When Johnny comes marching home

Casualties of war.

Chaz Brenchley

The war was a terror, but it was the peace that terrified. Like the vast bleak mysteries of adulthood — so much space and empty yet, quiet yet, unmarked by anything of ours — after the battlefield that was school. Like school, the war was none of our doing, it had simply happened to us and was always obviously survivable. Now we had somehow to make things happen on our own account, with no idea what would happen if we failed.

The aliens didn't help — but that was the point, rather. They weren't here to help. None of us understood them, quite. Not an invasion or an occupying force — because of course we hadn't lost the war, exactly. They might have been ambassadors or tourists, traders or artisans or thieves. Or weapons inspectors, because if we hadn't quite managed to lose the war we most certainly had not won it.

They might have been weapons. It was very hard to tell, and the government wasn't telling. The government gave a fine impression of knowing very little more than we did.

The aliens didn't really matter, though, day to day. They were a mystery and could stay that way, an expression of faith; we saw very little of them, day to day.

Our own soldiers were another matter. The survivors, that is. They were everywhere, inescapable, returned.

The wounded we could deal with. Some we could even treat. The psychologically scarred, those too; that was old science, albeit faced with new hurts.

But then there were the others, those who came back altered in ways we didn't understand. Enhanced, some people said. Or cursed, or corrupted. Betrayed, or betraying — some called them traitors, spies, dishonoured.

Some called them gods.

I had one who sat below my window, day and night. She didn't beg or steal. She took nothing from the government or anyone else. So far as I could tell, she neither ate nor excreted. Nor slept. Whenever I looked — and sometimes I would spend days, nights, just watching her — she was exactly there, exactly where she had been,

sitting cross-legged and playing with light. Running little balls of it up and down her arms, drawing lines of it in the dust, weaving patterns between her hands in a vivid and complex cat's cradle. Perhaps she lived on light now; perhaps she drew nourishment from the glowing air that engulfed her. Perhaps she was beyond feeding, as she was beyond sleep.

Some returnees were studied, of course, but there were too many and nowhere to house them; in honesty, nowhere that seemed safe, so many people so strangely changed and all together. Perhaps they were a danger after all?

So they leaked back into the world, and talked or did not talk, and were not understood either way. Not all could play with light. Some could shape sound, make an obscure sculpture of it, a new art that seemed to baffle them as much as us. Some were physically altered; I met a slipskin once, who could never quite be touched, as though he was magnetized to the same polarity as the world around. He was naked, necessarily, and there was a measurable distance between his feet and the floor. It seemed not to inhibit him, and not to be any kind of use.

Generally they seemed to have small use

for us, or for any life that we could offer. Their eyes were turned to another horizon. Mostly they were patient, but not all, or not without limits. My own lightweaver: one night she stood and drew herself a framework as high and wide as she could reach, lines of light that burned in the air; then she stepped through it and was gone before those lines had faded.

Some slipskins went too, as though neither gravity nor love could hold them any longer, as though there was nothing they could cling to. They needed no bright gateway; their own condition took them away, at an angle that could be neither described nor recorded.

We looked more closely then at those who remained, those who would let us look. There was no breakthrough, more the slow dawn of a consensus. These weren't victims, any more than they were accidents. They were templates, rather. Armatures. Design specs.

There was a phase-shift out there, waiting to be found: an alternate way to be, or to go. No wonder the aliens had proved unreachable; no wonder our war had fizzled out in mutual helplessness, where neither side could entirely reach the other. But these people, salvaged prisoners of that war, they were our guides into crossing the border. Or they could be, as soon as we had solved the equations of light and skin and

absence. Monkey see, monkey do: knowing that it was possible, we could do this.

We can do this. Not yet, but we'll get there. And then we'll get — somewhere else. Which is terrifying, true, but probably essential. It is what's waiting for us now. What these people have been altered for: skeleton keys to an uncertain lock. A gesture, a gift, an introduction. A helping hand.

There are still those who call them traitors, fifth-columnists, Trojans within the walls.

I call them Marshalls. With all that that implies. ■

Chaz Brenchley has been a professional writer since he was 18, working mostly in crime, horror, fantasy and science fiction. He claims to live down the dirty end of genre fiction. In fact, he lives in Newcastle upon Tyne.

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