

BOOK 2 OF THE SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY

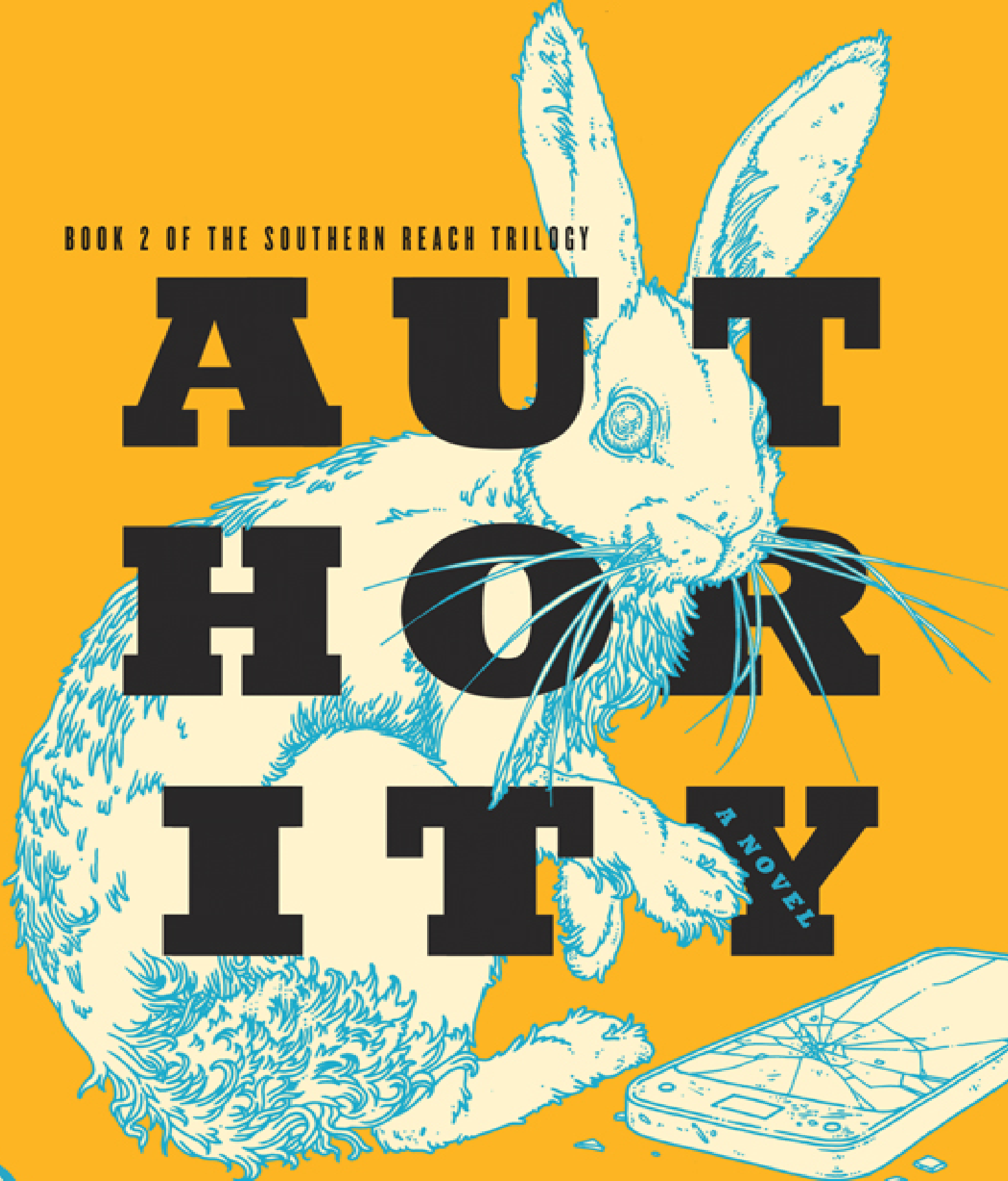
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Acknowledgments

Also by Jeff VanderMeer

A Note About the Author

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INCANTATIONS

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In Control's dreams it is early morning, the sky deep blue with just a twinge of light. He is staring from a cliff down into an abyss, a bay, a cove. It always changes. He can see for miles into the still water. He can see ocean behemoths gliding there, like submarines or bell-shaped orchids or the wide hulls of ships, silent, ever moving, the size of them conveying such a sense of power that he can feel the havoc of their passage even from so far above. He stares for hours at the shapes, the movements, listening to the whispers echoing up to him ... and then he falls. Slowly, too slowly, he falls soundless into the dark water, without splash or ripple. And keeps falling.

Sometimes this happens while he is awake, as if he hasn't been paying enough attention, and then he silently recites his own name until the real world returns to him.

001: FALLING

First day. The beginning of his last chance.

“These are the survivors?”

Control stood beside the assistant director of the Southern Reach, behind smudged one-way glass, staring at the three individuals sitting in the interrogation room. Returnees from the twelfth expedition into Area X.

The assistant director, a tall, thin black woman in her forties, said nothing back, which didn't surprise Control. She hadn't wasted an extra word on him since he'd arrived that morning after taking Monday to get settled. She hadn't spared him an extra look, either, except when he'd told her and the rest of the staff to call him “Control,” not “John” or “Rodriguez.” She had paused a beat, then replied, “In that case, call me Patience, not Grace,” much to the stifled amusement of those present. The deflection away from her real name to one that also meant something else interested him. “That's okay,” he'd said, “I can just call you Grace,” certain this would not please her. She parried by continually referring to him as the “acting” director. Which was true: There lay between her stewardship and his ascension a gap, a valley of time and forms to be filled out, procedures to be followed, the rooting out and hiring of staff. Until then, the issue of authority might be murky.

But Control preferred to think of her as neither patience nor grace. He preferred to think of her as an abstraction if not an obstruction. She had made him sit through an old orientation video about Area X, must have known it would be basic and out of date. She had already made clear that theirs would be a relationship based on animosity. From her side, at least.

“Where were they found?” he asked her now, when what he wanted to ask was why they hadn't been kept separate from one another. Because you lack the discipline, because your department has been going to the rats for a long time now? The rats are down there in the basement now, gnawing away.