# the
# Literary Architect

Dear Kim,

Firstly, thanks again for letting me read your manuscript. I know how unnerving it can be to put your work in front of someone else and ask their opinion about it, and I'm honored that you trusted me enough to let me assess your story.

I had a lot of fun reading *Untitled*. You've created a highly complex world that hints at a range of deep themes – social justice, spirituality, the true nature of self, the power of community and ancestry, the repressive forces of "commodification" and capitalism and, of course, the healing magic of super gay love.

It's a complicated story, with several competing primary plot lines and many more subplots, some of which intertwine and others of which seem to be only loosely connected. Here is an incomplete list of plotlines I identified while reading your manuscript:

Estel's journey to find her shadow-spirit
Estel's desire to reunite with nature
Estel's longing for the circus and her idealized past
Estel and Breeze's love relationship
Brian's journey as the machine-man and his inner conflict related to his Wolf nature
Estel, Breeze, and Brian's respective desires to destroy the machine state
The community's desire for liberation
The shadow people and their repression within the regime
Estel's relationship with her grandmother, and the Gray Wolf
Brian's relationship with the Gray Wolf
The insects
The intergalactic train and "riding the rails"
Breeze's experience becoming a shadow
The circus, both as a past experience and as a vehicle for liberation and expression of joy in the present

Regardless of the length of your story – but especially because you are committed to keeping it to under 35,000 words – the first thing I would recommend is getting some clarity for yourself about what *the* **primary plot line** is. Remember that as readers we are totally new to this world you are showing us. On one level, we just only have so much space in our brains;

but more pertinently you are writing a novella, which is essentially a long short story. If this was a trilogy of novels, you might be able to incorporate all of these elements with enough explanation, depth, continuity, and interconnectedness to satisfy a reader's need for a cohesive-feeling story – that is, a feeling that we are reading *one* story, though it may have many elements and components, as opposed to a constellation of stories with no center of gravity to bind them all together. As it stands, I found it difficult to get my bearings and to effectively weigh the important elements from the less important elements, the plots from the subplots, the main characters from the supporting cast.

Part of this is because – and this relates to finding clarity about the primary plot line – you have a lot of viewpoint characters, and it seems that you haven't settled on a consistent **point of view** for your story. Right now, the novella seems to shift back and forth from omniscient to limited third. You mostly stay in the viewpoint of either Estel, Breeze, or Brian – sometimes jumping between them in the same scene, paragraph, or even sentence, violating the apparent limited third you've established – yet other times you include the viewpoints of such minor characters as the cockroach, the lemur, the raccoon, the train conductor, etc. This is what's commonly known as "head hopping," and it can be a source of great confusion to the reader.

Point of view, to my mind, is one of the most crucial and complicated elements of storytelling, but I will try to summarize enough here for you to begin thinking about how it pertains to your story and what choice to ultimately make.

At its core, point of view is about balancing intimacy with perspective. A first-person narrator, for example, allows us to be extremely close to a character, but we have to sacrifice perspective – we can't see anything that they don't see. Every event is filtered through one person, and is tainted to some extent by their voice, tone, and perspective.

On the other end of the spectrum, an omniscient narrator is able to tell us *everything*. With the omniscient point of view, the writer is essentially God. She knows the past, present, and future; the social moors and historical context of the story; what the weather is like in Venezuela that day; and, of course, what every character is thinking, feeling, and doing. But she rarely delves deeply into any one character's mind, so we end up getting lots of perspective at the sacrifice of intimacy. This point of view can be kind of like watching a story through the wrong end of the binoculars: you

can see everything, but it seems very far away.

Somewhere between these two lies the limited third—sometimes called a "close third"— perspective. Most contemporary books are written using this point of view, because of the balance it offers between perspective and intimacy. In the limited third, we only get the internal perspective of one character at a time. You can shift between viewpoint characters, but you must use a clear chapter or scene break to cue the reader, and you run the risk of annoying a portion of readers who absolutely hate what is called "multiple viewpoint," where the story shifts back and forth between the perspective of one character and another.

So that's the oversimplified version – in reality, there are endless possibilities and a lot of nuance involved in point of view. (You may remember that in the *Harry Potter* series, JK Rowling often writes the first chapter in omniscient, then switches to a close third for the rest of the book, focusing on Harry.) But the thing to take away is that it's important to make sure your choice is intentional, and that you make transitions clear and easy for the reader for follow. I would recommend taking a look at some of your favorite books with an eye toward how the writer deals with point of view— how do you know whose point of view you're in, and when?—and if you have further questions about this I'll be happy to elaborate.

What point of view you choose will ultimately decide on the story you're trying to tell. If this is really Estel's story about her quest for her shadow-spirit, you will probably want to stick with her point of view using the limited third.

However, if this is a story about something broader, say, an entire galaxy's liberation from a repressive regime, you may want to go with omniscient. But you will risk losing the reader's identification with Estel and her struggle. Another thing about the omniscient is that it draws much more attention to the narrator's (a.k.a. the author's) writing style and tone, while subsequently pulling attention *away* from the story itself.

It is, of course, your choice what point of view you will settle on, and only you know what story you are trying to tell. But let me see if I can reflect a few things back to you that might help you unravel all these different threads and get some clarity about what direction you want to go in.

In your notes you say that Estel is your main character, and in reading your manuscript, it does seem to me that her desires drive the majority of the events in the story. It is her quest for her shadow spirit that leads her to

discover the machine; her desire to destroy the machine that brings her and Brian to team up with Breeze; her love of the circus of her past (and her developing relationship with Breeze) that inspires her to take action within the group; and ultimately it is her discovery of her shadow spirit that leads to the destruction of the machine and the story's resolution.

Now, I'm not saying I have this right – the core of the story, for you, might be something entirely different – but for the sake of discussion I'll use that interpretation as an example. So if this particular journey to find her shadow spirit really is the main story, you would first want to refine that chain of events, testing it for strength in the area of **cause and effect**. Right now, for example, her ultimate discovery of her shadow spirit toward the end of the novella feels more like a coincidence. In other words, it's not clear that this event had much to do with the events in the middle of the story, which weakens the chain of cause and effect and makes the story feel episodic, a series of random events which are linked by chronology (this happened, then this happened, then this happened) but not causality (this happened, which caused this to happen, which caused this to happen). Now, you may be thinking while you're reading this, *It had everything to do with her journey to destroy the machine!* Great. Make that clear to the reader. Remember: we are strangers to your world. While the intricacies of your story are very clear to you as the writer, we need help to come to the right conclusions – sometimes more help than it seems like we should need since the answers might seem so obvious to you. Better to err on the side of showing or explaining too much – you can always dial it back later.

After you solidify a tight primary plotline (whether in your mind or on paper), take a look at how much **conflict** you have. One of the strengths of your piece is that Estel has a very strong desire – to find her shadow spirit. This is great, because desire is key to conflict. Conflict arises when someone experiences an obstacle to getting what they want. That's why it's so crucial to make it clear to the reader what the character wants – otherwise it's impossible for us to gauge whether each subsequent event is a success or failure and how we should feel about it. Right now, Estel's original desire seems to fade into the background during the middle of the story, when she decides she wants to destroy the machine. But if you decide to go with the primary plot line of Estel's journey to find her shadow spirit, the "sagging middle" could be easily made more relevant and conflict-ridden by rewriting the quest to destroy the machine as an *obstacle* to finding her shadow spirit, instead of a *diversion* from that journey. Now, that doesn't

mean that Estel can't be passionately against the machine; the point is that once you've decided what your primary plot line is, any parallel plots or subplots will be most effective if they complicate and serve the primary plot rather than detract from it. Does that make sense?

After conflict comes **pacing**. Pacing is, more or less, about the reader's expectation of levels of intensity, conflict, and suspense at various parts of the story. As a general rule, intensity should build over the course of the story until the climax, where it falls dramatically. The resolution that follows is usually brief, as readers tend to lose interest once the main problem of the story has been resolved.

Right now, if I follow the thread of your proposed primary plot, it does seem to me that the tension subsides too early. Toward the end of the story, you toggle back and forth between scenes of great intensity and conflict (regarding the still-unresolved issue with the machine), and scenes of joyous resolution (when Estel and the others take a break from their mission, as well as when Estel finds her shadow spirit). My suspicion is that your draft ended up like this because of your two competing primary plot lines – the shadow spirit plot line, and the machine plot line – but if you were to decide which was the primary plot I think you could resolve this, making it clear that the climax of the story is Estel finding her shadow spirit. Your feeling that you need a "stronger" ending, then, could be an issue of the *order* of the ending's events, their causality related to what came before, and their pacing, rather than the events themselves, if that makes sense. Once again, I'm not saying that all the other elements of your story need to disappear, but that they should complicate, deepen, and draw *more* attention to your main story instead of distracting from it.

After you gain more clarity, focus, and a good sense of pacing regarding your primary plot, I would suggest taking a look at the way you present your story world to the reader on the sentence-level – the level of explanation you give about this unfamiliar world; how you orient them in time and place; and the details you use to describe the world. I bring this up especially in light of your note that "I wonder if perhaps some of the larger mythological aspects of the piece require clarification," and "I'm interested to hear suggestions... on making the world more dynamic and vivid."

I do think that some of the larger **mythological aspects** need clarification. It may help, as you are doing this, to imagine the reader as a detective. She comes into your world, which she has never seen, looking everywhere for clues. Where is she? What's going on? Why does it matter?

What should she be worried about or hopeful for? What does (event x) have to do with (event y)? Every time there is an unanswered question or something that is not fully explained (see my note, for example, about the wolf in your opening pages), the reader is on high alert. *She really wants to get it*, but, as mentioned earlier in my letter, she can only hold so many unanswered questions in her mind at one time. This is where your desire for an "ambiguous" world might backfire on you. What makes reading satisfying – in my opinion, obviously – is the process of putting all the information a writer gives us together to make a complete picture where we basically understand what's going on. It's a balance between leaving the reader *just enough* mystery and unanswered questions to keep the back of their brain wondering and trying to solve the mystery, while not withholding so much that they become confused or overwhelmed. This is sometimes called "good doubt" versus "bad doubt," and it requires a conscious decision on the part of the writer – what do you want the reader to wonder about, and what do you *not* want them to wonder about?

As it stands, you hint at many mythological aspects of your story world without fully explaining any of them, and it leads to a lot of "bad doubt." Here is an incomplete list of mythological story elements I identified that I never fully came to understand. When you get your manuscript back from me, you will find many places where I have pointed out where I was confused or having trouble with:

The shadow world
The nature of the machine and its location
The commodification process
The nature of shadow-spirits
The "Wolf" versus the "wolf" versus the "Gray Wolf"
The train and the idea of "riding the rails"
The insects—Are they shadow spirits, too, or other entities all together?
The shadow people or shadow workers

I understand the resistance to exposition, however, I think in the sci-fi fantasy genre it is absolutely crucial. There are less boring and obtrusive ways to do this – ways that still leave a lingering mystery for the reader, but a *relevant and intentionally chosen* mystery. It seems to me, for example, that what you really want the reader to be wondering about is whether Estel will *find* her shadow spirit, not what a shadow spirit *is*. If you *do* want the

mystery to be what a shadow spirit is, we at least need to understand why it's important – the role it plays in this world – so that we can navigate the coming events with something solid to stand on. Right now, there are so many unanswered questions, so many apparently similar and overlapping mythological concepts, that I was never quite able to get my bearings, even after reading the manuscript twice and consulting your notes.

Related to that, I also found it difficult to know *where* and *when* I was at many different points in the story. The problem, I think, is twofold: First is simply your tendency to jump into a scene without making it clear how much time has passed, where we are, or sometimes even who the viewpoint character is. You will see many places on your manuscript where I have made note of this. There are a couple of strategies you can use to resolve this. One is simply to tell or remind us in the first few sentences where and when we are (you will see a few suggestions to this effect on your manuscript). Another is to **structure** the novella, so that you establish a "rule" about chapter or scene breaks and stick with it. For example, you could decide that every scene break will indicate a change of location, and title each section with the name of that place. Alternatively, if you decide to use multiple viewpoint, you could title each section the name of the viewpoint character who's perspective we will be in for the duration of the section.

The second issue regarding reader orientation and visualization is that your **descriptions and word choices** are often very abstract. I wonder if this is what you meant with your comment about making your world more "dynamic and vivid," as well as your concern that "the writing becomes sort of flat and contrived more frequently than I'd like." I personally wouldn't use the word "contrived," but I think what you might be sensing is your tendency to choose abstract words over concrete, sensory detail, and to summarize instead of "showing" us your world. For example, I could never really quite understand how to visualize the different settings. Are Estel and Breeze's home worlds different planets? Is the city they travel to also on a planet, or is it just floating in outer space? What does a shadow person look like? I've marked many, but not all, of the places where I had a hard time visualizing my surroundings, as well as a few examples where you *did* provide the kind of detail I was looking for. The train scene, for instance, has some vivid and beautiful images, and some of the descriptions of the insects are simply fantastic. This leads me to believe that the "problem" isn't that you have a hard time with details, but that (1) this is a first draft, and

almost all first drafts tend toward vagueness and summarization, and (2) you were trying to fit *so much* into your novella that you skimmed over most of the details in an attempt to include everything.

This brings us full circle to the need, in my opinion, for greater focus and clarity about your primary plot line. Because if you added the kind of sensory detail I'm suggesting without removing or minimizing some of your subplots and/or viewpoint characters, your manuscript would end up to be a whole lot more than 35,000 words. Your ideal length alone makes a strong argument for choosing a single primary plot line and viewpoint character and laying out the mythology of your world at the outset. You may even want to simplify or even remove some of your mythological elements – if not in concept then at least in name. I think, for example, that you could get a lot of mileage out of making the names of the unfamiliar elements of your world utterly distinct from one another. Much of my confusion stemmed from the similar verbiage – Wolf and wolf, for instance, or shadow spirit and shadows. At times I wasn't clear whether you were talking about two different things or using two words for the same thing – again, you'll see these notes in the manuscript. It may also help to name the planets or realms, assigning them proper nouns so that readers can more easily distinguish one setting from the other. The only words you consistently capitalized, as far as I remember, were the Wolf and the Sticky Fruits, and I was unclear as to why those two words warranted capitalization beyond everything else.

I've given you a lot of information here, and I hope that you don't feel overwhelmed or discouraged. The truth is, first drafts almost always need a lot of revising in order to shape them into something a reader can even follow. I think of the first draft as a way to generate material, which I then work with in order to create the story I am trying to tell. It's not uncommon for me to write a dozen drafts between my first and final, and I often hear the same thing from other writers. I say all this to let you know that you are absolutely on the right track. It's obvious that, even if it isn't coming out clearly on paper right now, you have created an extremely intricate, original world in your imagination, which is more than half the battle of getting that first draft on paper. You may have some work ahead of you, but the truth is – as far as first drafts go – it's *freaking amazing*. (Honestly, you should see some of my first drafts. You can't identify *any* plotline let several of them.)

After you finish this letter, I would suggest reading through your manuscript and looking at my notes, pondering what I've said here a bit

more, and perhaps reading the letter again. You might find that some things that don't make sense to you right away or that you don't agree with start to gel in your mind. Then, when you've taken some time to consider everything, get in touch with me to ask any follow-up questions you may have. I'll be happy to clarify or expand on any issues I've raised here. After we've wrapped everything up, I'll be in touch to get some feedback from you and reimbursement for the printing costs of your manuscript.

    Thanks again for letting me review your work, friend, and I look forward to talking with you soon.

    Love,
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