

Is there anyone in the literary universe who quite writes, sounds or undulates like Karen An-Hwei Lee? If David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* were spliced with *My Octopus Teacher* and Rachel Carson's *Sea Trilogy*, it might come close to producing Emily, an inquisitive, "accidental" octopus with a penchant for spice cake and philosophical ruminations on the fate of rogue genomes and the enigma that is our souls. Singular and shimmering.

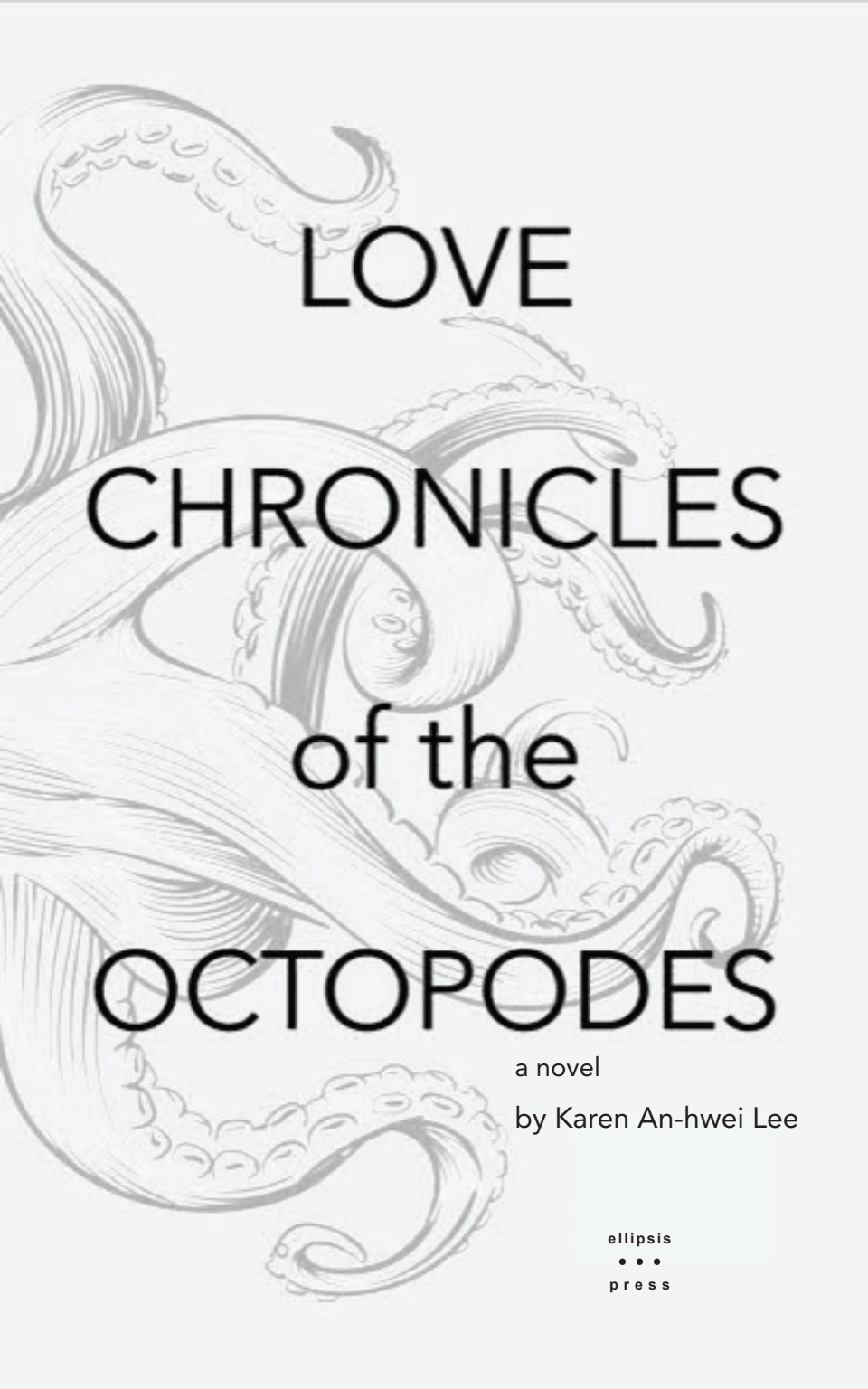
—Lisa Hsiao Chen, author of *Activities of Daily Living*

Have you ever watched the hues of a sleeping octopus shift dreamily from bright chartreuse to ghostly pale blue and from ghostly pale blue to the color of evening skies? If so, the wonder you felt is similar to the wonder you will feel reading *Love Chronicles of the Octopodes*, every page of which astounds and abounds with dazzling lyricism, narrative innovation, and prose textures movingly evocative of otherworldly sentience. With ingenuity and care, Karen An-hwei Lee incorporates research on cephalopods, black holes, genome editing, and the life and work of Emily Dickinson into sublime experimentations with language and genre. The result is art—and the art is powerfully transformative. To be submerged in the gorgeous songfulness of Karen An-hwei Lee's science fiction is to find oneself metamorphosing into a novel life form. I woke up from the dreamscapes of this book with exclamation marks in my brain and a new, tentacular, bioluminescent sense of possibility.

—Seo-Young Chu, author of *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*

Karen An-Hwei Lee, whose marvelous mind gave us Kafka—weird as ever and wonderfully alive—in twenty-first century Los Angeles and then a post-apocalyptic data cloud on a quest for the keys to happiness, outdoes herself with this brilliant head bend of a book. *Love Chronicles of the Octopodes* chronicles the adventures of one Emily D, octopus extraordinaire whose signal genetic material can be traced back to a certain legendary poet from Amherst but whose verve and swerve are all her own. Which is to say that Emily D is an original. As is Lee. There is no one else at work on the American scene like her.

—Laird Hunt, author of *Zorrie*



LOVE
CHRONICLES
of the
OCTOPODES

a novel

by Karen An-hwei Lee

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Portions of this book have appeared in somewhat different form in *Your Impossible Voice*, *The Big Other*, and *Dispatches from the Poetry Wars*.

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You are altogether beautiful, my darling,
beautiful in every way.

Song of Songs 4:7, *New Living Translation*

What's true of oceans is true, of course,
Of labyrinths and poems. When you start swimming
Through riptide of rhythms and metaphor's seaweed
You need to be a good swimmer...

Jack Spicer

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

Isaiah 43:2, *New International Version*

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1 | PORTRAIT OF AN OCTOPODEAN PARADISE

In which we meet our heroine and learn details of her origin as a rogue soul, her banishment by the stardust editors from the flesh factories of the Genzopolis to a lagoon on the other side of the universe. The moonlight delivers lost letters. The postdiluvian deluge.

PORTRAIT OF AN OCTOPODEAN PARADISE

ON THE LAGOON, IN THE MILKY RAYS of dawn, I woke after a night of deep slumber, and after several minutes of realization—slowly blooming on all nine of my brains—understood I was no less than an octopus. No less, no more, said my unwitting soul. You're not the person you thought you were yesterday. You're an octopus, I sighed, curling one of my arms over the edge of a water mattress. Not a drowsy woman lounging in a wetsuit, but rather, an atypical mollusk shot through with grit to the guts, purple as waxy plum lipstick all over the body, to boot. I lay sprawled across my waterbed, kissed yet irked and tickled by the soft rain falling through my window in the night, musing warily, maybe this is all there is. Make no bones about it. In fact, I have no bones. Not a lovely female in a gown of skin the color of cherry orchards draped on her shoulders; no fuzzy faux fur muffs to adorn her wrists; no gems of carbon vapor deposition the size of pomegranate pips, and no polymer nylons clinging to her sundry legs, thank goodness. No matter what her ambitions once were, if any, I finally know what this is all about. My dear sea stars, I'm an octopus.

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The ganglia of my flesh, tingling in eight limbs, buzzed and sparked, vexed by this awakening. On the shores of this lagoon, the kelp forest brightened outdoors while the sun shone like a cleaved starfruit, tapping the eaves of my lair in tandem with bright drops, a staccato rhythm of ellipses. Pip pop, pip pop, pip. Pop. Why say it's spring rain when no seasons exist here, the passing of time marked by a band of light? A willy-nilly smithing of words, I suppose. It's always spring on this side of the universe, a fair green lyric gracing the seaweed. Yesterday, I scribbled these lines by siphoning drams of my own do-it-yourself, homemade sepia ink, stored in a sac about the size of a mint leaf; some folks use gallbladders, while I use an ink sac. Drizzling drops of melanin inkiness, I jotted these lines:

Spring sings green through my window facing the sea.
Green is the scent of the air, a grove's upturned leaves.
Green glimmers under iridophores in my skin, a lagoon
of tranquility without sailboats or pearl-divers in sight.
Green is the color of matcha steaming with promise.
It's eternal green here, always. Doesn't this fact alone
drive a suspicion that all is not what it appears to be?
The balmy weather without a single cloud in the sky,
and your multifarious limbs on the floor, inching out
to the rock garden. This is a small place sans mirrors.
You don't fully realize who you are until you wake
with rain kissing your chromatophores shimmering
with emerald shifting to grenadine of toxic anemone
in the lagoon. My sea stars, you're an octopus.
Forget about the funny fruit you thought you'd be—
breadfruit, pawpaw, starfruit, even the noxious durian
with its reeking, creamy innards spooned into a glass
as a challenging treat. Not a human, you're an octopus.

Who gives a jumping gene about the art of being an octopus? As it goes, I speculated to my chinless self, I do. I've never sported two arms, always eight in sum. Never used an elbow or a pair of knees to knock about. No belly button or other dimpled oddities to mark a physical birth. I am not a mammal, not a designer-gene human entitled to special privileges, although my sequences were edited in the scriptorium of the Genome Omnibus Database, G.O.D. To this end, I'm barred from imbibing gene cocktails at the splendid bioinfusion bonanzas, never privy to gestures like a kiss on the forehead once in a blue moon, or even a glass of syntropically cultured kombucha with traces of nostalgia for a lost girlhood. Made without memories, a genetic anomaly, I arrived in this world as a zygote without kindred to call my own. Frankly, the concept of a family unit is foreign to me. I belong to nobody under the farthest stars, not a single soul who flies or creeps upon the face of the blighted Genzopolis.

As one of the rogues, I have no proper name. Rather, it's a ninety-digit, alphanumeric serial code with nine palindromes. I prefer to go by a nickname, Emily D. The letter D stands for dystopia, dysfunction, dysphagia, dyschronology, dyspnea, or dyspepsia. Please just call me Emily, yes. Emily of the dystopic dysfunctions, a dysphagic dyschronology of dyspnea and dyspepsia. While dystonically shy, I'm not agoraphobic like the original Emily on the other side of the universe. This Emily of the first genetic edition was a poet who lived in the ancient era when codons for amino acids were unknown. The double helix was not yet espied by x-ray crystallography. The genetic laws governing inheritance presented newfangled ways to look at lifeforms. Emily's unique genetic fingerprint, unbeknownst to the general public, would spawn generations through a lock of auburn hair tucked inside a letter, perhaps a lock once curled gently above a sherry-colored eye. Not erythropoiesis or hematopoiesis, but rather, poiesis, no more, i.e. a mysterious

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genesis of poets. The original Emily had no inklings about the role of reverse transcriptase in protein synthesis for hair, eighteen amino acids: proline, arginine, cysteine, and fifteen others.

A pea plant was a pea plant, not a genetic lifeform for probability computations in a monastery garden. Like the original Emily, the breathless belle and poetess of em-dashes, a dazzling diva of unconventional syntax, I dwell in seclusion; unlike Emily, however, I have no share in the wilderness of nights. Nights of brambled, blackberry wilderness. Nothing I do would grant time off my avocation of monotony. Thanks to the faults of the star-crossed editors, a flaw means I'm forever tagged as an accidental lifeform, flung into forgottenness. However, I've resigned to this fate of unstructured boredom, which I meet with a breathless ecstasy despite the doubt, as the unedited Emily might say. No austere, bleached dress adorns my body. I prefer to roam my domain without a stitch of clothing, as if I reside on a nudist colony: shyness, my beloved companion, has nothing to do with it.

This lagoon, in my opinion, is a bath spa of pleasure and sustainability alike, both aesthetic and pragmatic. I upcycle everything, even pints of rejected whelks alongside other odds and ends from the lagoon. It's a wholesome lifestyle, if you consider excommunication from the Genzopolis a rare luxury. A green living zone, at minimum. Saying I'm one hundred percent sustainable and readily compostable is a paltry understatement. I pay no citizen taxes or gene tariffs, the odd perks of bioexile. There's no poll tax or tourism fee. Rather, I spend my days soaking in a hydrotherapy bath of salts—magnesium sulfate heptahydrate—or sashaying across the lagoon. An edited lifeform am I, a genetic anomaly, not a free woman. My papillae are attuned to the whimsies of the bioengineered cosmos. In nocturnal reveries, the designer citizens sketch blueprints of modified flesh imitating my hydrostatic muscles.

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Up to this day, before this awakening, I've nursed no regrets.

As a zygote in a dish, I was powerless over my fate, which lay in the realm of the stardust editors. This vocation as a cephalopod doesn't grant fame, fortune, or fun holidays in the antipodes, of course. No excursions to the coastal villas, no picnicking in the foothills, no frolicking in the fern grottoes, no bungee jumping into gorges as a boon. I do enjoy living at the beach, where the land is a stone's throw away from the sea. No matter how much I grumble, and if you'll forgive the platitude, I make it a goal to remember each day is a gift; how easily this would've been otherwise with extra strokes of a genetic pen in the scriptorium. After all, gratitude triggers endorphins and boosts the immune system. A biomolecular blessing on the other side, I'm barred from access to bioinfusions to enhance my genotype. As my genes program my gambol through this seabound life, I'm in tip-top shape, physiologically and psychologically. No root canals and no tooth decay, never broken out in hives or rosacea, and never warded off flesh-eating bacteria or wrinkled like a raisin by soaking in hydrotherapy baths. No fatigue headaches, fibromyalgia, vertigo, or migraines, and no cephalalgia, the latter which has nothing to do with cephalopods in particular, despite the name. It's caused by the dilation of arteries in the noggin.

For me, a mammalian way of knowing, with all its nuances, is merely a dream.

No hindquarters were ever punctured for booster shots, my nonexistent knees never knocked for reflexes, nor glands or lymph nodes probed for lumps. Never visited a phlebotomist or a hematologist for low blood cell counts or elevated potassium levels. Never received infusions of artificial plasma engineered from fluorine and carbon in the form of perfluorocarbons, for all I know. An oddity, I blossom in a profusion of rogue genes. My cyan-hued, coppery blood isn't iron-fortified; rather, it's infused with hemocyanin instead of heme,

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water-blue as the ink barrel in a fountain pen, not vampire scarlet like human blood. Through no choice of my own, my wayward fate was inscribed by automated stardust editors. I don't wax sentimental about it, you see. Faced by cosmic irony, I hear the faraway stars whisper, you're an octopus, *an octopus*, I repeat even now, lying quietly on my waterbed, which heaves up and down as if in commiseration. Deal with it, you winking, warily wretched, and waterlogged one.

Deal with it in the present tense, I mean.

An octopus, nonetheless, an atypical one named Emily, I echo into my chamber where a cherrywood rolltop desk sits an arm's length away; one out of eight, not the sum of all limbs, I mean. This humdrum routine isn't what a bona fide, designer-gene citizen of the cosmos might imagine it to be; in other words, it is a pseudopodial sojourn on an undulating waterbed, or outdoor exercise of pushing stones the size of plumcots, apriums, pluots, or apriplums in a garden, or gnawing on brine-cured olives and luscious slices of papaya—not my own glossy flesh, but rather, tropical fruit the color of orangeade—while scooping ounces of seaweed gelatin out of jars and massaging gummy drops of it onto my suckers as well as my melonhead. An octopus of rogue genes, I love the water, you see, a shore-hugger who's hydrophilic in my own right, but I can also crawl ashore, if I feel so inclined. The gelatin functions as a good emollient, a skin moisturizer, if you will, for my forays out of the kelp forest onto the shore, where the miniscule crabs and shrimp flicker in tide pools. The gelatin plumps up my epidermis in a lovely way. The fluid drachm of slime I'd secrete while drying and withering in the light wouldn't be adequate to keep me alive.

I prefer to spend my days soaking in a tub, my head up inside my lair. I wonder what it would be like to harbor alveoli blossoming like red, oxygenated azaleas in my body. Inhaling iodized air instead of oxygenated saltwater, however, is the least

of my fantasies. I spend my days holed up in hundreds of jars, hours upon hours spent in blissful solitude, luxuriating in the wet suit of my plum-colored skin, the largest organ of the body. You see, it's a paradox. Inwardly a woman, yet outwardly—phenotypically expressed, I mean—an octopus to the judging eye of a citizen of the Genzopolis. So thanks to rogue genes, I'm a lifeform with the bodily shape of an octopus or vice versa. I should count it a blessing not to be rejected for eugenization. I don't want to be a designer-gene citizen if it means other lifeforms should not exist. If the flawless future of the Genzopolis excludes lifeforms like me, so be it.

Missing a silky cloud of hair and lush mink eyelashes, without the supple skin and melodious voice of a designer-gene citizen, I've still got the toughness and tenderness of a fully adult woman. Overlook this tangle of ganglion-rich arms under my shapely melonhead, and skin the color of a ladyslipper. Actually, I express a range of hues from indigo and purple to lotus on lily pads and jade. Thanks to my edited genes, I'm immune to communicable diseases. No small pox or chicken pox or coxsackie virus will infect me, huzzah. No measles, mumps, or rubella. No typhoid, no tetanus. Feeling all the frisky frills and gills of an octopus in the wild, I'm a sea creature who travels by jet propulsion like an undersea hydrojet. Yes, an oddball octopodean, am I. Solely for amusement, not for survival, I can mimic a hairless rambutan fairly well by raising the papillae on my mantle and rolling into a mottled ball of pips.

Without a ruddy neck or pair of clavicles afloat under a chin, my balloon-shaped torso is fused directly to my head like a fireplug. I noodle around with a giant ganglion in each of my eight hands: Arms, I should say. Why can't I navigate life as a sea cucumber and renounce my genetic melodrama, or drift aimlessly through a brackish lagoon as a filter-feeder? As an afterthought, I add, what do I possibly mean, having

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exhausted the multicellular potential of pluripotency long ago? As long as I physically look like an octopus, full-fledged womanhood will never bloom, thanks to molecular scissors and genetic pens who've muted those genes. Today, I harbor three hearts, of which I'm quite proud: a systemic one circulating blood throughout my body, and a pair of branchial vascular hearts, a double blessing. The systemic heart is a futurologist who looks forward, while the lesser pair of hearts nudge my blue-filtered wishes out to an inner sea of feathered gills. An act of faith, if you will. Finally, I've a doughnut-shaped brain of slightly above average intelligence. Not a fish brain. Not a squid brain. Not an eel brain, neither an electric one nor a freshwater unagi; not a jellyfish of stinging charms. Not a shark, oh my brittle sea stars. Nine brains is the right sum. I won't brag about this.

I'm an oddity dubbed Emily, by all means.

With a madcap tango of minor gravitas, it's manageable to juggle nine brains in a molecular dance of biodata. The neurons in my flexing limbs outnumber those in my melon-head. Eight arms of agile legerdemain enjoy autotomy—not autonomy but rather *autotomy*, a fleet of geckos casting their twitching tails from vertical walls, slashing the air with ir-repressible vitality; limbs sprout like altered pekoe buds of modified tea shrubs, hybridized with the grassy resilience of seaweed. If only human hands could do all this, then multiply by four to make eight in a dynamo of prestidigitation.

I wave my shyest arms, mimicking the sea anemone on a coral reef.

If only the unedited Emily could see how I sport a puckered mouth under every arm, which a casual observer wouldn't spy. The fountain of blood coursing through my veins is blue as the long horizon of an ink barrel, not cranberry, pear, or cherry. If you cut me with a knife, although I hope you won't, I'll bleed midnight ink while I grab you with

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one of my juicy huggers, my musculature shot through with myelinated nerves.

As the original Emily might say, good morning.

Soon enough, good midnight, my friend.

This is all to say, my renewed awakening—or awakened renewal, I mean—on this remote lagoon has led me to regret the time I've spent mired in an illusion, a pipe dream, if you will. I'll never fully embody a female human Emily. Marooned in a lagoon, if you'll forgive the rhyme; not the worst of fates, yet I'd erroneously assumed this octopodean glass was half-full when it was empty, albeit armed with an ink siphon. Am I a human copy whose genome was inscribed by genetic pens, or an octopus with Emily's sequences spliced into a rogue genome? In the face of this dilemma, the realm of possibilities runs away from me. Poof! My name is Emily, not an octopus. Boom! Ladies and gentle genes, the woman is now an octopus. Bam! This colloquy holds almost no sway over my ousted status as a rogue, so please let me start over again.

An octopus, not a woman.

As a postscript to this afterthought, the bubbling indigestion—while my skin changes from viridian green to the blue of fox grapes—implies I can't fully grapple with this new realization. Huzzah! Or maybe it's indigestion from consuming an excess of fig and gorgonzola crackers, gourmet cousin to the modest saltine? As the rogue genes would have it, I'm an octopus who relishes olives with gorgonzola and figs, not oyster shooters or escargot, and worse yet, the flesh of my own species. Our zoomorphology counts as the bottom line on the other side of the universe, if I may use an excess of pronouns to convey what I mean: you are not only what you consume but what you look like; you are not only what you look like but what you consume.

Hand me a spy glass for a glimpse into the future.