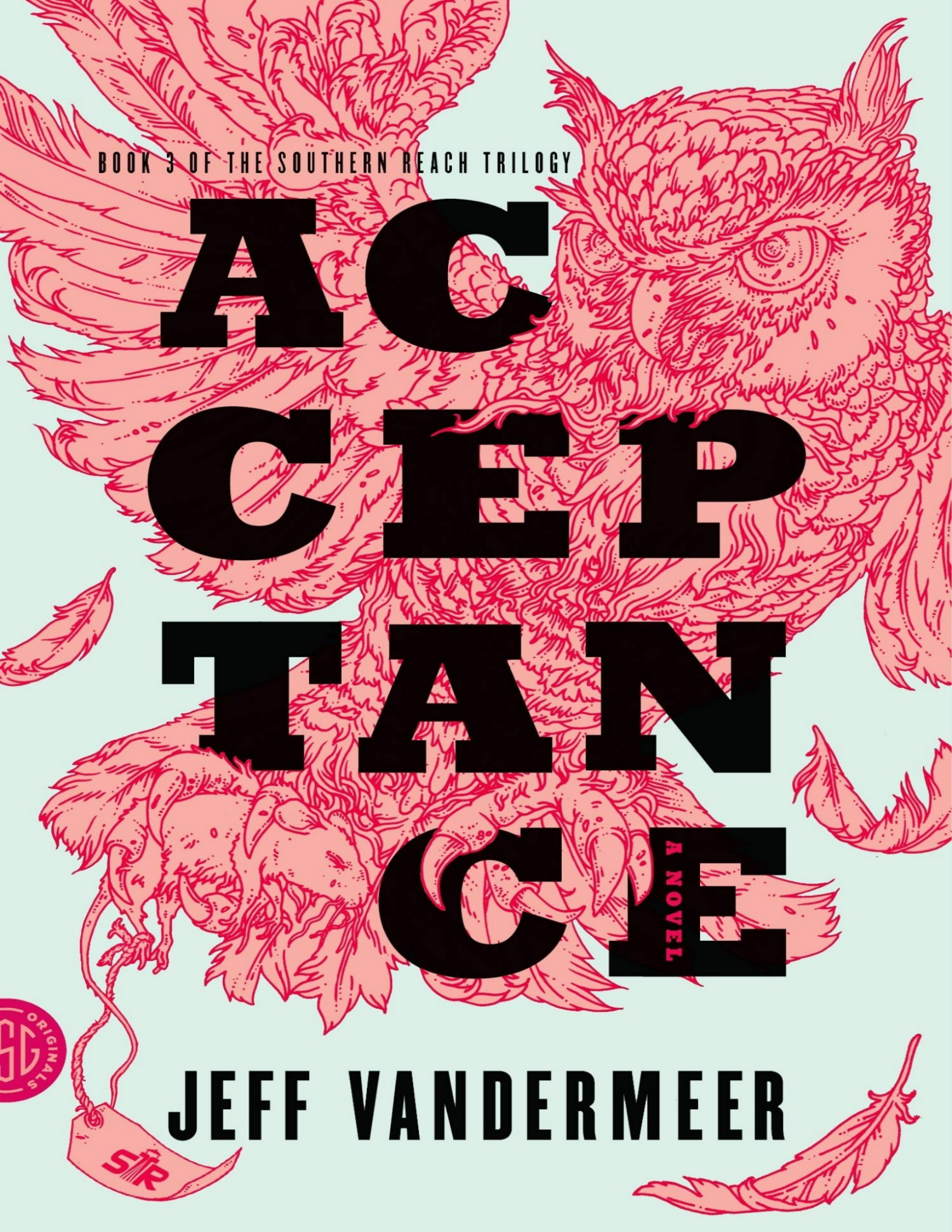
BOOK 3 OF THE SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY
ACCEPTANCE
A NOVEL
JEFF VANDERMEER
ORIGINALS

ACCEPTANCE

JEFF VANDERMEER

HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For Ann

Table of Contents

000X: THE DIRECTOR, TWELFTH EXPEDITION

Just out of reach, just beyond you: the rush and froth of the surf, the sharp smell of the sea, the crisscrossing shape of the gulls, their sudden, jarring cries. An ordinary day in Area X, an extraordinary day—the day of your death—and there you are, propped up against a mound of sand, half sheltered by a crumbling wall. The warm sun against your face, and the dizzying view above of the lighthouse looming down through its own shadow. The sky has an intensity that admits to nothing beyond its blue prison. There's sticky sand glittering across a gash in your forehead; there's a tangy glottal *something* in your mouth, dripping out.

You feel numb and you feel broken, but there's a strange relief mixed in with the regret: to come such a long way, to come to a halt here, without knowing how it will turn out, and yet … *to rest*. To come to rest. Finally. All of your plans back at the Southern Reach, the agonizing and constant fear of failure or worse, the price of that … all of it leaking out into the sand beside you in gritty red pearls.

The landscape surges toward you, curling over from behind to peer at you; it flares in places, or swirls or reduces itself to a pinprick, before coming back into focus. Your hearing isn't what it once was, either—has weakened along with your balance. And yet there comes this impossible thing: a magician's trick of a voice rising out of the landscape and the suggestion of eyes upon you. The whisper is familiar: *Is your house in order?* But you think whoever is asking might be a stranger, and you ignore it, don't like what might be knocking at the door.

The throbbing of your shoulder from the encounter in the tower is much worse. The wound betrayed you, made you leap out into that blazing blue expanse even though you hadn't wanted to. Some communication, some

trigger between the wound and the flame that came dancing across the reeds betrayed your sovereignty. Your house has rarely been in such disarray, and yet you know that no matter what leaves you in a few minutes something else will remain behind. Disappearing into the sky, the earth, the water, is no guarantee of death here.

A shadow joins the shadow of the lighthouse.

Soon after, there comes the crunch of boots, and, disoriented, you shout, "Annihilation! Annihilation!" and flail about until you realize the apparition kneeling before you is the one person impervious to the suggestion.

"It's just me, the biologist."

Just you. Just the biologist. Just your defiant weapon, hurled against the walls of Area X.

She props you up, presses water to your mouth, clearing some of the blood as you cough.

"Where is the surveyor?" you ask.

"Back at the base camp," she tells you.

"Wouldn't come with you?" Afraid of the biologist, afraid of the burgeoning flame, just like you. "A slow-burning flame, a will-o'-the-wisp, floating across the marsh and the dunes, floating and floating, like nothing human but something free and floating." A hypnotic suggestion meant to calm her, even if it will have no more effect than a comforting nursery rhyme.

As the conversation unspools, you keep faltering and losing track of it. You say things you don't mean, trying to stay in character—the person the biologist knows you as, the construct you created for her. Maybe you shouldn't care about roles now, but there's still a role to play.

She's blaming you, but you can't blame her. "If it was a disaster, you helped create it. You just panicked, and you gave up." Not true—you never gave up—but you nod anyway, thinking of so many mistakes. "I did. I did. I should have recognized earlier that you had changed." True. "I should have sent you back to the border." Not true. "I shouldn't have gone down there with the anthropologist." Not true, not really. You had no choice, once she slipped away from base camp, intent on proving herself.

You're coughing up more blood, but it hardly matters now.

"What does the border look like?" A child's question. A question whose answer means nothing. There is nothing but border. There is no border.

I'll tell you when I get there.

"What really happens when we cross over?"

Not what you might expect.

"What did you hide from us about Area X?"

Nothing that would have helped you. Not really.

The sun is a weak halo with no center and the biologist's voice threads in and out, the sand both cold and hot in your clenched right hand. The pain that keeps returning in bursts is attacking every couple of microseconds, so present that it isn't even there anymore.

Eventually, you recognize that you have lost the ability to speak. But you are still there, muffled and distant, as if you're a kid lying on a blanket on this very beach, with a hat over your eyes. Lulled into drowsiness by the constant surging sound of the water and the sea breezes, balancing the heat that ripples over you, spreads through your limbs. The wind against your hair is a sensation as remote as the ruffling of weeds sprouting from a head-shaped rock.

"I'm sorry, but I have to do this," the biologist tells you, almost as if she knows you can still hear her. "I have no choice."

You feel the tug and pull on your skin, the brief incisive line, as the biologist takes a sample from your infected shoulder. From a great and insurmountable distance, searching hands descend as the biologist goes through your jacket pockets. She finds your journal. She finds your hidden gun. She finds your pathetic letter. What will she make of them? Maybe nothing at all. Maybe she'll just throw the letter into the sea, and the gun with it. Maybe she'll waste the rest of her life studying your journal.

She's still talking.

"I don't know what to say to you. I'm angry. I'm frightened. You put us here and you had a chance to tell me what you knew, and you didn't. You wouldn't. I'd say rest in peace, but I don't think you will."

Then she's gone, and you miss her, that weight of a human being beside you, the perverse blessing of those words, but you don't miss her for long because you are fading further still, fading into the landscape like a reluctant wraith, and you can hear a faint and delicate music in the distance, and something that whispered to you before is whispering again, and then you're dissolving into the wind. A kind of alien regard has twinned itself to

you, easily mistaken for the atoms of the air if it did not seem somehow concentrated, purposeful. Joyful?

Taken up over the still lakes, rising up across the marsh, flickering up in green-glinting reflections against the sea and the shore in the late-afternoon sun … only to wheel and bank toward the interior and its cypress trees, its black water. Then sharply up into the sky again, taking aim for the sun, the lurch and spin of it, before free fall, twisting to stare down at the onrushing earth, stretched taut above the quick flash and slow wave of reeds. You half expect to see Lowry there, wounded survivor of the long-ago first expedition, crawling toward the safety of the border. But instead there is just the biologist trudging back down the darkening path … and waiting beyond her, mewling and in distress, the altered psychologist from the expedition before the twelfth. Your fault as much as anyone's, your fault, and irrevocable. Unforgivable.

As you curve back around, the lighthouse fast approaches. The air trembles as it pushes out from both sides of the lighthouse and then re-forms, ever questing, forever sampling, rising high only to come low yet again, and finally circling like a question mark so you can bear witness to your own immolation: a shape huddled there, leaking light. What a sad figure, sleeping there, dissolving there. A green flame, a distress signal, an opportunity. Are you still soaring? Are you still dying or dead? You can't tell anymore.

But the whisper isn't done with you yet.

You're not down there.

You're up here.

And there's still an interrogation going on.

One that will repeat until you have given up every answer.

PART I

RANGE LIGHT

0001: THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

> Overhauled the lens machinery and cleaned the lens. Fixed the water pipe in the garden. Small repair to the gate. Organized the tools and shovels etc. in the shed. S&SB visit. Need to requisition paint for daymark—black eroded on seaward side. Also need nails and to check the western siren again. Sighted: pelicans, moorhens, some kind of warbler, blackbirds beyond number, sanderlings, a royal tern, an osprey, flickers, cormorants, bluebirds, pigmy rattlesnake (at the fence —remember), rabbit or two, white-tailed deer, and near dawn, on the trail, many an armadillo.

That winter morning, the wind was cold against the collar of Saul Evans's coat as he trudged down the trail toward the lighthouse. There had been a storm the night before, and down and to his left, the ocean lay gray and roiling against the dull blue of the sky, seen through the rustle and sway of the sea oats. Driftwood and bottles and faded white buoys and a dead hammerhead shark had washed up in the aftermath, tangled among snarls of seaweed, but no real damage either here or in the village.

At his feet lay bramble and the thick gray of thistles that would bloom purple in the spring and summer. To his right, the ponds were dark with the muttering complaints of grebes and buffleheads. Blackbirds plunged the thin branches of trees down, exploded upward in panic at his passage, settled back into garrulous communities. The brisk, fresh salt smell to the air had an edge of flame: a burning smell from some nearby house or still-smoldering bonfire.

Saul had lived in the lighthouse for four years before he'd met Charlie, and he lived there still, but last night he'd stayed in the village a half mile away, in Charlie's cottage. A new thing this, not agreed to with words, but with Charlie pulling him back to bed when he'd been about to put on his

clothes and leave. A welcome thing that put an awkward half smile on Saul's face.

Charlie'd barely stirred as Saul had gotten up, dressed, made eggs for breakfast. He'd served Charlie a generous portion with a slice of orange, kept hot under a bowl, and left a little note beside the toaster, bread at the ready. As he'd left, he'd turned to look at the man sprawled on his back half in and half out of the sheets. Even into his late thirties, Charlie had the lean, muscular torso, strong shoulders, and stout legs of a man who had spent much of his adult life on boats, hauling in nets, and the flat belly of someone who didn't spend too many nights out drinking.

A quiet click of the door, then whistling into the wind like an idiot as soon as he'd taken a few steps—thanking the God who'd made him, in the end, so lucky, even if in such a delayed and unexpected way. Some things came to you late, but late was better than never.

Soon the lighthouse rose solid and tall above him. It served as a daymark so boats could navigate the shallows, but also was lit at night half the week, corresponding to the schedules of commercial traffic farther out to sea. He knew every step of its stairs, every room inside its stone-and-brick walls, every crack and bit of spackle. The spectacular four-ton lens, or beacon, at the top had its own unique signature, and he had hundreds of ways to adjust its light. A first-order lens, over a century old.

As a preacher he thought he had known a kind of peace, a kind of calling, but only after his self-exile, giving all of that up, had Saul truly found what he was looking for. It had taken more than a year for him to understand why: Preaching had been *projecting out*, imposing himself on the world, with the world then projecting onto him. But tending to the lighthouse—that was a way of looking inward and it felt less arrogant. Here, he knew nothing but the practical, learned from his predecessor: how to maintain the lens, the precise workings of the ventilator and the lens-access panel, how to maintain the grounds, how to fix all the things that broke—scores of daily tasks. He welcomed each part of the routine, relished how it gave him no time to think about the past, and didn't mind sometimes working long hours—especially now, in the afterglow of Charlie's embrace.

But that afterglow faded when he saw what awaited him in the gravel parking lot, inside the crisp white fence that surrounded the lighthouse and the grounds. A familiar beat-up station wagon stood there, and beside it the

usual two Séance & Science Brigade recruits. They'd snuck up on him again, crept in to ruin his good mood, and even piled their equipment beside the car already—no doubt in a hurry to start. He waved to them from afar in a halfhearted way.

They were always present now, taking measurements and photographs, dictating statements into their bulky tape recorders, making their amateur movies. Intent on finding … what? He knew the history of the coast here, the way that distance and silence magnified the mundane. How into those spaces and the fog and the empty line of the beach thoughts could turn to the uncanny and begin to create a story out of nothing.

Saul took his time because he found them tiresome and increasingly predictable. They traveled in pairs, so they could have their séance and their science both, and he sometimes wondered about their conversations—how full of contradictions they must be, like the arguments going on inside his head toward the end of his ministry. Lately the same two had come by: a man and a woman, both in their twenties, although sometimes they seemed more like teenagers, a boy and girl who'd run away from home dragging a store-bought chemistry set and a Ouija board behind them.

Henry and Suzanne. Although Saul had assumed the woman was the superstitious one, it turned out she was the scientist—of what?—and the man was the investigator of the uncanny. Henry spoke with a slight accent, one Saul couldn't place, that put an emphatic stamp of authority on everything he said. He was plump, as clean-shaven as Saul was bearded, with shadows under his pale blue eyes, black hair in a modified bowl cut with bangs that obscured a pale, unusually long forehead. Henry didn't seem to care about worldly things, like the winter weather, because he always wore some variation on a delicate blue button-down silk shirt with dress slacks. The shiny black boots with zippers down the side weren't for trails but for city streets.

Suzanne seemed more like what people today called a hippie but would've called a communist or bohemian when Saul was growing up. She had blond hair and wore a white embroidered peasant blouse and a brown suede skirt down below the knee, to meet the calf-high tan boots that completed her uniform. A few like her had wandered into his ministry from time to time—lost, living in their own heads, waiting for something to

ignite them. The frailty of her form made her somehow more Henry's twin, not less.

The two had never given him their last names, although one or the other had said something that sounded like "Serumlist" once, which made no sense. Saul didn't really want to know them better, if he was honest, had taken to calling them "the Light Brigade" behind their backs, as in "lightweights."

When he finally stood in front of them, Saul greeted them with a nod and a gruff hello, and they acted, as they often did, like he was a clerk in the village grocery store and the lighthouse a business that offered some service to the public. Without the twins' permit from the parks service, he would have shut the door in their faces.

"Saul, you don't look very happy even though it is a beautiful day," Henry said.

"Saul, it's a *beautiful* day," Suzanne added.

He managed a nod and a sour smile, which set them both off into paroxysms of laughter. He ignored that.

But they continued to talk as Saul unlocked the door. They always wanted to talk, even though he'd have preferred that they just got on with their business. This time it was about something called "necromantic doubling," which had to do with building a room of mirrors and darkness as far as he could tell. It was a strange term and he ignored their explanations, saw no way in which it had any relationship to the beacon or his life at the lighthouse.

People weren't ignorant here, but they were superstitious, and given that the sea could claim lives, who could blame them. What was the harm of a good-luck charm worn on a necklace, or saying a few words in prayer to keep a loved one safe? Interlopers trying to make sense of things, trying to "analyze and survey" as Suzanne had put it, turned people off because it trivialized the tragedies to come. But like those annoying rats of the sky, the seagulls, you got used to the Light Brigade after a while. On dreary days he had almost learned not to begrudge the company. *Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but not notice the log in your own eye?*

"Henry thinks the beacon could operate much like such a room," Suzanne said, as if this was some major and astounding discovery. Her enthusiasm struck him as serious and authentic and yet also frivolous and

amateurish. Sometimes they reminded him of the traveling preachers who set up tents at the edges of small towns and had the fervor of their convictions but not much else. Sometimes he even believed they were charlatans. The first time he'd met them, Saul thought Henry had said they were studying the refraction of light in a prison.

"Are you familiar with these theories?" Suzanne asked as they started to climb; she was lightly adorned with a camera strapped around her neck and a suitcase in one hand. Henry was trying not to seem winded, and said nothing. He was wrestling with heavy equipment, some of it in a box: mics, headphones, UV light readers, 8mm film, and a couple of machines featuring dials, knobs, and other indicators.

"No," Saul said, mostly to be contrary, because Suzanne often treated him like someone without culture, mistook his brusqueness for ignorance, his casual clothes as belonging to a simple man. Besides, the less he said, the more relaxed they were around him. It'd been the same with potential donors as a preacher. And the truth was, he didn't know what she was talking about, just as he hadn't known what Henry meant when he'd said they were studying the "taywah" or "terror" of the region, even when he'd spelled it out as t-e-r-r-o-i-r.

"Prebiotic particles," Henry managed in a jovial if wheezy tone. "Ghost energy."

As Suzanne backed that up with a longish lecture about mirrors and things that could peer out of mirrors and how you might look at something sideways and know more about its true nature than head-on, he wondered if Henry and Suzanne were lovers; her sudden enthusiasm for the séance part of the brigade might have a fairly prosaic origin. That would also explain their hysterical laughter down below. An ungenerous thought, but he'd wanted to bask in the afterglow of the night with Charlie.

"Meet you up there," he said finally, having had enough, and leaped up the stairs, taking them two at a time while Henry and Suzanne labored below, soon out of sight. He wanted as much time at the top without them as possible. The government would retire him at fifty, mandatory, but he planned to be as in shape then as now. Despite the twinge in his joints.

At the top, hardly even breathing heavy, Saul was happy to find the lantern room as he'd left it, with the lens bag placed over the beacon, to avoid both scratching and discoloration from the sun. All he had to do was

open the lens curtains around the parapet to let in light. His concession to Henry, for just a few hours a day.

Once, from this vantage, he'd seen something vast rippling through the water beyond the sandbars, a kind of shadow, the grayness so dark and deep it had formed a thick, smooth shape against the blue. Even with his binoculars he could not tell what creature it was, or what it might become if he stared at it long enough. Didn't know if eventually it had scattered into a thousand shapes, revealed as a school of fish, or if the color of the water, the sharpness of the light, changed and made it disappear, revealed as an illusion. In that tension between what he could and couldn't know about even the mundane world, he felt at home in a way he would not have five years ago. He needed no greater mysteries now than those moments when the world seemed as miraculous as in his old sermons. And it was a good story for down at the village bar, the kind of story they expected from the lighthouse keeper, if anyone expected anything from him at all.

"So that's why it's of interest to us, what with the way the lens wound up here, and how that relates to the whole history of both lighthouses," Suzanne said from behind him. She had been having a conversation with Saul in his absence, apparently, and seemed to believe he had been responding. Behind her, Henry was about ready to collapse, although the trek had become a regular routine.

When he'd dropped the equipment and regained his breath, Henry said, "You have a marvelous view from up here." He always said this, and Saul had stopped giving a polite response, or any response.

"How long are you here for this time?" Saul asked. This particular stint had already lasted two weeks, and he'd put off asking, fearing the answer.

Henry's shadow-circled gaze narrowed. "This time our permit allows us access through the end of the year." Some old injury or accident of birth meant his head was bent to the right, especially when he spoke, right ear almost touching the upward slope of his shoulder. It gave him a mechanical aspect.

"Just a reminder: You can touch the beacon, but you can't in any way interfere with its function." Saul had repeated this warning every day since they'd come back. Sometimes in the past they'd had strange ideas about what they could and could not do.

“Relax, Saul,” Suzanne said, and he gritted his teeth at her use of his first name. At the beginning, they’d called him Mr. Evans, which he preferred.

He took more than the usual juvenile pleasure in positioning them on the rug, beneath which lay a trapdoor and a converted watch room that had once held the supplies needed to maintain the light before the advent of automation. Keeping the room from them felt like keeping a compartment of his mind hidden from their experiments. Besides, if these two were as observant as they seemed to think they were, they would have realized what the sudden cramping of the stairs near the top meant.

When he was satisfied they had settled in and were unlikely to disturb anything, he gave them a nod and left. Halfway down, he thought he heard a breaking sound from above. It did not repeat. He hesitated, then shrugged it off, continued to the bottom of the spiral stairs.

Below, Saul busied himself with the grounds and organizing the toolshed, which had become a mess. More than one hiker wandering through had seemed surprised to find a lighthouse keeper walking the grounds around the tower as if he were a hermit crab without its shell, but in fact there was a lot of maintenance required due to the way storms and the salt air could wear down everything if he wasn’t vigilant. In the summer, it was harder, with the heat and the biting flies.

The girl, Gloria, snuck up on him while he was inspecting the boat he kept behind the shed. The shed abutted a ridge of soil and coquina parallel to the beach and a line of rocks stretching out to sea. At high tide, the sea flowed up to reinvigorate tidal pools full of sea anemones, starfish, blue crabs, snails, and sea cucumbers.

She was a solid, tall presence for her age, big for nine—“Nine and a half!”—and although Gloria sometimes wobbled on those rocks there was rarely any wobble in her young mind, which Saul admired. His own middle-aged brain sometimes slipped a gear or two.

So there she was again, a sturdy figure on the rocks, in her winter-weather gear—jeans, hooded jacket and sweater underneath, thick boots for wide feet—as he finished with the boat and brought compost around back in the wheelbarrow. She was talking to him. She was always talking to him, ever since she’d started coming by about a year ago.

“You know my ancestors lived here,” she said. “Mama says they lived right here, where the lighthouse is.” She had a deep and level voice for one so young, which sometimes startled him.

“So did mine, child,” Saul told her, upturning the wheelbarrow load into the compost pile. Although truth was, the other side of his family had been an odd combination of rumrunners and fanatics who he liked to say, down at the bar, “had come to this land fleeing religious freedom.”

After considering Saul’s assertion for a moment, Gloria said, “Not before mine.”

“Does it matter?” He noticed he’d missed some caulking on the boat.

The child frowned; he could feel her frown at his back, it was that powerful. “I don’t know.” He looked over at her, saw she’d stopped hopping between rocks, had decided that teetering on a dangerously sharp one made more sense. The sight made his stomach lurch, but he knew she never slipped, even though she seemed in danger of it many times, and as many times as he’d talked to her about it, she’d always ignored him.

“I think so,” she said, picking up the conversation. “I think it does.”

“I’m one-eighth Indian,” he said. “I was here, too. Part of me.” For what that was worth. A distant relative had told him about the lighthouse keeper’s job, it was true, but no one else had wanted it.

“So what,” she said, jumping to another sharp rock, balancing atop it, arms for a moment flailing and Saul taking a couple of steps closer to her out of fear.

She annoyed him much of the time, but he hadn’t yet been able to shake her loose. Her father lived in the middle of the country somewhere, and her mother worked two jobs from a bungalow up the coast. The mother had to drive to far-off Bleakersville at least once a week, and probably figured her kid could manage on her own every now and again. Especially if the lighthouse keeper was looking after her. And the lighthouse held a kind of fascination for Gloria that he hadn’t been able to break with his boring shed maintenance and wheelbarrow runs to the compost pile.

In the winter, too, she would be by herself a lot anyway—out on the mudflats just to the west, poking at fiddler crab holes with a stick or chasing after a half-domesticated doe, or peering at coyote or bear scat as if it held some secret. Whatever was on offer.

“Who’re those strange people, coming around here?” she asked.

That almost made him laugh. There were a lot of strange people hidden away on the forgotten coast, himself included. Some were hiding from the government, some from themselves, some from spouses. A few believed that they were creating their own sovereign states. A couple probably weren't in the country legally. People asked questions out here, but they didn't expect an honest answer. Just an inventive one.

"Who exactly do you mean?"

"The ones with the pipes?"

It took Saul a moment, during which he imagined Henry and Suzanne skipping along the beach, pipes in their mouths, smoking away furiously.

"Pipes. Oh, they weren't pipes. They were something else." More like huge translucent mosquito coils. He'd let the Light Brigade leave the coils in the back room on the ground floor for a few months last summer. How in the heck had she seen that, anyway?

"Who are they?" she persisted, as she balanced now on two rocks, which at least meant Saul could breathe again.

"They're from the island up the coast." Which was true—their base was still out on Failure Island, home to dozens of them, a regular warren. "Doing tests," as the rumors went down at the village bar, where they did indeed like a good story. Private researchers with government approval to take readings. But the rumors also insinuated that the S&SB had some more sinister agenda. Was it the orderliness, the precision, of some of them or the disorganization of the others that led to this rumor? Or just a couple of bored, drunk retirees emerging from their mobile homes to spin stories?

The truth was he didn't know what they were doing out on the island, or what they had planned to do with the equipment on the ground floor, or even what Henry and Suzanne were doing at the top of the lighthouse right now.

"They don't like me," she said. "And I don't like them."

That did make him chuckle, especially the brazen, arms-folded way she said it, like she'd decided they were her eternal enemy.

"Are you laughing at *me*?"

"No," he said. "No, I'm not. You're a curious person. You ask questions. That's why they don't like you. That's all." People who asked questions didn't necessarily like being asked questions.

"What's wrong with asking questions?"

“Nothing.” Everything. Once the questions snuck in, whatever had been certain became uncertain. Questions opened the way for doubt. His father had told him that. “Don’t let them ask questions. You’re already giving them the answers, even if they don’t know it.”

“But you’re curious, too,” she said.

“Why do you say that?”

“You guard the light. And light sees everything.”

The light might see everything, but he’d forgotten a few last tasks, a few last things that would keep him out of the lighthouse for longer than he liked. He moved the wheelbarrow onto the gravel next to the station wagon. He felt a vague urgency, as if he should check on Henry and Suzanne. What if they had found the trapdoor and done something stupid, like fallen in and broken their strange little necks? Staring up just then, he saw Henry staring down from the railing far above, and that made him feel foolish. Like he was being paranoid. Henry waved, or was it some other gesture? Dizzy, Saul looked away as he made a kind of wheeling turn, disoriented by the sun’s glare.

Only to see something glittering from the lawn—half hidden by a plant rising from a tuft of weeds near where he’d found a dead squirrel a couple of days ago. Glass? A key? The dark green leaves formed a rough circle, obscuring whatever lay at its base. He knelt, shielded his gaze, but the glinting thing was still hidden by the leaves of the plant, or was it part of a leaf? Whatever it was, it was delicate beyond measure, yet perversely reminded him of the four-ton lens far above his head.

The sun was a whispering corona at his back. The heat had risen, but there was a breeze that lifted the leaves of the palmettos in a rattling stir. The girl was somewhere behind him singing a nonsense song, having come back off the rocks earlier than he’d expected.

Nothing existed in that moment except for the plant and the gleam he could not identify.

He had gloves on still, so he knelt beside the plant and reached for the glittering thing, brushing up against the leaves. Was it a tiny shifting spiral of light? It reminded him of what you might see staring into a kaleidoscope, except an intense white. But whatever it was swirled and glinted and eluded his rough grasp, and he began to feel faint.

Alarmed, he started to pull back.

But it was too late. He felt a sliver enter his thumb. There was no pain, only a pressure and then numbness, but he still jumped up in surprise, yowling and waving his hand back and forth. He frantically tore off the glove, examined his thumb. Aware that Gloria was watching him, not sure what to make of him.

Nothing now glittered on the ground in front of him. No light at the base of the plant. No pain in his thumb.

Slowly, Saul relaxed. Nothing throbbed in his thumb. There was no entry point, no puncture. He picked up the glove, checked it, couldn't find a tear.

"What's wrong?" Gloria asked. "Did you get stung?"

"I don't know," he said.

He felt other eyes upon him then, turned, and there stood Henry. How had he gotten down the stairs so fast? Had more time passed than he'd imagined?

"Yes—is something wrong, Saul?" Henry asked, but Saul could find no way to reconcile the concern expressed with any concern in the tone of his voice. Because there was none. Only a peculiar eagerness.

"Nothing is wrong," he said, uneasy but not knowing why he should be. "Just pricked my thumb."

"Through your gloves? That must have been quite the thorn." Henry was scanning the ground like someone who had lost a favorite watch or a wallet full of money.

"I'm fine, Henry. Don't worry about me." Angry more at looking silly over nothing, but also wanting Henry to believe him. "Maybe it was an electric shock."

"Maybe …" The gleam of the man's eyes was the light of a cold beacon coming to Saul from far off, as if Henry were broadcasting some other message entirely.

"Nothing is wrong," Saul said again.

Nothing was wrong.

Was it?

"I'm loving the Southern Reach trilogy. Creepy and fascinating."

—**STEPHEN KING**

In the conclusion to the *New York Times*–bestselling Southern Reach trilogy, questions are answered, true natures revealed, terrors deepened.

It is winter in Area X, the mysterious wilderness that has defied explanation for thirty years, rebuffing expedition after expedition, refusing to reveal its secrets. As Area X expands, the agency tasked with investigating and overseeing it—the Southern Reach—has collapsed in on itself in confusion. Now one last, desperate team crosses the border, determined to reach a remote island that may hold the answers they've been seeking. If they fail, the outer world is in peril.

Meanwhile, *Acceptance* tunnels ever deeper into the circumstances surrounding the creation of Area X—what initiated this unnatural upheaval? Among the many who have tried, who has gotten close to understanding Area X—and who may have been corrupted by it?

In this last installment of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy, the mysteries of Area X may be solved, but their consequences and implications are no less profound—or terrifying.

PRAISE FOR THE SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY

"More than just a horror novel; there's something Poe-like in this tightening, increasingly paranoid focus. But where Poe kept his most vicious blows relatively oblique, VanderMeer drives them deep . . . in a corkscrewing way that is no less cruel and exquisite."

—**N. K. JEMISIN**, *The New York Times*

"Ingenious . . . VanderMeer masterfully conjures up an atmosphere of both metaphysical dread and visceral tension . . . It's about science as a way of not only thinking but feeling, rather than science as a means of becoming certain about the world."

—**LAURA MILLER**, *Salon*

"Successfully creepy, an old-style gothic horror novel set in a not-too-distant future. The best bits turn your mind inside out."

—**SARA SKLAROFF**, *The Washington Post*

JEFF VANDERMEER is an award-winning novelist and editor. His fiction has been translated into twenty languages and has appeared in the Library of America's *American Fantastic Tales* and multiple year's-best anthologies. He grew up in the Fiji Islands and now lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife.

Visit www.SouthernReachTrilogy.com for interactive maps, reading group guides, and more.

COVER DESIGN BY CHARLOTTE STRICK

COVER ILLUSTRATION AND
AUTHOR PORTRAIT BY ERIC NYQUIST

FSG ORIGINALS

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
WWW.FSGORIGINALS.COM