GLEANINGS

ARC OF A SCYTHE

GLEANINGS

Stories from the Arc of a Scythe

NEAL SHUSTERMAN



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2022 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2022 by Neal Shusterman
Jacket illustration © 2022 by Kevin Tong

The right of Neal Shusterman to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Bembo

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0954-0

www.walker.co.uk



For my friend and publisher,
Justin Chanda,
who believed in this series
from the beginning,
and has always believed in me
– N. S.

Contents

The First Swing 9

Formidable 13

Never Work with Animals 35

A Death of Many Colors 89

Unsavory Row 109

A Martian Minute 135

The Mortal Canvas 209

Cirri 253

Anastasia's Shadow 265

The Persistence of Memory 305

Meet Cute and Die 343

Perchance to Glean 373

A Dark Curtain Rises 407

The First Swing

Slicing through the air with effortless aplomb,
the moment you take your first swing,
you wield your axe
like you are a master in the art of gleaning.

Those before you are in awe.
They cannot imagine what your next move will be.
You carry yourself as balanced and poised as a performer
dancing brutally among them;
the searing star of stars,
your robe cascading to the earth
in showers of gold.

But that is not the truth.

Your worth does not matter
to those who now matter to you.
You are truly nothing but a tiny sunspot
to the eyes of others like yourself.
An insignificant fleck.
And as you take that first swing,
they laugh at you.

You try to rise above their derision,
to be noticed in some small way.
To find favor from the old ones,
who are never old.
To gain respect from the young ones,
who have slain their own youth.
To justify the arrogance
that comes with the pride
of being chosen.

But that is not the truth either.

It will be years until you come to know the truth:
That those you revere are merely servants
to the collective that we prune.
It was *their* choice to let *us* choose
all those years ago.
The awed, terrified, relieved spectators;
the real ones in power,
the puppeteers of your actions.

Standing in a perfect line before them,
a cutting edge,
wielding our axes,
each one of us is the same as the last.
We are one in all,
We are all in one, and

We.
Shall.
Kill.

Our mantra, our commandment,
our duty to remind the immortal of mortality.
To teach them
that eternal repose may be distant,
but not lost.

Who are We?
We are Scythes.
And the weapons We wield
are not by any means our friends.
The devastating force
of bullet, blade, and bludgeon
tears us apart each day, every day,
piece by piece,
and leaves us with wounds that will never heal.
This is what ties us to the masses,
yet restrains us from being one with them.
And with each new gleaning,
We bleed and break anew,
yet our resolve never changes.

For We are scythes.
Nothing will ever change that fact.

And when it is your time to bleed,
you will know,
and you will learn.

– *Joelle Shusterman*

Formidable

"It takes time, Susan," Michael had told her. "Soon the girl who you once were will wither into memory. You will inhabit your new identity fully and completely."

Which was easy for him to say – Michael had already been a scythe for five years. She wondered how long it had taken him to "inhabit" himself. He was so fully Faraday, she couldn't imagine him being anyone else.

I am Marie. Not Susan. It was something she constantly had to tell herself – because it wasn't just about presenting herself as Scythe Marie Curie; she had to start seeing herself that way. *Feeling* the reality of it. The public persona was one thing, but getting that persona into one's own thoughts was another. It was like thinking in a different language.

"This will cease to be a role you play, and will become who you are," Faraday had assured her. "And once it does, I have a feeling you'll be formidable!"

But so far she felt anything but. Her first few months of gleaning had been unremarkable. Utilitarian. Functional. She did her job, but was still trying to find a style that defined her. Without it, she felt sloppy and undirected.

This was her state of mind when Susan – no … when *Marie* – arrived at Harvest Conclave, Year of the Marlin. It was her first

conclave as a full-fledged scythe. She had naively thought that the grand gathering of scythes would be easier to bear now that she was no longer a mere apprentice … but that couldn't be further from the truth.

While most scythes arrived in driverless vehicles – publicars, or scythe limousines for the more ostentatious among them – Marie drove herself in an old mortal-age Porsche that had been gifted to her by the son of a man she had gleaned. As she stepped out, rather than letting the car be taken by a member of the scytheguard, she turned to the gathered crowd.

"Is there anyone here who can drive a nonautonomous, off-grid stick shift?"

Very few hands went up. She chose a young man, who seemed about her age. Nineteen or so. When he realized he had been selected, he stepped forward, eager as a puppy.

"Careful, it packs a punch," she warned.

"Yes, Your Honor. Thank you, Your Honor. I'll be careful, Your Honor."

She handed him the keys with one hand, then held out her other to him as well. He knelt to kiss her ring and the sight of him doing so made a little girl in the audience squeal with delight.

"Leave the keys with any member of the scytheguard, and they'll find their way back to me," she told him.

He bowed to her. He actually bowed. She recalled that bowing began as a way to show fealty – offering a royal your head for decapitation. While some scythes loved the groveling, Marie found it ridiculous and awkward. She wondered if any scythes ever actually beheaded someone who bowed to them.

"It is a scythe's prerogative to give random tasks to random people," Michael had told her. *"Just as it is a scythe's prerogative to reward them for their service."* She had come to learn it wasn't about feeling superior – it was a way to justify the granting of immunity. In this way Michael had taught her to turn what could have been entitlement into a kindness.

The young man drove off, and Marie joined the pageant – and a pageant is exactly what it was: an intentional spectacle of scythes in their colorful robes ascending the marble steps to Fulcrum City's capital building. The ascension was as important as any business that took place within the building, because it was a reminder to the public of how awe-inspiring the Scythedom was.

There were always hordes on either side of the steps behind a gauntlet of the scytheguard, all hoping to catch a glimpse of their favorite scythes. Some scythes played to the crowd; others did not. But whether they smiled and waved, or scowled in chilling judgment, it left an impression that was essential to the Scythedom's public image.

As she ascended the steps, Marie did not engage the crowd. She wanted nothing more than to be inside and be done with this part of it. In spite of the scythes making their way up with her, she suddenly felt very much alone. She hadn't anticipated how powerful that sense of isolation would be. At her previous conclaves, when she was an apprentice, she was always accompanied by Faraday. But this time not a single scythe around her felt companionable.

There had been five apprentices who took the final test at Vernal Conclave four months back. Marie was the only one to make the cut; the only one ordained. Which meant that she

couldn't even find camaraderie among other first-timers, because there were none. Nor could she fraternize with up-and-coming apprentices, because that was beneath her as a scythe, and would reflect poorly on her.

As for the rest of the scythes, they were either too absorbed by the adulation of the crowd, or too self-absorbed, to notice her sense of solitude. Or maybe they did notice, and took pleasure in it. It's not that the others disliked her – but they did dislike the *idea* of her. They hated the fact that a scythe as young as Faraday, just a few years past his own ordination, had taken on an apprentice. And so Marie bore the brunt of their disapproval.

There were many who made sport of that disapproval, treating her with dismissive disdain. Even now she was getting sideways looks from scythes who clearly disapproved of her choice of robe, a vibrant, bright violet. She had chosen such a vivid color as a way to secretly spite her Tonist parents, who abhorred anything that wasn't faded earth tones. Now she was regretting it, because of the unwanted attention it drew.

She had toyed with the idea of dyeing her hair that same color – but the hairdresser had made a face, and said her single, beautiful braid would get lost against the fabric. "Silver!" he had suggested. "Oh, how striking that would be!"

And so Marie took the advice. Now her silver braid fell along the back of her robe dangling halfway to the ground. She thought this new look would help redefine her from being Faraday's protégé to being her own scythe – but now she could see that it had backfired. She saw smirks and heard snickers, and they reddened her cheeks – which only made her more embarrassed, because now they knew they had gotten to her.

In the vestibule, where the traditional breakfast feast was set out for the eye as well as the appetite, someone finally spoke to her. Scythe Vonnegut approached, in his acid-wash denim robe looking like the surface of the moon; a fabric harkening to a time that no one quite remembered.

"Well if it isn't 'Little Miss Mischief'," Scythe Vonnegut said with a grin. He had the sort of grin that could either be false or genuine, and she could never be sure which. As for the moniker, Marie had no idea who had coined it, but it had taken hold, spreading through the MidMerican Scythedom even before she was ordained. Little Miss Mischief. It was just one more unkindness, for she was neither little nor mischievous. She was a tall girl, slim and gangly – and far from mischievous, she was dour – too serious to ever be up to mischief of any kind.

"I would prefer it if you didn't call me that, Scythe Vonnegut."

He grinned that ambiguous grin. "It's just a term of endearment," he said, then quickly changed the subject. "I love what you've done with your hair!" Again, was it derision, or sincerity? She would have to learn how to read people better. Although scythes were so skilled at remaining unread.

She spotted Faraday across the room. He hadn't seen her yet. Or maybe he was pretending not to. Well, why should she care? She was a scythe now, not some fawning schoolgirl. Matters of the heart had no place in her life.

"You must learn to be less obvious," Scythe Vonnegut whispered to her. "Your infatuation might as well be projected on the walls."

"Why does it matter? Scythe Faraday has no feelings for me."

Again that grin. "If you say so."

A gong sounded, alerting them that they had fifteen more minutes to fill their stomachs.

"Have a good conclave," Vonnegut said as he strode away. "And eat up before the gluttons leave the display in ruins."

Michael did come up to her in the vestibule just a few minutes before they were ushered into the inner chamber, but their conversation was stilted. Both were keenly aware that they were being watched, and judged, and gossiped about.

"You're looking well, Marie," he said. "I trust you had a good first season."

"I've made my quota."

"I had no doubts." She thought he might come closer for a few more personal words, but instead he moved away. "Good to see you, Marie."

She wondered if he could sense how her heart dropped.

The ritual of conclave morning ranged from dull to torturous. The Tolling of the Names. Ten for every scythe, chosen out of the dozens each had gleaned. Ten to represent all the others. Marie's favorites had been Taylor Vega, who, with his last breaths, thanked her for not gleaning him in front of his family; and Toosdai Riggle, because she liked saying the name.

Finally the morning came round to the matters at hand. This season's hot mess of a debate revolved around what to do about the troublemakers in the old capital. But really, it was less of a debate, and more just an opportunity to complain.

"The Windbags of Washington continue to stir an increasingly rancid pot," Scythe Douglass said.

"Yes, but it's not our problem," High Blade Ginsburg

pointed out. "The old capital is in EastMerica. Let them deal with it." As High Blade, she was constantly trying to remind the MidMerican scythes to stay out of business that wasn't theirs – but this time she was wrong. This was more than just an EastMerican problem.

Marie grunted at the High Blade's dismissal of the issue. She hadn't meant anyone to hear, but someone beside her – she thought it was Scythe Streisand – nudged her. "If you have an opinion, offer it," she said. "You're a scythe now. It's time you learned to be opinionated."

"No one wants to hear what I have to say."

"Ha! No one wants to hear what *anyone* has to say, but you say it anyway. That's the way it is around here."

And so Marie stood, and waited until she was recognized by High Blade Ginsburg, who studied Marie for a moment before she spoke.

"Does our newest member care to weigh in on the matter?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," Marie said. "It seems to me that the old pre-Thunderhead government is MidMerica's problem, too – because they still claim hegemony over not just EastMerica, but also MidMerica, WestMerica, and Texas."

Then another scythe shouted without waiting to be recognized. "The paltry claims of the Washingtonians have no bearing on reality! They are a nuisance, nothing more."

"But," said Marie, "as long as they stir up trouble, they weaken everything we stand for."

"It's the Thunderhead that they rail against," said the scythe who spoke out of turn, "so the Thunderhead can deal with them."

"That's short-sighted!" Marie dared to say. "We can't deny that the Scythedom and the Thunderhead are two sides of the same coin. If one is threatened, then so is the other!"

It brought forth a low grumbling from the rest of conclave. She wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

"Let the old-world politicians broadcast their bile," shouted someone else. "If the Thunderhead allows it, then so should we."

"The Thunderhead is obliged to honor their freedom – including their freedom to disrupt," Marie said. "But *we* don't have that obligation. Which means we can actually *do* something about it."

High Blade Ginsburg folded her arms. "So what does the Honorable Scythe Curie propose we do?"

And all eyes turned to her. Suddenly self-consciousness came crashing down on Marie like a harsh autumn wave.

"We … we do what the Thunderhead can't. We solve the problem…"

Silence. Then from across the room, another scythe bellowed in the most resonant of voices. "Could it be that 'Little Miss Mischief' is finally living up to her name?"

That brought a round of laughter so hearty from the throng that it actually echoed throughout the chamber. Marie tried to endure it with dignity, but she felt her spirit imploding.

Once the laughter died down, High Blade Ginsburg, still chuckling, spoke to Marie in her most patronizing tone. "My dear fledgling rapier, the Scythedom's stability comes from consistency and slow deliberation. You would be wise, Scythe Curie, to be less … reactionary."

"Hear, hear!" someone seconded.

And that was that. The High Blade called for other business, and the conversation shifted to the debate on whether scythes should be banned from taking on the same last name as another living scythe, since there was currently constant confusion between Scythes Armstrong, Armstrong, and Armstrong.

Marie let out a breath though her clenched teeth, and it came out as a hiss. "Well, that was pointless."

"Agreed," said Scythe Streisand, "but it was entertaining."

Which only aggravated Marie more. "I'm not here for everyone's entertainment."

Scythe Streisand gave her a judgmental glare. "Honestly, kid, if you can't handle a little smackdown, you have no business being a scythe."

That made Marie bite back anything else she had to say. She looked over to Faraday across the chamber. He didn't as much as glance at her. Was he embarrassed by her display? Pleased that she put forth an opinion? Honestly, there was no way to tell. He certainly didn't lift a finger to support her, but was that such a surprise? As much as Marie hated to admit it, Michael was right to distance himself from her – and not just because of rumors and gossip – but because Marie needed to establish herself without him. But with this crowd, how could she ever do anything that would bring forth something other than smirks, snickers, and folded arms?

"Scythes are figures of action," Faraday had told her during her apprenticeship, then had added with an impish grin, "and not just because they make action figures of us."

He was right. A scythe needed to act decisively and without hesitation – even when it was difficult. If Marie was going to

prove herself, her choices would have to be so breathtaking the Scythedom would have no wind left to laugh.

Marie lived alone. Most scythes did. There wasn't a commandment that made solitude compulsory. *"Thou shalt have neither spouse nor spawn"* didn't mean one couldn't have a lover or companion. But Marie had already found out what most scythes already knew: Anyone who would choose to live with a scythe was not the sort of companion you'd want to share a home with.

Some young scythes returned to the homes of their youth, but it never lasted. Marie could never go back to live with her parents, even if they hadn't been members of that absurd Tonist cult. She couldn't imagine coming home after a gleaning and having to face them. Yes, gleaning was a vital, almost sacred task for humanity, but death was death, and blood was blood.

Marie had chosen for herself a large home in the woods with high ceilings and huge windows, with a view of mountains and a babbling creek. She found that the sound of flowing water calmed her. Cleansed her. She had heard there was a famous residence somewhere where a river actually ran through the home. Something worth exploring someday, but for now, her rustic home sufficed. She had purchased it using Scythedom funds, rather than just taking it from the owner, as some scythes did. After four months, it was barely furnished. Another instance of her not "inhabiting" her life.

The day after returning from conclave, she took a walk in the woods, hoping the crisp, earthy air would purge her of the foul feeling that conclave had left her with, but she came across

two joggers on the path. They were gossiping. Who was cheating on their spouse in virtual brothels; who was traveling to Tasmania for outrageous body modifications; turning a corner for no good reason. It reminded Marie of the petty intrigue that plagued conclave.

Marie gleaned both of them, and immediately regretted it – because wasn't it just as petty to condemn them to death for gossiping? And they weren't clean gleanings, either. Had she done it right, their hearts would have quickly ceased beating and the mess would be minimal. But not this time. She heard Michael's voice in her head chiding her, and telling her to practice her killcraft.

When she got home, her cat, Sierra, quickly came to her, weaving around her ankles. Marie had a part-time housekeeper – the only extravagance Marie allowed herself – who gasped at the sight of Marie's blood-spattered robe. She always gasped, every single time, and she always apologized for it – but Marie was grateful for her honest reaction. The aftermath of gleaning *should* be shocking. If it ever stopped being shocking, then something was wrong.

"Debora, could you please take this robe to the cleaners?" Marie asked her. "Tell them no rush, I still have two others."

"Yes, Your Honor."

The cleaners always did wonders with her robes … although Marie sometimes suspected they just gave her new ones.

After Debora had gone, Marie drew herself a bath to wash the day away, and made the mistake of turning on the news while she soaked.

President Hinton of the Old America was ordering the

Army Corps of Engineers – which still existed for some strange reason – to start dismantling Thunderhead cerebral nodes.

"It is our moral duty to free this great nation from the stranglehold that the dark cloud has over it," Hinton said, in his typical bloviating tone – but it was nothing more than words in a whirlpool. Public opinion was not on Hinton's side. The fact was, fewer than one in twenty even voted anymore – because most everyone knew that the very concept of government was obsolete – and even fewer than that agreed with Hinton's negative view of the Thunderhead. But of course Hinton and his cronies claimed that the Thunderhead's polls were all lies. Hinton lived in such a miasma of falsehoods, he couldn't even conceive of an entity incapable of lying.

The Thunderhead made no effort to stop the server removal. Instead it just established new nodes elsewhere – which had the added benefit of providing thousands of jobs for people who chose to work.

It was well known that the Thunderhead had publicly offered Hinton the same thing it had tried to offer presidents for years: an honorable way to step down; friendly exile anywhere in the world for him, his cabinet, and all their families. They would be handed a new future, free to pursue any activity their hearts desired, as long as it didn't involve a position of political power. Hinton was just one more in a line of presidents who flatly refused.

"I do not fault Mr. Hinton," the Thunderhead had said, always magnanimous. "No one cedes power willingly. Resistance is a natural, expected response."

After her bath, Marie sat before a crackling fire, sipping cocoa, trying to take comfort in simple pleasures, but she