



Landscapes

Christine Lai

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In Christine Lai's haunting novel *Landscapes*, a wounded woman contends with memories, artifacts, loss, and hope.

Penelope is an English country estate's archivist and librarian; she's been there for twenty-two years. Her partner, Aidan, is an heir to the estate. It's a place of former splendor, now damaged by climate change extremes, including flooding, heatwaves, droughts, and earthquakes. When the estate's upkeep becomes overwhelming, it is sold.

Before moving to a new home designed by Aidan, Penelope works to catalog the estate's extensive collections. Additional stress comes from the impending visit of Aidan's brother, Julian. Penelope's once intimate friendship with Julian ended when he assaulted her; he relinquished his share of the estate and moved to New York. Penelope did not report the crime to the police and hasn't seen Julian since.

Julian is intelligent, obsessive, and violent. He exhibits pathological sensitivity. While traveling back to the estate, he reflects upon his relationship with Daphne, which he ended by sending Daphne an unflattering photograph of herself and a detailed "dossier" of her faults enclosed in a lovely, ribbon-tied box.

As Julian's arrival approaches, Penelope remembers how she struggled to recover after the brutal rape. She contemplates artworks depicting women being violated and exploited. She recalls a self-drawn map of emotional "landmines," or places in London that she visited with Julian to which she could no longer return.

The book creates a melancholy division between the arid, uncertain present and the recent past, "when the world was a beautiful blue-green orb that appeared unchanging." Yet even amid shortages and forced migrations, there is cautious excitement over sudden snowfalls or tiny plants that force their way through fissures.

Ethereal and unsparing, *Landscapes* is a novel about destruction, endurance, and resilience.

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