Kittens,” as he lives his life for the kittens. The notion of living for another is explored in depth and remains pervasive through these stories. The post-apocalyptic genre is progressed through wishes and dreams for what would attract readers in a story about a bleak, lifeless world beyond help? It is important to remember that the protagonists in each story are not white knights; both characters have killed at some point and understood that this was necessary for survival. Loss is a driving factor in each character’s motivation, a force which compels them

to live for themselves yet educational enough for them to afford compassion to those in a similar position.

Rye sought solace wherever she could find but never thought to provide it for others. The protagonist of, "Four Kittens," had assumedly lived for himself but found a purpose in protecting life. These values are shown to be intrinsic of humanity, even in worlds devoid of such ideals. Lamenting over losses and wallowing in sorrow is shown to be a pain like no other, however what truly provides hope for a better future is the way one recovers. Each character finds meaning where there is none and hoping when all had been lost. Instead of resigning themselves to an early demise, they rolled up their sleeves and got to work in the hope of rebuilding what was destroyed. In most cases, that is the hardest action to take but the easiest way to continue.

Works Cited:

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