

Christopher Rowe has published short stories in Realms of Fantasy, Infinite Matrix, Swan Sister, and Trampoline, and collected several tales in the chapbook Bittersweet Creek and Other Stories, but he's best known for "The Voluntary State," a short story that earned several award nominations after it appeared in Sci Fiction two years ago. He and Gwenda Bond produce the ever-interesting magazine Say...

A native Kentuckian currently living in Lexington, Mr. Rowe offers up a challenging vision of America in his F&SF debut.

Another Word for Map Is Faith

By Christopher Rowe

THE LITTLE DRIVERS THREW baggage down from the top of the bus and out from its rusty undercarriage vaults. This was the last stop. The road broke just beyond here, a hundred yards short of the creek.

With her fingertip, Sandy traced the inked ridge northeast along the map, then rolled the soft leather into a cylinder and tucked it inside her vest. She looked around for her pack and saw it tumbled together with the other Cartographers' luggage at the base of a catalpa tree. Lucas and the others were sorting already, trying to lend their gear some organization, but the stop was a tumult of noise and disorder.

The high country wind shrilled against the rush of the stony creek; disembarkees pawed for their belongings and tried to make sense of the delicate, coughing talk of the unchurched little drivers. On the other side of the valley, across the creek, the real ridge line — *the geology*, her father would have said disdainfully — stabbed upstream. By her rough estimation it had rolled perhaps two degrees off the angle of its writ mapping.

Lucas would determine the exact discrepancy later, when he extracted his instruments from their feather and wax paper wrappings.

"Third world *bullshit*," Lucas said, walking up to her. "The transit services people from the university paid these little schemers before we ever climbed onto that deathtrap, and now they're asking for the fare." Lucas had been raised near the border, right outside the last town the bus had stopped at, in fact, though he'd dismissed the notion of visiting any family. His patience with the locals ran inverse to his familiarity with them.

"Does this count as the third world?" she asked him. "Doesn't there have to be a general for that? Rainforests and steel ruins?"

Lucas gave his half-grin — not quite a smirk — acknowledging her reduction. Cartographers were famous for their willful ignorance of social expressions like politics and history.

"Carmen paid them, anyway," he told her as they walked toward their group. "Probably out of her own pocket, thanks be for wealthy dilettantes."

"Not fair," said Sandy. "She's as sharp as any student in the seminar, and a better hand with the plotter than most post-docs, much less grad students."

Lucas stopped. "I hate that," he said quietly. "I hate when you separate yourself — go out of your way to remind me that you're a teacher and I'm a student."

Sandy said the same thing she always did. "I hate when you forget it."

Against all odds, they were still meeting the timetable they'd drawn up back at the university, all those months ago. The bus pulled away in a cloud of noxious diesel fumes an hour before dark, leaving its passengers in a muddy camp dotted with fire rings but otherwise marked only by a hand-lettered sign pointing the way to a primitive latrine.

The handful of passengers not connected with Sandy's group had melted into the forest as soon as they'd found their packages. ("Salt and sugar," Lucas had said, "They're backwoods people — hedge shamans and survivalists. There's every kind of lunatic out here.") This left Sandy to stand by and pretend authority while the Forestry graduate student whose services she'd borrowed showed them all how to set up their camps.

Carmen, naturally, had convinced the young man to demonstrate tent pitching to the others using her own expensive rig as an example. The olive-skinned girl sat in a camp chair folding an onionskin scroll back on itself and writing in a wood-bound notebook while the others struggled with canvas and willow poles.

"Keeping track of our progress?" Sandy asked, easing herself onto the ground next to Carmen.

"I have determined," Carmen replied, not looking up, "that we have traveled as far from a hot water heater as is possible and still be within Christendom."

Sandy smiled, but shook her head, thinking of the most remote places she'd ever been. "Davis?" she asked, watching her student's reaction to mention of that unholy town.

Carmen, a Californian, shuddered but kept her focus. "There's a naval base in San Francisco, sí? They've got all the amenities, surely."

Sandy considered again, thinking of cold camps in old mountains, and of muddy jungle towns ten days' walk from the closest bus station.

"Cape Canaveral," she said.

With quick, precise movements, Carmen folded a tiny desktop over her chair's arm and spread her scroll out flat. She drew a pair of calipers out from her breast pocket and took measurements, pausing once to roll the scroll a few turns. Finally, she gave a satisfied smile and said, "Only fifty-five miles from Orlando. We're almost twice that from Louisville."

She'd made the mistake Sandy had expected of her. "But Orlando, Señorita Reyes, is Catholic. And we were speaking of Christendom."

A stricken look passed over her student's face, but Sandy calmed her with exaggerated conspiratorial looks left and right. "Some of your fellows aren't so liberal as I am, Carmen. So remember where you are. Remember *who* you are. Or who you're trying to become."

Another reminder issued, Sandy went to see to her own tent.

The Forestry student gathered their wood, brought them water to reconstitute their freeze-dried camp meals, then withdrew to his own tent far back in the trees. Sandy told him he was welcome to spend the evening around their fire — "You built it, after all," she'd said — but he'd made a convincing excuse.

The young man pointed to the traveling shrine her students had erected in the center of their camp, pulling a wooden medallion from beneath his shirt. "That Christ you have over there, ma'am," he said. "He's not this one, is he?"

Sandy looked at the amulet he held, gilded and green. "What do you have there, Jesus in the Trees?" she asked, summoning all her professional courtesy to keep the amusement out of her voice. "No, that's not the Christ we keep. We'll see you in the morning."

They didn't, though, because later that night, Lucas discovered that the forest they were camped in wasn't supposed to be there at all.

HE'D FOUND an old agricultural map somewhere and packed it in with their little traveling library. Later, he admitted that he'd only pulled it out for study because he was still sulking from Sandy's clear signal he wouldn't be sharing her tent that night.

Sandy had been leading the rest of the students in some prayers and thought exercises when Lucas came up with his moldering old quarto. "Tillage," he said, not even bothering to explain himself before he'd foisted the book off on his nearest fellow. "All the acreage this side of the ridge line is supposed to be under tillage."

Sandy narrowed her eyes, more than enough to quiet any of her charges, much less Lucas. "What's he got there, Ford?" she asked the thin undergraduate who now held the book.

"Hmmm?" said the boy; he was one of those who fell instantly and almost irretrievably into any text and didn't look up. Then, at an elbow from Carmen, he said, "Oh! This is..." He turned the book over in his hands, angled the spine toward one of the oil lamps and read, "This is *An Agricultural Atlas of Clark County, Kentucky.*"

"County," said Carmen. "Old book, Lucas."

"But it's *writ*," said Lucas. "There's nothing superseding the details of it and it doesn't contradict anything else we brought about the error. Hell, it even confirms the error we came to correct." Involuntarily, all of them looked up and over at the apostate ridge.

"But what's this about tillage," Sandy said, giving him the opportunity to show off his find even if it was already clear to her what it must be.

"See, these plot surveys in the appendices didn't get accounted for in the literature survey we're working from. The book's listed as a source, but only as a supplemental confirmation. It's not just the ridge that's wrong, it's the stuff growing down this side, too. We're supposed to be in grain fields of some kind down here in the flats, then it's pasturage on up to the summit line."

A minor find, sure, but Sandy would see that Lucas shared authorship on the corollary she'd file with the university. More importantly, it was an opportunity before the hard work of the days ahead.

"We can't do anything about the hillsides tonight, or any of the acreage beyond the creek," she told them. "But as for these glades here...."

It was a simple exercise. The fires were easily set.

In the morning, Sandy drafted a letter to the Dean of Agriculture while most of her students packed up the camp. She had detailed a few of them to sketch the corrected valley floor around them, and she'd include those visual notes with her instructions to the Dean, along with a copy of the writ map from Lucas's book.

"Read that back to me, Carmen," she said, watching as Lucas and Ford argued over yet another volume, this one slim and bound between paper boards. It was the same back country cartographer's guide she'd carried on her own first wilderness forays as a grad student. They'd need its detailed instructions on living out of doors without the Tree Jesus boy to help them.

"By my hand," read Carmen, "I have caused these letters to be writ. Blessings on the Department of Agriculture and on you, Dean. Blessings on Jesus Sower, the Christ you serve."

"Skip to the end, dear." Sandy had little patience for the formalities of academic correspondence, and less for the pretense at holiness the Agriculturalists made with their little fruiting Christ.

"So, then, it is seen in these texts that Cartography has corrected the error so far as in our power, and now the burden is passed to you and your brethren to complete this holy task, and return the land to that of Jesus' vision." Carmen paused. "Then you promise to remember the Dean in your prayers and all the rest of the politesse."

"Good. Everything observed. Make two copies and bring the official one to me for sealing when you're done."

Carmen turned to her work and Sandy to hers. The ashen landscape extending up the valley was still except for some ribbons twisting in a light breeze. The ribbons were wax sealed to the parchment banner her students had set at first light, the new map of the valley floor drawn in red and black against a cream background. Someone had found the blackened disc of the Forestry student's medallion and leaned it against the base of the banner's staff and Sandy wondered if it had been Carmen, prone to sentiment, or perhaps Lucas, prone to vague gestures.

By midmorning, the students had readied their gear for the march up the ridge line and Carmen had dropped Sandy's package for the university in the mailbox by the bus stop. Before they hoisted their backpacks, though, Sandy gathered them all for fellowship and prayer.

"The gymnasiums at the University have made us fit enough for this task," and here she made a playful flex with her left arm, earning rolled eyes from Lucas and a chuckle from the rest. "The libraries have given us the woodcraft we need, and the chapels have given us the sustenance of our souls."

Sandy swept her arm north to south, indicating the ridge. "When I was your age, oh so long ago — " and a pause here for another ripple of laughter, acknowledgment of her dual status as youngest tenured faculty member at the university and youngest ordained minister in the curia. "When I was your age, I was blessed with the opportunity to go to the Northeast, traveling the lands beyond the Susquehanna, searching out error."

Sandy smiled at the memory of those times — *could they be ten years gone already?* "I traveled with men and women strong in the Lord, soldiers and scholars of God. There are many errors in the Northeast."

Maps so brittle with age that they would flake away in the cold winds of the Adirondack passes, so faded that only the mightiest of prayers would reveal Jesus' true intentions for His world.

"But none here in the heartlands of the Church, right? Isn't that what our parish priests told us growing up?" The students recognized that she was beginning to teach and nodded, murmured assent.

"Christians, there *is* error here. There is error right before our eyes!" Her own students weren't a difficult congregation to hook, but she was gratified nonetheless by the gleam she caught in most of their eyes, the calls, louder now, of "Yes!" and "I see it! I see the lie!"

"I laid down my protractor, friends, I know exactly how far off north Jesus mapped this ridge line to lay," she said, sweeping her arm in a great arc, taking in the whole horizon, "And that ridge line sins by two degrees!"

"May as well be two *hundred!*" said Carmen, righteous.

Sandy raised her hand, stopped them at the cusp of celebration instead of loosing them. "Not yet," she said. "It's tonight. It's tonight we'll sing down the glory, tonight we'll make this world the way it was mapped."

The march up the ridge line did not go as smoothly as Sandy might have wished, but the delays and false starts weren't totally unexpected. She'd known Lucas — a country boy after all — would take the lead, and she'd guessed that he would dead-end them into a crumbling gully or two before he picked the right route through the brambles. If he'd been some kind of natural-born hunter he would never have found his way to the Lord, or to education.

Ford and his friends — all of them destined for lecture halls and libraries, not fieldwork — made the classic, the *predicted* mistake she'd specifically warned against in the rubric she'd distributed for the expedition. "If we're distributing six hundred pounds of necessities across twenty-two packs," she asked Ford, walking easily beside him as he struggled along a game trail, "How much weight does that make each of us responsible for?"

"A little over twenty-seven pounds, ma'am," he said, wheezing out the reply.

"And did you calculate that in your head like a mathematician or did you remember it from the syllabus?" Sandy asked. She didn't press too hard, the harshness of the lesson was better imparted by the straps cutting into his shoulders than by her words.

"I remembered it," Ford said. And because he really did have the makings of a great scholar and great scholars are nothing if not owners of their own errors, he added, "It was in the same paragraph that said not to bring too many books."

"Exactly," she said, untying the leather cords at the top of his pack and pulling out a particularly heavy looking volume. She couldn't resist looking at the title page before dropping it into her own pack.

"*Unchurched Tribes of the Chiapas Highlands: A Bestiary*. Think

we'll make it to Mexico on this trip, Ford?" she asked him, teasing a little.

Ford's face reddened even more from her attention than it had from the exertions of the climb. He mumbled something about migratory patterns, then leaned into the hike.

If most of the students were meeting their expectations of themselves and one another, then Carmen's sprightly, sure-footed bounding up the trail was a surprise to most. Sandy, though, had seen the girl in the gym far more frequently than the other students, most of whom barely met the minimum number of visits per week required by their advising committees. Carmen was as much an athlete as herself, and the lack of concern the girl showed about dirt and insects was refreshing.

So it was Carmen who summited first, and it was she who was looking northeast with a stunned expression on her face when Sandy and Lucas reached the top side by side. Following Carmen's gaze, Lucas cursed and called for help in taking off his heavily laden pack before he began unrolling the oilcloth cases of his instruments.

Sandy simply pursed her lips and began a mental review of her assets: the relative strengths and weaknesses of her students, the number of days' worth of supplies they carried, the nature of the curia-designed instruments that Lucas exhibited a natural affinity for controlling. She began to nod. She'd marshaled more than enough strength for the simple tectonic adjustment they'd planned, and she could set her own unquestionable faith against this new challenge if it revealed any deficiencies among her students. She would make a show of asking their opinions, but she already knew that this was a challenge she could meet.

Ford finally reached the top of the ridge line, not so much climbing as stumbling to the rocky area where the others were gathering. Once he looked up and around, he said, "The survey team that found the error in the ridge's orientation, they didn't come up here."

"They were specifically scouting for projects that the university could handle," said Sandy. "If they'd been up here, they would have called in the Mission Service, not us."

Spread out below them, ringed in tilled fields and dusted with a scattering of wooden fishing boats, was an unmapped lake.
