

The Four Profound Weaves, by R.B. Lemberg

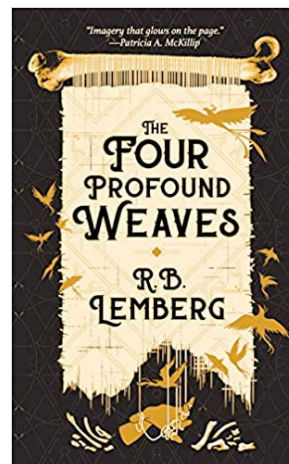
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R.B. Lemberg. *The Four Profound Weaves*. Tachyon, 2020. Paperback.
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"This tale must be told four times", said Uziya, as if reciting a lesson. "Stitched with wind, stitched with sand, stitched with song, stitched with bones. Change, wanderlust, hope, and death. Only then will the ultimate secret become known. (66)

Sadly, because of space, I cannot tell this review four times. This is a pity, because a typical review does not and cannot serve the utterly atypical R.B. Lemberg well. They are such a singular writer, their writing rich in both deep strangeness and lyric beauty, such as to be expansively beyond a typical work of fantasy. No writer I know of so populates their fantasy world with so many genderqueer and/or autistic characters (both sorely lacking in most standard SF&F). Their prose greatly resembles the graceful, stunning, nearly intangible carpets that feature in both this novella and its Nebula-nominated predecessor, "Grandmother-nai-Leylit's Cloth of Winds." Like those carpets, Lemberg's fiction, particularly their Birdverse in which *Weaves* is set, is constructed of countless threads of bright color in the woof and threads of darkness and grief and suffering running crosswise in the warp. The latest Birdverse chronicle, *The Four Profound Weaves*, is likewise a beautiful piece of craft.



"The first of the Four Profound Weaves is woven from wind. It signifies change". (19) Change, transformation, shifts in identity – these are at the heart of Lemberg's story. In fact, it is the heart of most of their stories. Intangibles such as wind and hope are woven into graspable objects, from something unseen into something that can be felt, touched, admired. Bones are made into cloths that robe assassins. In Lemberg's Birdverse magical cosmology, the abstract concepts of geometry, are changed through the mystical use of special naming into usable works of protection and healing. Things and peoples and individuals are always changing in Birdverse.

Yet, the most noticeable and outstanding characteristic of Lemberg's Birdverse work is the acceptance and commonplaceness of genderfluidity. Moving between and among genders as a matter of course is a practice that generally escapes comments – to switch genders is much more the norm than the exception, despite some cultural differences on the subject. One of *Weaves'* protagonists, nen-sasair, is a trans male who was originally introduced as the woman Bashri-nai-Tammah in "Cloth of Winds" but who transitioned before the beginning of *Weaves*. At one point he muses about his fellow protagonist, the weaver Uziya e Lali, thinking:

I did not know that she was a changer like me. I never thought anyone was. I had never met others who went through the change in Iyar. They were banished or imprisoned or hiding or dead. But here, in the desert, changing one's shape was a matter of ritual, of love, not of desperate secrets. (29)

Nen-sasair is a member of the Khana people (a rough Birdverse cultural analog to the Jews), among whose women both queerness and polyamory are accepted as a matter of course (as they are elsewhere in Birdverse). However, trans people are not. Change for nen-sasair is a psychological necessity and part of the natural order; his native Khana are lacking. They are less, in many ways, for not embracing the fluid nature of ongoing change. Uiziya's aunt Benesret (the master crafter who creates the eponymous weaves) snorts at the notion that changing gender is foreign to the Khana, or indeed, to anyone. "That's what he says. Changing is always and forever done. Everywhere, it is done; in open, in secret. He has gone through the change and so, I assure you, have others". (59) And Uiziya herself notes, "It is not hard to be a changer among my people. I know that it is not true everywhere, but in the great Burri desert, changing your body to match your heart is not a thing to bleed over". (27)

For Lemberg, change is a beautiful thing, a regular and welcome part of life and the human condition. Early in the novella, they describe nen-sasair's transformation into what he calls his "true life" in the most poetic way.

But now I was here, far east and away from Iyar, in the great Burri desert. It was here, at this very place, in this dust, on the outskirts of the snake-Surun' encampment, I had stood in my cloth made of winds, the weave of transformation my friends and my grandchildren had woven for me out of love. I'd lifted my arms to the sky and the sandbirds had come to me, sent to me by the goddess Bird and summoned by the cloth of winds. They were birds of bright fire that fell from the sky and cocooned me, until I could see and hear nothing except the warmth and the feathers enveloping me and the threads of the wind singing each to each until my whole skin was ignited by the sun, my body changing and changed by the malleable flame. And when it was done, I sang.

I sang as the wind and the feathers dissolved into sand under my feet; I sang because my transformation was complete. I sang the dawn-song – the sacred melody that the men of my people sing, standing on the roof of the men's quarter every morning. (26)

The opposite of change is stasis, and stasis is unnatural. Uiziya and nen-sasair are travelling to the latter's home city of Iyar to retrieve Benesret's weave of hope from the Ruler of Iyar ("The Collector") who hoards the beautiful and rare within his dark coffer in an attempt to stop time like an insect in amber. As he explains, "I want things to remain, sacred and sovereign and unchanging. I want to preserve what is best. It is a noble purpose". (143) It is to rescue beauty and change from this dark imprisonment (albeit for their own purposes) that motivate the two protagonists to make the journey.

And as it turns out, the Ruler's actions are even darker than at first supposed. In his behavior he stands in opposition to every one of the Four Profound Weaves: he refuses to embrace the natural inevitability of change, which he calls "a lie". Rather than experience or trust wanderlust he would rather stay entombed within his palace. "Change is the world's greatest danger... You rebel, you wander from place to place, you chafe at my rule, thinking that something else, somewhere else, would be better. It isn't. But I save you. I am the one who is centered and stable, anchoring the whole world from my rainbow-tiered court, unmoved by world's wildness, contained in my birdcage throne". (120-121)

Rather than welcome hope and make it free to all, he warps it by offering it as a scrap of bait. As nen-sasair notes of him, "Hope. *Hope has been perverted here, in your Rainbow-Tiered Court, into a thing only you can possess*". (145) By contrast, nen-sasair understands hope as a necessity of life, speaking of it in terms that any Jewish person—such as Lemberg himself—would find familiar:

It [the dawnsong nen-sasair hears] was hope. My hope, and the hope of all others of my people who sang it throughout the landmass. The hope that wherever we wandered, exiled, and unwanted, the dawn would still come for us. We had only to hold on. (107)

Finally, the Ruler fails to understand death, the final Weave. He seeks the carpet of death that is woven from bones, but only as a prize and a symbol of power. To that end he slaughters countless rebel woman and stores their bones in his dungeons, ready to have them used as mere tools in the crowning of his great and sterile collection. In the name of stability and a world where the frightening nature of change can never take hold, he acts supremely unnatural in trying to subdue hope and death. But in this, the Ruler must ultimately fail, because Lemberg knows that what is natural, what is true to nature and to oneself, cannot be suppressed. Towards the end of the novella, nen-sasair sings before the Ruler the truth:

"Bird's feathers made the threads that Benesret wove into her great carpet of song; and the bone-threads Uziya had made from the women you killed will now sing. Hope and death; the siblings are intertwined, and this is the mystery of the ever-changing desert. Hope cannot be given away, to you, or to anyone. Hope is the song which arises from silence where all our voices had been; all those locked away against their will one day will surge again, come forth with great exuberance, sweep the world in a reverberation of rainbow more true than your Rainbow-Tiered Court." (168)

Lemberg ends the novella with hope, hope at the promise of renewal and the excitement of new adventures. This is of a piece with the rest of *The Four Profound Weaves*, which is remarkable in its truths about the changing nature of life, poetic in its prose, and profound in its understanding of humanity.