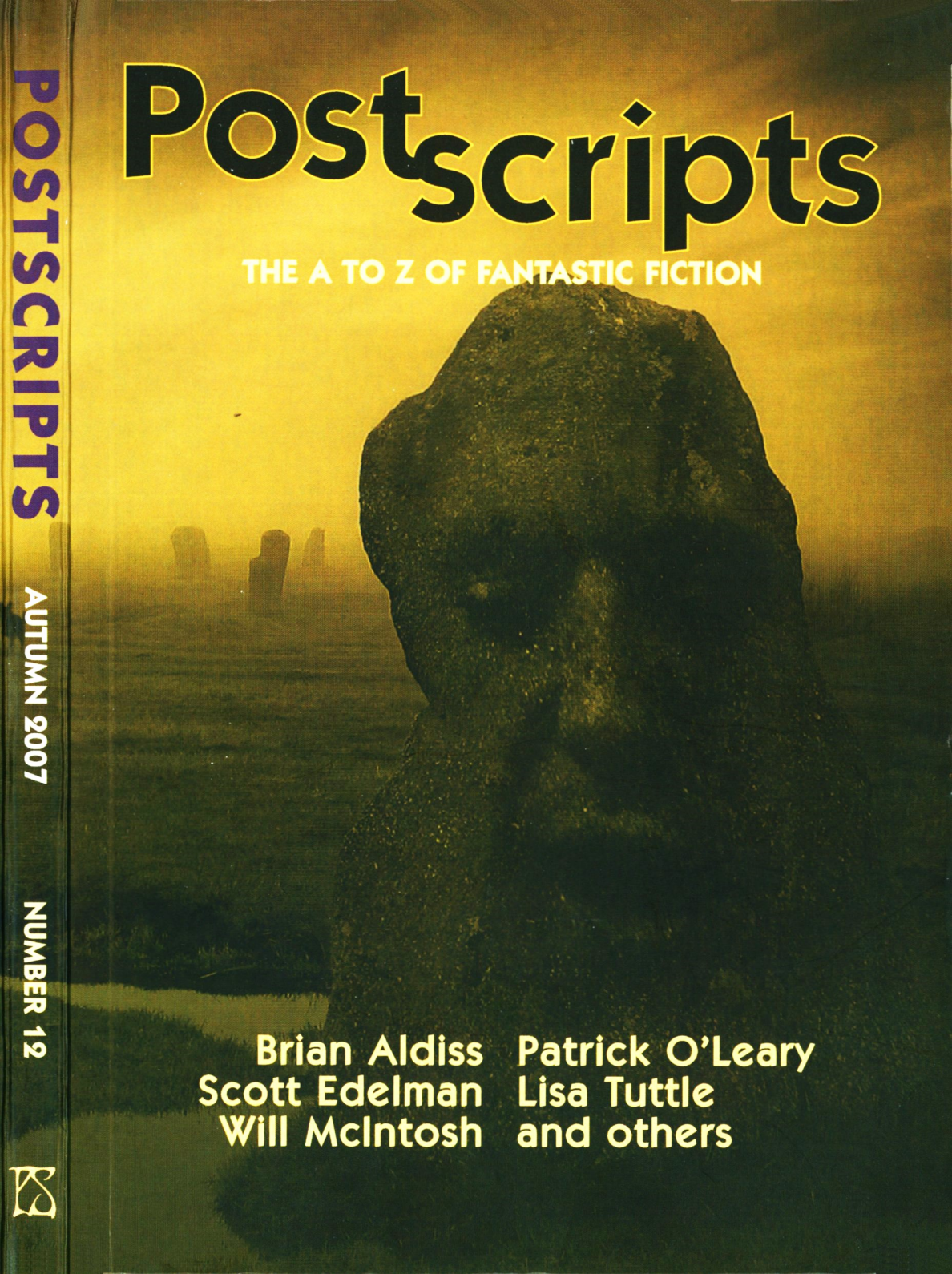

Postscripts
THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION
Brian Aldiss
Scott Edelman
Will McIntosh
Patrick O'Leary
Lisa Tuttle
and others
POSTSCRIPTS
AUTUMN 2007
NUMBER 12

Postscripts

AUTUMN 2007 NUMBER 12

Cover art by Ben Baldwin.

Interior illustrations by Ben Baldwin (pages 11 & 24), *and James Hannah* (page 78).

Peter Crowther
Publisher and Managing Editor

Nick Gevers
Editor

Alligator Tree Graphics
Design and Layout

Postscripts is published quarterly by PS Publishing Ltd.

Paperback £6/$12 per copy

Signed hadback £25/$50 per copy. Postage £2 within UK; £4/$8 outside UK.

Four-issue subscriptions: Unsigned edition–£26 postage-paid within UK; £30/$60 outside UK. Signed edition–£100 postage-paid within the UK; £110/$220 outside the UK. (*Occasional larger issues will be double the normal price for the unsigned edition. These bumper editions will, however, be sent to subscribers at no additional cost.*)

Printed in the UK by Biddles.

Lisa Tuttle is the author of seven novels—most recently The Silver Bough *(Bantam)—and five short story collections, two of which (*My Pathology *and* Ghosts and Other Lovers*) are available as e-books. She has also written non-fiction, including* Encyclopedia of Feminism *and* Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction, *and more than a dozen books for younger readers.*

Editorial

Lisa Tuttle

Lists are:

1. meaningless
2. predictable
3. a waste of time
4. invented by journalists to fill space

Don't send me your answers, because there are no winners here.

It's ridiculous to get annoyed about the results of things like "The Nation's Favourite Books" or "Top Ten Life-Changing Books", I know, because they don't really mean anything; such lists are a way of stirring up interest in books (presumably a good thing) and besides, they are a waste of time, and utterly predictable. And, anyway, since I never vote in these public polls, what right have I to complain?

But I do, for a variety of reasons, one of which is the way "book" has become short-hand for "fiction" which is conflated with "novel", so that whereas poetry gets lists of its own ("The Nation's Favourite Poems" or "100 Poems to Read Before You Die") short stories are demoted to the ephemeral, or the unfinished. If it's not what's sometimes referred to as "a full-length novel" it's not important.

Of course, the category "book" can include single-author collections and anthologies of short stories, and although commercially these may be considered an inferior species, never on the best-seller lists, they're still bought and read and sometimes loved by readers. So where are they? Noticing how many of the "best-loved books" on the BBC-sponsored list of a few years ago were children's books, I became even more baffled by the absence of collections. Of course, if you ask people for their favourite book they're likely to name something that impressed them as new and profound and vitally important, which is probably more common in youth than later in life. (Then again, some people just never read anything after

struggling through *Winnie the Pooh*.) But surely I'm not the only reader who moved as a child out of the baby pool into the deeper waters of grown-up fiction via short stories?

I grew up in a house full of books. My parents were—still are—great readers, with eclectic tastes. As a seven-, eight- and nine-year-old, I found adult books daunting with their many pages, hard words, and lack of pictures, but was eager to move beyond the bland readers provided at school. My father had a subscription to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, which had strange, brightly coloured pictures on the cover. Inside, I read stories by Ray Bradbury, Zenna Henderson, Fritz Leiber, Poul Anderson, among others, some of which I understood.

Certain titles on the bookshelves were especially tempting: *The Haunted Omnibus* (what was an omnibus? I had no idea) and *Famous Psychic and Ghost Stories* introduced me to wonderful, terrifying tales by Arthur Machen, Edith Wharton, Oliver Onions, J. Sheridan LeFanu, M.R. James, W.W. Jacobs, Saki and many others. Then there were the complete works of Poe and Ambrose Bierce, and collections of stories about Sherlock Holmes and "The Amateur Cracksman" (a.k.a. Raffles) that had belonged to my grandfather.

Not long ago the National Book Foundation in America asked National Book Award winners to name their most "life-changing" books, and compiled a list of 100, which can be perused on their website. Along with novels, there are non-fiction and poetry and, yes, even short story collections and anthologies. Writers clearly take a more inclusive view of books than "the general public." Laurie Halse Anderson even nominated a single short story—"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson (one of my own favourites), with the comment "English class wasn't a total waste of time."

How true! Individual short stories often have an impact out of all proportion to their length. And, somehow, they generally hold up better than classic novels under the dead hand of the dullest high school English teachers. They killed *Silas Marner* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, but they couldn't destroy the best of Jackson or Hemingway.

But each short story is just one part of a book, and unless it's an all-hits compendium of a favourite author, most people wouldn't nominate a short story collection as their favourite book. It's the same as if you're asked to list the best albums of all time—some of your favourite songs are bound to be left out.

Yet if I had to name a book that changed my life, it would be an original anthology. *Dangerous Visions* was published in 1967, the year I turned fifteen. It was the most expensive book I'd ever bought—$6.95. I could have bought ten new paperbacks for that and still had enough for a bag of Fritos and a Royal Crown Cola. But I couldn't wait for the paperback, or even the book-club edition, if there was one, and this was clearly the sort of book likely to be banned rather than supplied by

libraries in Texas. And seeing that it contained brand new stories by Theodore Sturgeon, Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany and Roger Zelazny, and reading the promise on the jacket flap—"This is a revolutionary book"—I had to spend all my savings on it.

I was not disappointed. Some of the stories blew me away. Some I didn't understand. But besides the stories—wrapping around them—was all this other stuff: forewords, introductions, afterwords, biographies, bibliographies, jokes, anecdotes, rabble-rousing, hell-raising, politicking and crusading from the authors and, especially, the editor, Harlan Ellison. It opened a door to a new world, and the reader was invited not merely to observe at a distance, but to enter and take part. I believed a book could change the world, and it changed mine.

So let me take the chance to praise not just short stories but the places where they first appear. Not the "Best of" collections at the height or the end of a career—that's easy. I want to cheer the editors and the publishers, the rare original anthologies, and the struggling little magazines that continue to provide a place to read and a reason to continue to write short stories.

I remember sitting alone in my dorm room at college in 1970, reading "The School Friend" by Robert Aickman—a writer I hadn't previously encountered—in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Outside, darkness was falling, and I leaned closer and closer to the page, so wrapped in its sinister atmosphere that the sudden opening of the door behind me, as my roommate returned, made me shriek in terror.

Other discoveries, shocks and delights have continued down the years, sometimes from writers new to me (Michel Faber, Leslie Dick, Ted Chiang, Kelly Link) and sometimes from classics revisited (Chekhov, Turgenev, Borges, Kipling, Wells), and sometimes the latest from an admired contemporary—just last year, in *Postscripts*, Michael Swanwick's "The Bordello in Faerie" showed me that, yes, something new and thrilling can still be mined from the oldest tropes of fantasy.

I seem to be getting perilously close to list-making. Well, why not? I make no claims that what follows is anything more than just a dozen more (not including those already mentioned) of my very favourite, could-not-live-without stories, in no particular order:

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
"Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway
"A Rose for Ecclesiastes" by Roger Zelazny
"Liminal: The Little Man" by Lydia Davis
"The Dead" by James Joyce
"The Foghorn" by Gertrude Atherton
"Lady With Lapdog" by Anton Chekhov

"The Skull of Charlotte Corday" by Leslie Dick
"The Songbirds of Pain" by Garry Kilworth
"The Ugly Chickens" by Howard Waldrop
"Sex and/or Mr. Morrison" by Carol Emshwiller
"A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor

I could go on, I should go on—how can a list of my essential stories not include anything by Borges, Kafka, Ray Bradbury, Kate Wilhelm, Alice Munro, Edith Wharton, Michel Faber, A.L. Kennedy, Philip K. Dick, Theodore Sturgeon? But . . . A self-imposed limit of a dozen. So artificial. But then, so are lists.

Lists are:

1. geeky
2. fun
3. autobiographical
4. necessarily incomplete
5. all of the above

Patrick O'Leary remarks, "There is a good reason we are called 'fiction writers'. Nobody would believe us if we called ourselves 'non-fiction writers'. Besides, then we would have to take notes, testify before Congress, and tell the truth. 'The Cane' began in the usual manner. One starts by choosing the precise amount of words needed for the task like a builder estimates bricks. I was told the Brian Aldiss story in this issue contained 2,800 words. Perfect. I then turned to the themes: Pretention/Materialism/Marrakesh/ Narrative Strategies/Wood Carving. Having settled the metaphorical foundation one moves naturally into embedded puns, tributes to family, disguised bile, and refurbished prose that didn't quite cut the mustard in the last story. The remainder is mostly backfill and spackle. Finally, though, there is the unavoidable element of labor. One must strive to be interesting.

"'The Cane' is a story about my first visit to Gene Wolfe's house in Barrington, Illinois. You'd think that The Best Writer in The World would reside in a more pretentious location closer to the center of culture. You'd think."

Patrick lives near Detroit, Michigan. His collection of new stories, The Black Heart, *comes out in 2008 from PS Publishing.*

The Cane

Patrick O'Leary

The young writer approached the great writer's house as if it were a castle buried deep in the woods, surrounded by an impenetrable moat of thorns. His step slowed as he got closer, and he had to will himself forward. Would the great man sense his palpitating heart? Chide him for his presumption? Would he sneer at him for completely missing the seven hidden layers of Nordic symbolism? Would he refuse to sign his sweaty well-thumbed copies of the Great Works? In short, would he reject his adoration as so much fan noise?

The castle was a red brick ranch on a slab in a suburb of Chicago. Bumble bees drifted lazily through a window-box of pink lantana. A rusty golden mail slot beside the bell. A yellow sticky on the door warded off solicitors. Another one assured interlopers there was a dog to be wary of. Still another reminded Calamity the back door was open and please wipe your paws.

The writer was rereading the last note when the man himself opened the door with fierce cordiality. He was bald and his baggy blue bathrobe revealed a valley of grey chest hair over a corpulent body. He limped back to the living room and offered his guest the best seat. He seemed delighted with the company, effusive in his welcome, generous in his offering of cups of coffee. And, the writer dearly hoped, forthcoming in his answers.

"What was the name of your magazine again?" the old man asked.

"It's not an actual, ahh, well, in fact, it's an online review." He saw the man's face. "It's a blog."

"*Blog*? Goodness."

"We average 30,000 hits a day."

"Goodness! Is that a lot?"

"It's pretty impressive," he admitted.

"And when they *hit* you. What happens exactly?"

"A hit is a visit. Someone who stops at the site."

"I see. It's not like a Vegas black jack hit. Or a Mafiosi hit."

"No, it's a visit."

"Like you stopping by to see me."

The Great Man was to all appearances an ordinary human creature. Retired, arthritic, given to sentimental décor: doh dahs everywhere—angels, fairies, leprechauns—watched him with gleeful aspects—annoying invitations to a party he wouldn't be caught dead at. But he knew this cloak of normalcy had to be a sham, a wrap thrown hastily over a magician's cloak of many colors. And he was determined to find the man behind the curtain, breach the inner sanctum, penetrate the tabernacle and retrieve the definitive codex. He watched the great man sign his bag of first editions—his left hand curling over his signature—an awkward crablike scrawl which gave the impression he was writing upside down.

"You've created such a treasure chest of stories," he began.

"Thank you."

"There's got be a secret."

"Secret?"

"To how you do it." And then he went on a monologue which he was halfway through when he realized he had no idea what he was saying or where his sentences were going to end up. He pressed on regardless, hoping the words would fill the vacuum he felt sucking away his resolve, and transform themselves by their impetus alone into meaning. It was very much like the problems he had with stories, he thought. Oh, he could begin any number of stories. You simply kill someone, or have a bathtub drop through the ceiling, or lay down a particularly apt and lovely turn of phrase, then when things get tedious you call in a plot, an alien or a car chase or—not that there was anything crass about it. He struggled mightily with his prose. He polished and polished until it shone. But what exactly was shining often left him clueless. He found himself unsure what all the gleaming was about. And he hoped a visitation with The Master might give him a clue, might, in fact, give him everything he needed to turn the corner from an ambitious wannabe to become an accomplished has been. Like the man he was talking to? Perhaps he better stop talking.

"Yes," the master said sympathetically. "I know exactly how you feel. I suspect there's a little bit of fraud in all of us who presume to impose our words upon the reader."

And the writer, feeling encouraged, was off again. Talking about story problems. Narrative understructure. The-

matic resonance. The Importance of a governing metaphor. He seemed to be both stating literary theory and cross-examining it, hoping for some verdict from the wise old man, who seemed anything but judgmental, seemed, in fact, to be a fountain of empathy. And again, halfway through his monologue, and this is how he thought of his typing voice, as a monologue, a speaker holding forth in the most eloquent and impassioned whatever as the paragraphs tumbled forth on their inevitable journey to a thrilling, and moving, yes, of course, moving was everything—conclusion—again, he'd lost his way. He'd somehow dropped the story he was telling as well as the point he was making. And once again it terrified him so much he raised his rhetoric up a notch until he was sweating and leaning forward in his seat, declaring his necessary truth upon the world, hoping that no one much less his hero on the other side of the living room would realize he had no idea what he was going on about at all.

"Oh, I understand completely," the old man said. "It is very difficult to know when to begin, when to stop and when to say nothing at all. It is our perennial problem. But I wouldn't be so hard on yourself."

"It's just that I have a problem finishing. Finishing stories. Any story. I find myself rewriting and revising and it's almost like I've never written the first draft." He stopped to catch his breath.

"If there was a secret," the writer said, "I'd be tempted to sell my soul to learn it."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," the old man said. "You may need it some day."

"I'm joking, of course," the young writer assured him.

There was a clatter of claws on linoleum before an ugly brown boxer with blue eyes trotted out of the kitchen.

"Calamity! This is him! The reviewer who understands all my work."

"No, no, no, no," the man chuckled modestly, realizing after a moment that he was addressing himself to the dog.

The dog bared one side of her snout revealing a row of sharp yellow teeth and a growl that sounded uncannily like the human word "raven."

"He wants to know where I get my stories from," said the author to the dog.

Was he really going to tell him? The writer held his breath.

"From Morocco," he explained.

Morocco?

The author turned to the corner where a stack of canes leaned against the wall. Some black, some pale, some bearing faces at the head, one shaft wrapped at intervals in orange amber like a coral snake and tipped with a silver stub. Actually there were quite a lot of canes there.

"Fetch me the girl," he said.

The dog rummaged through the pile of walking sticks until she gripped the

cane with the face and retrieved it for her master, then sat at his feet, never taking her gaze off the young man's face.

The old man thanked her then held up the cane. He looked the woman's screaming face in the eye, then with a twist of the wrist, turned her agony to the fan.

"Her name was unpronounceable outside her native country," he began. "We only have it misheard from a tourist who saw her death. Shantacleer, he called her. Shantacleer was the sacred mute of Marrakech.

"Whenever there was unrequited love, whenever a mother died in labor, whenever a wall fell upon a man, or a camel trampled a child, whenever a funeral began or plague or famine settled on the land like a dark cloud, Shantacleer had the first word.

"A silent wail that was revered by all. For she had the gift of speaking the unspeakable, loosing the vocabulary of sorrow onto the world, venting her city's grief by expressing the deep wound at the center of all living.

"There at the focus of any calamity would stand the woman in white, Shantacleer. The town mourner. Wrapped from head to toe in Egyptian cotton. Her face covered except for her eyes. Her body weaving back and forth as if a serpent from the underworld had seized her ankles and sought to wrench her down into its depths. Rolling her head in anguish, beneath her perfect veil, her mouth an empty bowl covered by the finest linen.

"She grew from a dark-eyed young girl to a dark-eyed young woman. Every day she walked through the Square of Death where the souks sold fruit, silver, meat, magic, jewels and crafts. Where the evil were separated from their heads and their heads decorated the pikes that rimmed the great square. And as she walked the crowds cleared a path before her, saying, 'It is Shantacleer.'

"On the last day of her life the young dark woman was crossing the square, she passed a dentist with his table full of pulled teeth. She nodded to the tumblers in their colorful silk vests and baggy pants. She caught the eye of a young man who would write a famous song about her when he was much older. And, finally, she came upon a man beating a monkey who wore a tiny red fez. She stopped. The monkey tried to run but the man snapped it back with a thin black leather belt he had buckled around its neck. He was striking the monkey with his bare hand, tugging it back into range when it tried to flee screaming, and smacking it again with his open palm.

"'You'll dance when I tell you to dance!' the man said.

"The monkey squealed.

"The dark woman watched until she could no longer bear it. 'Sir,' she said quietly.

"'Dance, I say!'

"The man slapped the monkey again. And the hidden dice spilled out of his fez.

"'Stop!' she said. 'Sir, please!'

"It was the first words anyone had heard her say. A small crowd grew silent around her.

"She bent and retrieved the dirty brown dice. And threw them at the monkey man.

"'Stop it, you beast!'

"He turned his attention from the monkey.

"'Can you not see you are his *god*!?'

"Recognizing her the man bowed and the monkey dashed away dragging its choking belt behind it.

"Like ripples from a stone cast into a well, the stunning news that Shantacleer could speak spread outward in wonder through the square. One by one the people thought, 'She talks!' 'The Mute speaks!' 'It was a Choice!' I say 'thought' because on that day every one in the town found they had lost their tongues. No one could speak.

"No one save the dark-eyed woman.

"The dark-eyed woman who would not stop talking.

"The dark-eyed woman who would not stop telling the truth.

"'You, Captain, take bribes.'

"'You, Mother, cheat on your husband regularly with the barber.'

"'You, Holy Man, love young boys and swear them to secrecy.'

"'You, Belly Dancer, are a man who wants to be a woman.'

"'You, teacher, have never told a truth when a lie would be easier.'

"Naturally after a day of this the situation became intolerable. And the town ripped off her veil, buried her up to her neck and stoned her to death in the middle of the square. It was the first time any of them had seen her face. 'A dangerous beauty' they confirmed before her features became unrecognizable.

"They set her head upon the highest pike.

"And that very hour their voices returned.

"When her head had been scavenged by birds, a wooden pike was commissioned and carved to commemorate the day of silence. And her screaming head stood above the square for fifty years until it was burned down in a war. The image grew into a legend, survived centuries and eventually became a popular souvenir—carved into plates, bowls, even the heads of canes. They called it 'The Silent Scream.'"

The old man took a dainty sip of coffee from his mug.

The young man was silent. But finally he managed to say, "That was . . . I was . . . there." He swallowed. "I could see her face at the stoning."

"Could you?" the old man said, not unpleased with the response.

"It was horrible."

"I imagine it was."

His head ached from the frowning. "That's it? That's all there is to it?"

"All?"

"You just . . . choose a cane and hold it in your hand and let the story tell itself?"

The old man smiled. "Ahhhh! There's no hiding from a man of your perception."

The contempt the writer felt then

was as complete as it was unexpected. A trick. A conjurer's trick. Not a lifetime of honing one's craft. Not a brave journey into the dark night of the soul to retrieve shards of hard-won light. Not even a devoted understudy of the traditions of narrative. But this. This third-rate grab-the-walking-stick and crank-out-the-fairytales like sausages on an assembly line. It was odious.

The author returned the cane to its corner and the company of its brethren and added his fond gaze to the writer's secret repugnance. "That dark black one? He's hollow. He broke China's monopoly on silk by smuggling silk worms to the west. That yellow one holds a silver poker in its spine. He impaled a missionary in Shanghai. And that twisty one? Bought it in a Kasbah from a man smoking a hookah. I had to soak it in a tub of bleach to get the smell of hash off it. He's always Blaming someone."

The young man took his leave quickly after that despite the old man's protestations. Why, he hadn't even asked about his juvenile work! Or how he got his leg wound. Didn't he want to know the story of a great aunt who'd been burned at the stake? What about his gun collection! And the Whale! He couldn't possibly leave without touching the spiral horn of the gnarl whale!

The writer was glad to have escaped. He told himself again that dogs do not talk. That there was no way her bark could have sounded like the word "raven." It just wasn't possible. He must have misheard. And somewhere between the old man's haunted castle and his Subaru he lost his vocation. Though he did not feel it as a loss at all. He felt reprieved. He felt unburdened. If that was what a writer was well no wonder he was having troubles. He had no wish to arrive at that destination. He was bound for a better fate than a carney barker, a cheap purveyor of narrative gymnastics. He would take his years of study, his honed tools of interpretation, and his depth of insight and apply them to a truly worthy trade. A skill that served the public good, and guarded the culture from such frauds as that decrepit old trickster.

He would be a critic.

The further he got from the old man's house, the safer he felt, and the less of his visit he recalled. It was as if he had left a pocket of memory and entered the larger circle of forgetting. With every step all the mental notes he had taken grew hazy and dim as a receding dream.

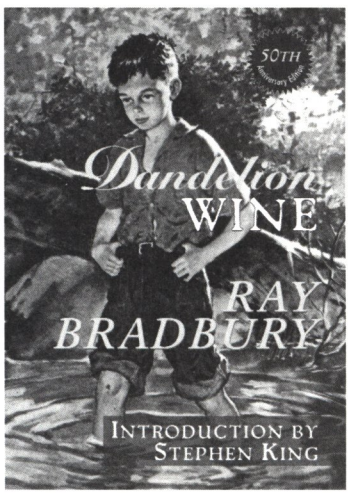
Except that one story. It remained, though it was quite unwelcome.

And every few months it would enter his dreams.

Sometimes he was the monkey. Dashing through a forest of human legs, choking on its collar. Sometimes he was the man who made the monkey dance, the man with the rough hands who looked up to see the beautiful dark furious eyes of Shantacleer and hear her voice for the first time—

a strange cracking voice that sounded as if it never had been used before. Often he was a stranger in the crowd who held a stone and watched the dark eyes of the unburied head. And sometimes he was the original carver who lovingly gouged the eyes and nose and scooped the empty open mouth out of the head of the log, and watched between his knees as her beautiful agony took shape.

He was never her though. Sometimes, when he mused on it—that is, when the thought imposed itself upon him—he did indeed wonder why, why of all the figures in that awful story hers was the one soul he could not fill.



DANDELION WINE
50 Years Later

You do things and you don't watch . . . then, all of a sudden, you look at what you're doing and it's like the very first time.

It happens to everyone at least once. While it lasts, the ordinary business of living becomes a magical series of discoveries and revelations. It happened to Douglas Spalding the summer he was twelve years old . . . the summer of 1928, when he discovered that he was truly alive and he yelled it a dozen times in celebration.

Ray Bradbury's wondrous novel of inter-connected stories and vignettes depicts what is truly a vintage summer for a growing boy. A summer of green apple trees, mowed lawns and new sneakers . . . of gathering dandelions, of Grandma's belly-busting dinners. A season of sorrows and marvels alike.

With a brand new introduction by Stephen King, this 50th Anniversary production of *Dandelion Wine* boasts three states and includes all the original illustrations that accompanied the individual stories when they first saw print in the magazines of the 1940s and '50s: an unsigned trade edition; an edition signed by Mr. Bradbury; and a special slipcased edition signed by both Mr. Bradbury and Mr. King that includes a second book, *Summer Morning, Summer Night*, featuring all the other Greentown, Illinois stories . . . some of which are previously unpublished.

For fans of Ray Bradbury's work, this may well turn out to be the publishing event of the decade.

In "The Greatest Serial Killer in the Universe", Robert Jeschonek explores what makes humanity unique—in a bad way. "When we finally travel the stars," he says, "our murderous impulses could be our greatest legacy . . . and our defining trait. Will humankind, like serial killer Luther James Paraclete, spread violence among unsuspecting lifeforms? Will we make as big a mess of things out there as we have down here? Or will unforeseen challenges force us to rewrite our savage natures?" The answers—perhaps—lie in the story that follows.

Robert's "Fear of Rain" appeared in Postscripts 8. *His stories have appeared in various other magazines and websites, and he has written* Star Trek *stories for Pocket Books, including the grand prize winner in the Strange New Worlds VI contest, "Our Million-Year Mission". Visit his website at www.robertjeschonek.com for news, original fiction, and The Flog, a fictionalized blog with an emphasis on fantasy.*

The Greatest Serial Killer in the Universe

Robert T. Jeschonek

"No, no, no," said Luther James Paraclete, snatching the knife from the alien's tentacle. "Like this."

Lunging forward, he plunged the blade up to the hilt into the soft bulb of the second alien's head. Milky pink fluid spurted out at once, then gushed as Luther sliced the knife across the bulb, tearing a long gash.

The victim creature made a noise like a cross between a sneeze and a shrill whistle. As Luther finished the cut, pink milk poured over his hairy forearm, running off the point of his elbow. The alien's head-bulb drained in an instant and collapsed like a deflated balloon.

The rest of the creature's body followed, slumping to the street. Blue and yellow fluids streamed out of the gash, flowing from lower regions of the corpse to mingle with the pool of pink milk.

"Now *that's* how you kill," said Luther, wiping the dripping blade on his black coveralls. The air was thick with the stink of rotten fish, and he breathed it in deeply. After five killings, Luther was starting to like the rank odor given off by dying Ectozoids.

"Tried," said the first alien, puffing out the word through a fluttering maw on its forehead. "Could not do." The alien's name was Boraf Zolagorg. Like all Ectozoids, it looked like a man-sized jellyfish with a lower body of translucent bulbs and tentacles.

And it was Luther's employer for the duration.

In a way, Luther was sorry that the 'Zoids looked the way they did. Killing

a creature that looked like something that had washed up on the beach wasn't quite the same as murdering a red-blooded Earthling.

On the other hand, Luther felt a different kind of thrill knowing that he was the first Earthling serial killer to take a stab at an extraterrestrial species. He liked killing what no human had killed before.

Now if he could just get the 'Zoids to do some killing of their own. It was, after all, the reason Boraf was paying him.

"Here," said Luther, holding the knife by the blade and extending the hilt toward Boraf. "Take it. Let's find our next volunteer."

Boraf did not reach out a tentacle for the weapon. The alien's gelatinous head-bulb quivered in the light from the planet's double moons. "Want to," said Boraf. "But no can. Ectozoid no kill."

When Luther stepped up close to the creature, Boraf's bulb dimpled as if pushed in by the human's breath. "You don't have any choice," said Luther. "It's kill or be killed now, right?"

"Still no kill," puffed Boraf.

Luther scowled and shook his head. He was starting to think that the job he'd been hired to do was undoable.

In the three days he'd been on Ectos, Luther had killed five locals, which was history-making and good for his lifetime average, but he'd had zero success in developing the killer instinct in Boraf. Like all Ectozoids, Boraf seemed to lack the ability to kill.

It wasn't that the 'Zoids weren't powerful enough to kill, because they were. As fragile as they looked, the aliens were strong and quick.It wasn't that the 'Zoids lacked the motivation to kill, either. They said they expected a hostile invasion soon and were desperate to prepare for it.

It was just that none of them had the killer instinct. On their happy little world, unlike Earth, all life co-existed harmoniously. The 'Zoids and lesser species on Ectos shared a low-grade link which was, if not a hive intelligence, at least a limited collective awareness. Organisms ate other organisms for sustenance, but it was more the result of a mutual agreement than a predator-prey competition for survival.

The Ectozoids were simply not wired for killing. In fact, there had never been a murder on Ectos, not one, until Luther had arrived.

Luther thought that was pretty cool. Not only was he the first Earthling to kill an alien, but he was the first being to commit a murder on the planet Ectos.

It was a great confidence builder for an aging, arthritic serial killer whose best years had seemed long gone a long time ago. Now if he could just get the creatures to kill, he knew he would feel like a new man. A new murderer. Once he got the Ectozoids on the road to bloody mayhem, he could return to Earth and the Serial Killers Guild as a hero and a legend. And a wealthy son of a bitch, what with the fortune in precious metals and gems the aliens were paying him.

"C'mon," said Luther, heading down the street, waving for Boraf to follow. The porous orange surface under his feet pulsed like all the streets and walkways in the living maze of the city. "Let's find you some easy pickings, my friend."

Boraf shuffled after him, its bulbs and tentacles rustling and slapping together as it moved. "Pickings?"

"We're not going home till you kill someone," said Luther. "Get that through your head-bag."

"Tried," puffed Boraf. "No can kill."

"Sure you can," said Luther, smiling as if he had no doubt that the alien would come through. "Once you get that first one under your belt, you'll be fine."

"Hope," said Boraf. "Hope much."

Luther patted the creature's head-bulb, then wiped the slime off his hand onto his coveralls. With Boraf close behind, he turned down another passageway . . . and stopped so suddenly that the 'Zoid bumped into him from behind.

In the pulsing yellow tubeway, Luther saw a lone 'Zoid shuffling toward him from less than twenty yards away.

"Time to lose your cherry," Luther whispered to Boraf.

"Cherry?" puffed Boraf.

Stepping forward, Luther grabbed hold of one of Boraf's tentacles and pulled the 'Zoid along with him. The other alien kept shuffling toward them, apparently unconcerned.

"Hello, friend," said Luther with a cheery grin. "Wonderful night, isn't it?"

The approaching 'Zoid bobbled its head from side to side but made no reply. Luther wasn't surprised, as Boraf was one of the few locals who understood and spoke English.

The 'Zoid made a burbling sound through its forehead blowhole and kept coming. Pulling Boraf along by the tentacle, Luther moved to one side to let the unsuspecting creature pass.

Then, as the 'Zoid wobbled by, Luther swept a leg through the mass of tentacles supporting it. The alien made a noise like the yelp of a poodle and fell forward, its tentacles and fluid-filled bulbs slapping the street like a mop slapping a floor.

Boraf hung back until Luther yanked it forward by the tentacle. "It's showtime," he said, wrapping the tentacle around the hilt of the knife.

"No kill," said Boraf, its voice shrill. "Ectozoid no kill Ectozoid."

Boraf tried to unwind its tentacle from the knife hilt, but Luther clamped both hands down hard around it. Arthritis pain lanced his fingers and wrists, but he held on tight. "Brace yourself," he said. "You're about to make history."

Then, he wrenched the knife and tentacle forward, punching the point of the blade through the biggest bulb south of the 'Zoid victim's head. As the tip penetrated, both Boraf and the victim squealed like punctured balloons.

Luther had to struggle to keep the knife moving, as Boraf continued to pull back. Gritting his teeth, the Earthling pressed the weapon deeper into the

victim 'Zoid's bulb, then inched the blade upward, opening a gash.

Inky fluid streaked with yellow milk rose from the wound and splashed out onto the street. Luther forced the knife to the top of the bulb, then withdrew it, keeping Boraf's tentacle cinched around the hilt.

"Ta-da!" said Luther. "You did it, Boraf! Your first kill! Way to go!"

Pain shot through his wrists and fingers again, and Luther had to relax his grip for an instant. He loosened his hold on the tentacle and knife just enough to flex his aching joints the tiniest bit.

It was all the opening Boraf needed to free itself. Suddenly yanking backward, the alien jolted itself out of Luther's grasp.

At first, Luther was so surprised and irritated that he didn't notice the tentacle wasn't the only thing that had slipped away from him. "Hey!" he snapped. "Get back here!"

Luther realized what was missing from his hand just a heartbeat before he saw the object flashing toward him, wrapped in Boraf's tentacle.

The knife. Luther had let go of the knife.

Instinctively, Luther ducked away from his client. Boraf lunged forward, aiming for the wounded 'Zoid in the street.

Making a sound like a squealing automobile tire, Boraf raised the knife high and brought it down, stabbing the blade into the victim's head-bulb. As pink milk rushed from the puncture, Boraf hoisted the knife back out and up and thrust it down into the head-bulb again.

And again. And again.

And again.

Luther could not believe his eyes. Boraf stabbed with abandon, then slashed the head-bulb into shreds . . . and took the knife to the rest of the victim's body.

The dead 'Zoid's fluids sprayed Luther, splattered everywhere. Slimy bits of dead Ectozoid flew through the air, blobs of jelly sticking where they landed. Boraf was a whirlwind of motion, gouging and hacking, ripping the corpse to pieces with the blade.

Then, the 'Zoid stopped cutting. Boraf made a sound like someone hawking up phlegm, then shuddered violently and dropped the knife.

Without hesitation, Luther bolted over and grabbed the weapon. Jumping back, he put some distance between himself and Boraf.

"Killed Ectozoid," said Boraf, its voice high-pitched and reedy. "Boraf killed Ectozoid."

"Congratulations!" said Luther, smiling but staying out of Boraf's immediate reach. "I knew you could do it!"

"Feels good," said Boraf. Its eyes—ten black beads mounted on slender, pink stalks near the bottom of the head-bulb—remained focused on the corpse. "Want more kill."

"Glad to hear it," said Luther. "So tell me, what turned you around, buddy? So I know for my next trainee."

"Turned around?" puffed Boraf.

"You went from 'No kill, no kill' to 'Want more kill,'" said Luther. "What changed? Was it feeling the knife go in that first time with my hand guiding you?"

"Not feeling knife," said Boraf. "Feeling hand."

"My hand?" said Luther, frowning.

"Before, no want kill," said Boraf. "After touch Luther, want kill. *Love* kill."

Luther turned his hand over, staring at both sides. If, somehow, his serial killer mindset rubbed off on the aliens with just a touch, all the better. It would make his job on Ectos much easier than trying to talk the creatures out of their natural inhibitions.

"How 'bout that," said Luther as a grin spread over his face. "Talk about your magic fingers."

Making a noise like a cross between a horse's whinny and a parrot's squawk, Boraf looped a tentacle around Luther's arm. "More kill," said the Ectozoid. "More pickings."

Luther laughed as the creature shuffled down the passageway, dragging him along behind it. "Already? But you just killed someone."

Moving out of the passageway and onto the street, Boraf went faster, leaning forward with eager anticipation. "Look," it said, pointing a tentacle at an Ectozoid weaving down the block ahead of them. "Boraf kill that Ectozoid now please?"

Luther chuckled because the alien had sounded like a child asking permission to ride a teeter-totter. "Why sure," he said, holding up the knife he'd retrieved from the last victim's corpse. "Go get 'im, tiger."

By the next morning, Boraf had murdered twelve Ectozoids . . . and wasn't ready to stop there. Completely exhausted, joints throbbing with arthritis, Luther had to drag Boraf home to get some rest. Even then, along the way, Luther had to restrain his client from slaughtering passers-by.

When Luther passed out on the sleeping mat Boraf had provided, the Ectozoid was still whistling and pacing around the door, dying to go back out and kill some more. Boraf was still doing the same thing when Luther woke up some hours later; he doubted the Ectozoid had slept a wink the whole night.

Luther rubbed the sleep from his eyes and chuckled. "Man, you need to relax," he said. "An Ectozoid doesn't live on murder alone."

"No relax," puffed Boraf. "Time for save world. Make more Ectozoid kill."

"Later," said Luther, padding over to the locker of food he'd brought from Earth. "Breakfast first. Save world later."

No sooner had he popped open the locker and reached for a packet of corned beef hash than the door of Boraf's house-mound slithered open. Three Ectozoids shuffled in, making whimpering noises as they crowded around Boraf.

"Save world now," said Boraf. "Ectozoids come now for Luther make kill."

Luther sighed and squeezed the tab on the food packet, activating the built-in heating element. In seconds, the packet grew warm to the touch, though the contents inside were heated to a much higher temperature. "Give me five minutes," he said, tearing open the seal and inhaling the smell of the cooked food.

One of the new arrivals shuffled over and grabbed the packet from his hand. The creature made a sound like a duck as it swung the food out of Luther's reach.

"Make Ectozoids kill like Boraf," said Boraf. "Save world now. Eat later."

Luther tried to snatch the food packet from the 'Zoid's tentacle, but the creature lashed it out of reach. Irritated, Luther tried again, more aggressively this time, but the alien swept the packet up and passed it to another 'Zoid.

Glowering, Luther combed his fingers through his wavy silver hair. "Fine," he snapped, marching past the creatures and out the door. "But if one tentacle comes near me when I'm taking a piss, the world can go to hell."

By the end of the day, 'Zoids were killing 'Zoids all over the place.

From the doorway of Boraf's home, Luther could see and hear plenty of action. Armed with knives and clubs, 'Zoids attacked other 'Zoids down the block, across the street, in neighboring house-mounds. The air was thick with sneezing death-cries and the stink of rotten fish; the pulsing street was strewn with jellyfish corpses and soaked with seeping body fluids.

He'd lost track of how many 'Zoids he'd given the touch, but he guessed it was close to a hundred. They were all out there now, killing like cavemen and loving every minute of it, high on death. Boraf was with them, caught up in the mayhem that only a day ago had seemed so unthinkable.

As Luther stood there, another trio of 'Zoids came shuffling toward him, eye stalks twitching. Before they said a word, he knew they wanted him to transform them like the rest, turn them into murderers so they could join the fun.

But he was out of gas. After the long, exhausting day he'd been through, Luther wanted nothing more than to collapse on his mat and get some deserved sleep. As entertaining and gratifying as the work had been, he couldn't stand the thought of corrupting one more alien jellyfish.

Even as he slipped inside and closed the door, however, he knew that he was screwed. They knew he was there; he knew that they wouldn't leave him alone.

Sure enough, the 'Zoids ended up at the door, coughing and trumpeting and belching his name. They thumped at the door with their tentacles, each blow harder than the last.

Though he knew he would end up opening the door eventually, Luther tried to shut out the commotion for just

a moment more. He slipped a cigarette out of the pocket of his coveralls and lit it, inhaling deeply.

And it was then, only then, that he finally noticed how different he felt. As he stood there and smoked, listening to the thumping and sneezing and belching, he realized that exhaustion wasn't the only reason he didn't want to face the creatures.

Up until now, he had been enjoying his adventure. He had loved killing aliens on another planet . . . loved making a comeback after years of decline . . . loved being treated like a V.I.P. for doing what he loved to do. He had loved the irony, too, that a serial killer whose nickname was

Bug-Eyed Monster, and whose M.O. included carving crop circles in his victims and arranging their organs like constellations, had become the first Earthling serial killer in space.

But something had changed. The thrill seemed to be gone.

As hard as it was to believe, Luther felt all killed out. He'd never thought he'd see the day when he'd had enough murder, but the day had come.

The next morning, after about three hours of sleep interrupted by Ectozoids whomping on the front door for murder lessons, Luther felt even less enthusiastic about the kill training.

As Boraf shook him awake to face a fresh batch of wannabes, Luther actually felt a wave of dread at the day ahead. Instead of reveling in gleeful anticipation, he wished that the day was over already; the last thing he felt like doing was cranking out another bunch of killer jellyfish.

Before long, his reluctance went further and affected him more deeply. Around his fifteenth conversion of the morning, he began to regret his life as a serial killer.

It was a brand new train of thought, one that had never chugged through him on even his worst days. His choice of career had been a given practically from day one; he had never felt like he could have been anything *but* a serial killer.

So why, all of a sudden, was he questioning his choice? Why did he feel sadness and shame when he looked back at his achievements instead of the usual pride and nostalgia? And why was he jumping the track now, of all times, just when he was at the apex of his career?

As he guided another 'Zoid in gutting another victim, Luther remembered the first human life he had taken. The old woman's face came back to him, looking just the same as it had when he'd thrown the first shovel-full of dirt on her: weeping and blinking and quaking, buried alive. He had thought of her often through the years, always with secret, dark pleasure . . . but now, the pleasure had soured. When he conjured her image in his mind (Ida Mae Caldwell, that was her name) he felt a brick in his stomach and a wave of dizzying nausea.

Annoyed at this unexpected response, Luther skimmed through his

memories of other victims, seeking more familiar reactions. Not counting the 'Zoids he'd killed, he had 276 to choose from over a 42-year period. Normally, recalling them was like fondling rare coins from a collection—admiring them, wallowing in the selfish joy of ownership; this time, he wanted to put them right down just as soon as he picked them up.

For the first time in his life, his murder memories felt unclean.

Contrary to what he had thought up until now, Luther realized that he was a sick and twisted individual. His disgust at the memories of what he had done in the past was equaled only by his loathing of what he was doing now.

For example, standing by, arms dripping with pink milk from a punctured head-bulb, as one 'Zoid trainee fought another over the remains of a murder victim, playing a savage tug-of-war with the limp mess of bulbs and tentacles.

As the creatures squawked and yanked the corpse back and forth, Luther wiped his drenched arms on his black coveralls. Deciding he had had enough, he turned to walk away.

And before he could take a single step, a third 'Zoid flung itself in front of him.

"Make kill now," the creature puffed from its forehead blowhole. "Now!"

Luther shook his head and backed away.

The 'Zoid reached out with three tentacles at once, and Luther had to back up fast to evade them. "Make kill," said the creature. "Save world."

Luther wished he hadn't handed over the knife to the other two 'Zoids. "Not now," he said, continuing to backstep as the creature pressed toward him.

"Save world make kill now not later," said the 'Zoid, extending more tentacles.

Luther took another step and ran into a pillowy obstacle. Lurching away from it at once, he spun around and saw that it was Boraf.

The other 'Zoid shuffled closer, still reaching. Its tentacles brushed him as he ducked away and darted behind Boraf.

As Luther got ready to run, the wannabe plowed into Boraf with a sound like wet spaghetti flopping into a colander. The creatures hooted and thrashed around, tentacles intertwining, fluid-filled bulbs sloshing against each other.

One of the wannabe's tentacles squirmed out from between them and twisted toward Luther... but he easily sidestepped it. Another wriggled toward him from below, catching him by surprise, but it only managed to graze his leg before he danced away from it.

Then, the wannabe stopped struggling.

It stood there for a moment, huddled against Boraf, breath whistling in and out of its blowhole. Then, slowly, it uncurled its tentacles from Boraf's and drew back, head bobbing from side to side.

Luther watched, expecting the creature to thrust past Boraf and pursue

him. Instead, the wannabe shuffled back, tentacles coiling sinuously, head-bulb quivering.

"Want kill," puffed the creature. "Want kill!"

"I told you, no more for now," said Luther. "You'll have to wait."

"No wait," said the wannabe. "No need human."

The creature turned and wobbled over to the two 'Zoids who had been fighting over the carcass. They had resolved the tug-of-war by tearing the corpse in half, and each was now smearing its slimy prize like a washcloth over its body.

The knife the killers had used on their victim lay forgotten in a pink puddle in the street. Flashing out a tentacle, the wannabe scooped up the weapon . . . and in the same flicker of motion, swung it around and drove it into the head-bulb of one of the killers.

"Want kill more," sang the wannabe, wrenching the knife from the first 'Zoid and swinging it around into the head-bulb of the second. As both victims squealed, the wannabe ripped out the knife again and slashed it through the air, pink milk flying, to plunge into another of the first killer's bulbs. "Boraf make want kill! No need human!"

Luther stared as the 'Zoid lashed the blade back and forth, hacking up two creatures at once. For the first time that he could remember, Luther felt horrified at watching a killing in progress.

Boraf turned and patted his shoulder with a slimy tentacle. "Boraf make Ectozoids kill now," said the alien. "Luther take break now. Boraf make many kill save world."

Luther just kept staring. Whatever had enabled him to transform 'Zoids into killers—whether it was some fluke of his body chemistry or some warped electrical field in his brain—it had somehow been transferred to Boraf. The timing couldn't have been better, because Luther was sick to death of making killers.

And yet, he wondered if it was entirely a good thing that Boraf had the power. He wondered if it would stop with Boraf, or if other 'Zoids could develop the same ability to implant the killer instinct.

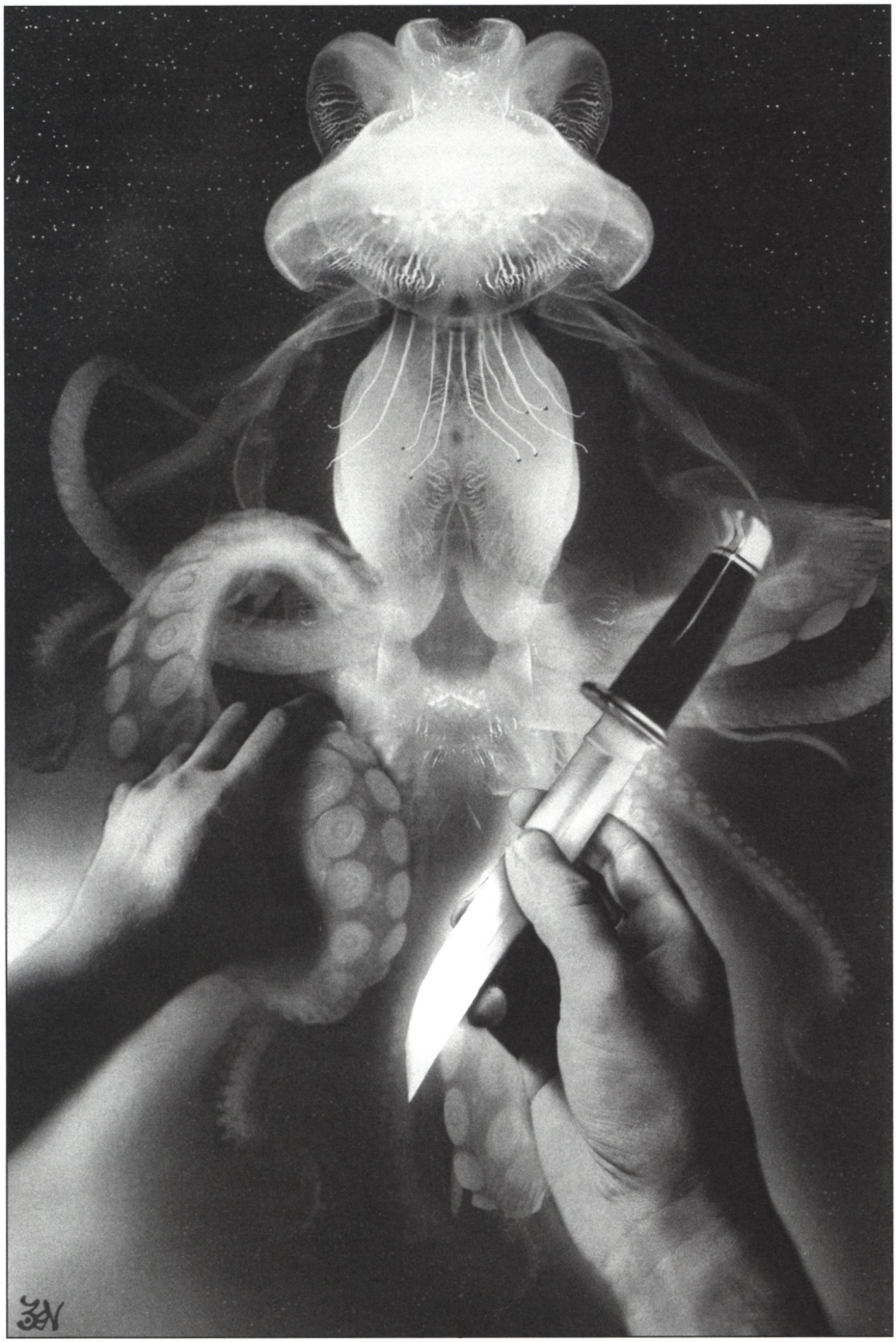
If the killing could be spread by 'Zoids other than Boraf, he wondered what the world would be like in a week.

That night, no one bothered Luther. No 'Zoids barged up to wallop the door of Boraf's house-mound, demanding conversion. Luther figured it was because Boraf—and other 'Zoids, too, most likely—was doing the job just fine without him.

Finally, Luther was alone with time to rest . . . but all he could do was lie awake and think.

The faces of the many people he'd killed kept drifting up out of his memory, filling him with guilt and regret. Number 150, in particular, kept returning again and again, the worst of the lot.

Number 150, Harmony Duquesne, 18 years old.



The harder he tried not to think about her, the more forcefully she surged back to the forefront of his mind. The man he had become could not believe what the man he had been had done to her.

He wondered how he had managed it, how he had managed any of it. Thinking back, he tried to understand what had driven him, what had enabled him to commit such atrocities . . . and he couldn't. He had the memories, bright and brutal and real, but no grasp at all of the mentality that had brought them into being.

He was a monster, and he finally knew it. Whatever had blinded him to the truth had been leeched out of him by the 'Zoids; he finally had a conscience and awareness of his nature.

And he wished he didn't.

There was only one redeeming factor, one thing that he might have done right, and he clung to it. By instilling the killer instinct in the 'Zoids, he might have given them the means to save their world.

Maybe (Luther tried to convince himself) this single act could balance the scales for the past . . . or, at least, allow him to live with the memories of what he had done. Maybe, with this act of redemption and his newfound change of heart, Luther still had hope for a brighter future free of the demons that had ruled him for most of his life.

And maybe, the evil he had done had had a purpose after all, had all been leading up to this . . . and in saving the 'Zoids, Luther had also saved himself.

Rolling over on the sleeping mat, he reached for his cigarettes and fished one out. As he lit it, he listened to the chaos outside—the yips and whistles and squeals of 'Zoids in frenzy, the splashing of body fluids, the smacking of corpses on the street. It was a round-the-clock madhouse out there, like a vision of Hell . . . and he had made it.

Two mornings later, Luther found himself riding a giant centipede.

He and Boraf sat in a bubble that was either grown from the creature's back or attached there, he couldn't tell which. It was the same type of transportation he had ridden from the spaceport to Boraf's house-mound upon his arrival . . . and now, it was taking him back to the spaceport for his return trip to Earth. Now that his work on Ectos was done, and the invasion was due to strike sometime soon (the 'Zoids wouldn't say exactly when), Luther was getting out while the getting was good.

Sunlight gleamed off the creature's ruby carapace as it scuttled through the streets, neatly winding its segmented length around bends and corners. Giant antennae danced from its head like fishing poles, constantly twitching and flickering in the air.

As the centipede taxi hurried them through the maze of the city, Luther noticed that the mayhem of the past week had finally subsided. The orgy of killing had seemed to die away in the middle of the night, from what he could

hear from inside Boraf's house-mound, and now he didn't see a single murder underway anywhere. It was as if someone had given a signal, and all the 'Zoids had stopped killing at once.

Stopped killing and headed for the spaceport, apparently. All along the centipede's route, Luther saw 'Zoids shuffling in the same direction that the taxi was traveling. The further the taxi went, the more 'Zoids filled the streets . . . until, at the spaceport, the centipede was packed in all around by a vast crowd of jellyfish, all shambling toward the cluster of massive, globular spacecraft steaming on the launch pads.

Before long, the taxi drew up to one of the ships, many times smaller than the other vessels but of the same spherical design. The bubble on the centipede's back rolled open like an eyelid, and Boraf wriggled down the creature's side to the ground.

As Luther handed down his duffel bag of possessions, he squinted up at the mirrored silver skin of the sphere-ship. It looked identical to the craft that had brought him from Earth.

Luther reached for his food locker, but when he started to lift it, arthritis pain flashed through his arms and hands.

Releasing the locker handles, he hissed breath between clenched teeth and massaged his hands. "Hell with it," he said. "Short trip to Earth, right?"

"Short trip," said Boraf, extending tentacles to help Luther down the side of the centipede. "Fast ship."

Luther held on to a tentacle and slid off the taxi's ruby carapace. He couldn't wait until he was home and would never have to touch another slimy tentacle for the rest of his life.

"What about my payment?" he said.

"All on ship," puffed Boraf. "Plus bonus."

"All right," said Luther, shouldering the duffel bag with difficulty. "Now let's get the hell out of here."

As the ship popped out of the atmosphere like a bubble popping out of soapy water, Luther asked if the invasion fleet was getting close yet.

"All clear," said Boraf, though it didn't seem to be looking at a monitor screen or out a window. "Safe passage."

Luther's eyes were glued to the circular viewport alongside his seat. Boraf's vagueness on the subject of when exactly the invasion would occur had him worried. "Wait," he said, squinting at a distant flicker of light. "Is that one of their ships?"

"No," said Boraf.

"Well, how do you know?" snapped Luther. "You didn't even look."

Boraf floated past, free of the harness that had restrained it during liftoff. "Always notified of danger," said the 'Zoid. "No danger now."

Luther snorted and kept his eyes on the viewport anyway.

Gazing into the starry blackness, Luther wondered which of the pinpricks of light was Earth's sun. He wished that he was already there,

already breathing the sweet air and moving among other human beings and drinking in the familiar sights . . . savoring all the things that he had so taken for granted and never would again.

At the same time that the thought of going home excited him, it scared the hell out of him. He was returning to Earth as a new man, free of his old compulsions, remorseful and self-aware. He was already planning to face up to the crimes of his past, to make amends and restitution as best he could and pay the price for what he had done . . . which would ease his newfound conscience but would be the fight of his life. By the time it was all over, his very life might be the price he would have to pay. That, he was not looking forward to.

And then there was another possibility that was wearing on him.

What if, when he got home, whatever had changed within him changed back?

Suddenly, something caught his eye outside the viewport, and he jumped. Craning his neck, he saw a gleaming silver curve gliding up from the rear edge of the window, sparking in the light of Ectos' sun.

"Boraf!" he said, watching as the silver advanced and expanded . . . and then, as the word left his mouth, he recognized the shape.

It was one of the 'Zoid sphere ships, moving alongside them. The massive globe floated up from the 'Zoid homeworld, traveling in the same direction as the ship carrying Luther.

He heard a familiar sloshing and rustling as Boraf drifted up beside him. "Killship," said the 'Zoid. "Killship save world."

Keeping his eyes glued to the viewport, Luther spotted another of the giant spheres beyond the first. And then another. Moving in formation, they paralleled his own ship's course and speed, bobbing in the void like enormous silver balloons.

Luther frowned as another sphere pushed up alongside the rest. "We're all heading in the same direction," he said. "Are they escorting us till we're safely away from here?"

"Ships escort," said Boraf.

"Well, good," said Luther, leaning back. "I'd hate to wind up in the line of fire."

Boraf made a noise like the wail of a saw being played with a fiddle bow. "Luther safe," it said, patting his head with a tentacle. "No worry."

As Boraf floated forward to burble at the 'Zoids operating the ship's controls, Luther tried to relax. He felt a little better knowing that his ship had a protective escort, but he still couldn't quite extinguish the foreboding that needled the back of his mind.

After a while, though, when the ships had cruised far from Ectos with no sign of danger, he finally managed to convince himself that he would be okay. Slowly, his nervousness faded, and he actually drifted off to sleep.

Luther awakened to the most wonderful sight: a blue-green world,

swathed in clouds of white, with a single pewter moon suspended above it.

Earth.

As he watched his home planet push closer through the big viewport at the front of the ship, he smiled serenely. Whatever awaited him there, he was happier than he had ever imagined possible to be near it again.

He was home.

"We're there already," he said, raising his voice for Boraf to hear.

Boraf was playing his tentacles over the fluttering grassy fronds of a control panel. "Earth," the 'Zoid said simply.

"Thank God," muttered Luther, still smiling. He yawned loudly and stretched, extending his arms overhead and pressing his abdomen against the thick safety strap holding him in his seat.

Staring at the beautiful planet beyond the forward viewport, he daydreamed about the things he had missed most from home . . . the things that were now within reach. No matter what ordeals he was about to undergo, he promised himself that he would gorge on as many cheeseburgers,

T-bones, beers, and pornos as he possibly could.

Then, something caught his attention from the corner of his eye.

He turned to the viewport beside him, and his smile disappeared. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

A chill ran up his spine.

"Boraf," he said quietly, and then he shouted. "Boraf!"

The 'Zoid left the controls and floated over to him, sloshing and puffing. "Luther?"

"Why are the other ships here?" snapped Luther. "I thought they were just escorting us until we were safely away from Ectos. I thought they were just protecting us from the invasion fleet."

The 'Zoid made a noise like the meow of a cat crossed with the squeak of a hinge. "Fleet no protect from fleet," it said. "No make sense."

"No no no," said Luther, gaping at the giant silver spheres outside the viewport. "Protect us from the invasion fleet! The one that's supposed to attack your world!"

A gargling sound emerged from Boraf's forehead blowhole. "Only one fleet," said the creature. "One invasion."

Luther's heart raced as he turned from the window to stare at the hovering jellyfish. "One invasion," he said slowly.

"Earth," said Boraf, pointing a tentacle at the forward viewport. "Ectozoids invade Earth."

"I don't understand," said Luther. "You told me you needed to save your world."

"Save world yes," said Boraf. "Ectozoids use up resources. Get new resources Earth save world."

Cold panic rushed through Luther, mingled with rage. "No!" he said, grabbing for the latch on his restraints, trying to pry them open. "You tricked me!"

"Luther be happy," said Boraf. "Great killer make greatest kill ever. Kill human species."

Luther battled the restraints but couldn't open them. "No! Don't do it!"

"No worry," said Boraf, ruffling his hair with a slimy tentacle. "Luther safe. Luther Ectozoid hero save world."

"Please!" screamed Luther. "I was wrong! I've changed!"

"Congratulations," puffed Boraf. "Luther greatest serial killer in universe."

Boraf was close enough to kill. Luther reached deep, searching for the old murderous fire . . . but he couldn't even find a dim spark. Even now, the killer within was nowhere to be found.

All he could do was thrash against his restraints and scream like a child in a doctor's office as the gleaming silver globes dropped into the atmosphere of the blue-green planet.

Paul Jessup tells us that "Ghost Technology from the Sun" was inspired by a large number of sources, but the two most prominent were a documentary on the Koreshian cult in Florida and the Hare Bride Fairy Tale.

Paul has been published in many magazines, including Fantasy Magazine, Farrago's Wainscot, Electric Velocipede, *and* Pseudopod. *He currently edits with his wife the bi-annual magazine* GrendelSong. *You can visit him online at http://pauljessup.kapo.ws*

Ghost Technology From The Sun

Paul Jessup

Master told us that the earth was hollow, and that we lived on the inside of it, clinging to the top of the crust. Below us was another world, a world inside the world, a glowing bright sun of a place. What master called the summerlands. That is where the dead live, he said. That is how we can talk to them, he said. They send us signals across the air, and the mediums pick them up and drink them in.

And when the words came in, we had to speak them. We cannot deny the dead our voices—the dead would be angry if we did. And nobody wanted the angry dead to fly their zeppelins up from the sun and attack us crust dwellers.

That wouldn't do anyone any good.

Master knew this because he is an ambassador to the land of the dead. At night he walked through the door of the dead, and it beamed his body down above us, into the summer sun inside of the earth. That is where he talked to them, worked out trade between our two peoples.

The dead have a lot to offer the living.

He came back with schematics.

Ways of building circuit boards.

Ghost technology from the sun.

I remember when Ma first drank in the voices of the dead and talked with the tongue of paper and fire. We'd only been here a week or so and I was frightened of what was going to happen, having heard stories of horror from different members of the God's Foot Spiritualists. I kicked and screamed, refusing to go with her into the lodge, refusing to let her destroy herself for religion.

Eventually I gave in.

They took us into the Dead Man's Tongue. This was a lodge built for dead drinking. It had no windows and was

covered in paintings of ghosts and the summerlands. It was lit entirely by the Master's halo, blue light bouncing off of the walls and illuminating the circle of faces in an eerie chilled light.

I remember clearly the shadow chanting and the fingers moving and the feet pounding out that rhythm. Ra-tat-tat. Ra-tat-tat. A hum of sounds: ah-m-m-m-ah. Ah-m-m-m-ah. The air thickened, and we could hear a clear barrage of whispers. Like everything started whispering around us, the trees, the lodge, the stars and the sun. Everything had a voice, and everything spoke in hushed tones.

Mother rolled her eyes back in her head, the marble white of her pupils reflecting the cities in the sun. Her mouth opened wide and out came fire and words and long streams of paper snakes. She danced and spat and spoke, she revealed her breasts and screamed. The chosen inscribers jotted down everything she said into small red and black notebooks.

It is said that past the gardens and into the woods there is a hidden library filled with small red and black notebooks. It is said that the Master goes there every night and reads them. Over and over again. Never sleeping.

"The dead don't sleep," he once told ma, "And neither should I."

The Master was handsome.
The Master was tall.

The Master was a bone setter and an electrician.

We called him he who walks among the dead.

When I turn fourteen I want to marry the Master.

I practiced writing my name and his in a small red notebook. I would run the names together, combine them into new shapes and new words. I hoped that the truth in ink would become the truth in flesh.

I wandered through the garden at night, in hopes I could see him as he returned from the hidden library. I always tried to strike up some sort of conversation with him, flirting with him a little. He acted nonchalant but I could feel something there—a spark, a chemical connection. A magnetic pull from his eyes to my heart.

I am scared for the Master when he beams down into the undersun. The cave made so much noise. The screams of the dead, wailing as he walked between dimensions. I was afraid that he would never return.

And then where would we be?
Lost and haunted by the dead.
With no one to lead us.

I was so lonely in God's Foot, being the only child there and with no one to play with. Most of the people in our commune were women, and they were all pregnant with the Master's kin. He

called these women the Blessed, and he said that they carried the weight of Angels inside of them.

Last week I noticed my ma's belly was full and shaped like the moon below us, and I asked her if she was Blessed. She said she was, and she said that in a year or two I could become Blessed as well. That made me so happy, I bounced around for the rest of the day. I made extra certain that the master noticed me, and tried to look my best every time I went out to play.

I wore my blue dress and tied gold ribbons in my hair. He saw me twice, and both times he mentioned how pretty I was and how happy he was for me to be here, living amongst such fine folk. Just hearing the deep rumble in his voice made me feel so happy.

Imagine that! Me! Blessed!

What a wonderful day that would be.

The garden was pretty at night.

So blue and full of shadows.

Master said the sun had two sides, one blue and one yellow. It spun beneath us, and that is why we have night and day. And all those stars and clouds—those were voices of the dead, moving through the ether for us to bring into our bodies and interpret.

We used the séance in order to drink in the words.

Our bodies became balls of light.

The words etched into our skin.

Last night I saw a rabbit in the garden.

I shooed him away, but he just smiled at me.

With a mouthful of human teeth.

One day the Master came out of the Door to the Dead with a roll of ancient looking blueprints. He unrolled them and told everyone to begin work on this right away. This would be our greatest achievement. By the end of that week the whole village was lit up with electricity, and we called him the light bringer. Some of the people even compared him to Prometheus or Hermes, stealing the light of wisdom and bringing it down to us poor mortal folk.

I remember the first night we had all those lights up, strung between the trees in paper lanterns. They glowed and hummed and I remember touching the wires, feeling the electricity sharp and alive inside of it. Master says that this was just the beginning.

He was working on something bigger, better.

Earlier today the dead came into me and made me paint them. The canvas was stretched out beneath me and dyed brown with tea. I felt a surge of power in my head, and the whispers of the dead in my ears. The air became thick, heavy. Like a wet blanket around my skin.

Then my hands moved and I couldn't stop it. At first I was scared, my body taken over by an outsider. I tried

to keep the dead out, I did not want to drink it in. My hands moved anyway, my thoughts and motions no longer mine. My whole body felt numb around me, completely unresponsive to my thoughts.

I stopped fighting it, and just went with the flow. It was what the Master called the rivers of our soul, which the dead ride like boatmen. They taint the water inside of us with their fingers as they ride, and we drink in this taint and become the words they speak.

I saw the summerlands as I painted.

I saw the golden sphere within the earth below us.

I saw all of the dead looking at me, their flesh rotting, their teeth grinning. I wanted to scream. The summerlands was no paradise. Not at all. It was all dark and dank architecture and filled with the bones of the dead. They wanted to pull me down, yank on the river of my soul and push it into the summerlands.

When I came to I looked down and saw my painting.

Red, red.

A crow in red.

And that rabbit. With teeth. And his bride in white right next to him, frightened and with a veil of the dead across her eyes.

And there, in the middle of it all was a sun.

Smiling, hungry.

Wanting to eat me whole.

When I was done I ran outside and threw up in the bushes. The Master came by and I was so embarrassed, and I knew he wouldn't want to marry me now. No one ever would. How could he love me when I smelled of vomit?

The Master praised my painting. He hung it in the Dead Man's Tongue with all of the others. He said that I had been possessed by Uk-Olak-Ken, the dead god of Atlantis. Gods die too, he said, and they also go and live in the summerlands of the afterlife just like the rest of us mortals.

He said that this painting was very special, and no one had ever been possessed by Uk-Olak-Ken before. He told me he had a secret job for me. One that no one else could ever know about. Not even ma.

I made dolls out of the corn husks in the garden. The dolls were very tall, about as tall as I am and I dressed them up in my clothes, and took them outside and danced with them. Sometimes I pretended they were real and they were my friends.

Some nights I could hear them whispering after the séance, and I wondered if the dead voices were trapped within them. As if they were possessed somehow. I meant to tell the Master or ma about it, but during the daylight hours I forgot.

There was so much work to do on the farm, and everyone had to help out. Even those who were Blessed.

I once lined up all of the corn dolls in the garden and dressed them in red and black dresses. I called them the army of corn, and made them ready for war against the trees around them. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something brown and furry dart between the rampion.

I stood and walked towards it, following it.

The air felt thick with dreams and whispers. Like it did during a séance. I heard the screams and howls come from the door to the dead, and realized that the Master must be descending again. Going down and above us, into that sun in the center of the world.

I saw a furry puff of a tail peek out from between the cabbages, and two brown ears slicked back onto a mangy skull. "Rabbit," I said as I walked towards it, "Rabbit, what are you doing in our garden? This is our food."

The rabbit turned his head and smiled at me with a mouthful of human teeth. "Get on my tail," he said.

"No, never. Go."

He hopped closer to me, the grin widening into a threat. "Come on. Follow me to the Door of the Dead."

I stepped backwards, frightened.

"Who are you?"

He hopped closer, and then stood up. His back uncoiled and he grew as tall as I am, standing on his hind legs like a human. His eyes were dark and troubled, and the center of them looked like suns stuck into his hollow head. "I am the keeper of doorways."

I stepped back and pointed at my dolls. "They are armed," I said, "With the voices of the dead."

They whispered then, the sound of it filling the air with the smell of turpentine and rotten eggs.

The rabbit hopped backwards.

"Ah, then. I guess I'll be getting on. But I will return. You are far too pretty to leave be, and I need a wife sooner than soon."

And then he shrunk down and hopped off, leaving the dust of his footprints across the garden.

The master brought us all together before a séance one night with an announcement. He had brought new schematics from the land of the dead, and we will have new ghost technology in order to build and use. He laid out the plans on the grass and started pointing out different things that would need to be done.

"This will be," he said, "an amplifier to the voices of the dead. No longer will they whisper in the void between our worlds. This will take the ether between us and the summerlands and thicken it—making them louder and more audible to us."

The people cheered.

The Master is taking us into a new era of enlightenment. Humanity will evolve now—faster and more sure, towards the shores of the dead. No longer will we be separate, but travel between the worlds will be as easy as riding on a train.

I was possessed by Uk-Olak-Ken again. He came into my skull and ate away at my mind, forcing the rivers of my soul to become overflowing and flooded. I screamed in angst and my mother said I bit her on her leg. She showed me the rings of broken skin my teeth made, like red moons on her flesh.

I painted the walls of my room in the lodge while in the trance, red crows all over it and rabbit brides. I painted a large sun, grinning and hungry. I painted rivers of black slime and castles crumbling on the moonside of the sun. I painted the hollow earth, and a bridge that moved between it.

And I painted the zeppelins.

The skullish dead riding in them, ready to war with us breathing meat-sacks. Their eyes glittered in my paintings, all hollow and holy and wanting to feed on us.

The painting frightened me.

Master said it was a good sign. A great omen. Uk-Olak-Ken had blessed us with this message. It meant that the dead will come to us soon, come and take us to the summerlands where we will be happy and no longer dependent on this crust of a world.

I felt sick and queasy as I realized Master was wrong. This was a warning. The dead are preparing for war. They want to destroy us. They were jealous of our flesh and lives and they wanted to take our skin and wear it, steal our beating hearts and use it to pump the blood of life into their dead bodies.

I slept in the garden after that incident.

I couldn't stay in the same room with that painting ever again.

There was a large gathering and ceremony before the Master switched on the newly built amplifier. The celebration started with prayers to the dead, and an offering to the doors between worlds. Then it moved to a séance, with fourteen people all becoming possessed and two whole red and black notebooks filled with the mad sayings of the dead.

He then went forward and turned the machine on. It looked like a vivisection of a robot, all metallic intestines and beating artificial hearts. On top of it stood a brain molded in copper, with black rubber tubes and a spine of bronze spouting out of it. The spine curved up and into the air, and shook and hummed when the machine was switched on.

It vibrated and sang while people celebrated. We danced to the music of the amplifier that night, the voices of the dead a chorus around us. The air felt thicker, wetter. A hot moisture dripping onto our bodies. We all felt possessed, and every one of us could hear the voices now, so loud and so clear.

And the smell.

The air smelled of sweetness and ripeness.

The next day my Ma was outside, laying on the ground in a mud puddle near the back of our house. The mosquitoes hung like a biting buzzing veil

around us, hungry in the sticky air. My ma's belly was round and sticking out of the mud like a moon stuck in the center of the void below us. I wondered if there was a world inside of her stomach, with people like us clinging to the crust, and another world in the center with the voices of the dead.

Ma had mud all over her face.

Her eyes looked so tired.

All around us the voices of the dead carried on in conversation, forcing us to speak up a little louder if only to be heard. "Marybeth dear," Ma said to me, "Why did you sleep in the garden last night? I missed you."

I shrugged.

"That painting. It scares me. All those faces, dead faces, looking at us in such hatred."

She waved her arms in the mud, making mud angels. Her face looked elsewhere, towards the ether. So murky this air, I thought, so thick and deadly. "I can't sleep at night with you gone. Come and sleep with us dear. Or the Master will think something's wrong with you."

I sat down in front of her, the mud staining my blue dress. Tonight, I thought, I will take the ribbons out of my hair. I don't want to wed the Master anymore. "Maybe there is something wrong with me. This air is suffocating."

Ma laughed. It was a strange and deadly sound.

"I don't feel pregnant. Isn't that weird? It's like what's inside of me is a ghost. Like my stomach is haunted, or even that an insect is living in there, getting larger with time. And I feel like this whole place is a dream, and the dead are the ones that are really alive."

Ma then rolled around on the mud, coating her stomach heavily. It looked like a brown and sticky circle of flesh, hidden under the dark shadows of her dress. I wanted to reach out and touch it, to feel the ghost beating under her skin.

It's so hard to breathe.

The air is so fluid.

Like trying to breathe underwater.

And the voices get louder and louder every day.

They sound like shouting snowflakes in a blizzard of sound.

The Master changed. I don't know if anyone else noticed it, but he started glowing brighter. So bright that the daylight gives way to his glow. And his skin peeled and cracked. Beneath the holes in his skin more light throbbed and glowed, even stronger and more radiant than before.

He called himself Xansu.

Lord of the Lights.

And he would talk to people in half heard whispers. I saw bits of paper stuck under his fingernails, and I saw him at the library more and more. He must be constantly reading those notebooks.

He stopped going to the séances.

And the séances became more violent, more disturbing. Almost everyone

became possessed, and they attacked each other, the ghosts burning holes in their eyes and poisoning their soul rivers with rot and plague. Yesterday Erica blinded her husband. Ripped out his eyes with her own fingers.

The dead made her do it.

The dead make us do everything.

Their presence is overwhelming.

Master came by to visit me while I played in the garden one night before I went to sleep. He looked at my corn dolls and smiled. Their voices are louder now, I realized. They are practically screaming in the language of the dead.

The Master's body glowed as he approached me, sending away the light of the moon with his own disturbing blue illumination. He held his arms out to me. The closer he got, the more disgusting he looked. His face had holes in it, and his eyes were falling out. His hair was unkempt and decrepit, and I wanted to scream at the sight of him.

Instead, I stayed silent.

"Hello, my child."

I nodded.

"I have a secret job for you."

I moved a little away from him. The corn dolls hissed at the Master as he moved, trying to send him away. Their voices clattered out insults, trying to move their corn husk bodies to get close enough to attack him.

"Don't you want to know what it is?"

I stumbled back.

Still covered in sweat. This heat was unbearable even at night. No reprieve from the thickness of air. "No, it's ok. You can tell me tomorrow."

The Master smiled.

"Tomorrow might be too late," he said. "I need you to summon Uk-Olak-Ken. I need to talk to him."

I shook my head no. "Why can't I do it during the séance tomorrow?"

The Master moved closer to me, his body gliding across the ground. "Too many people. I need to ask him secret stuff. Only stuff I need to know. Something is being hinted at in the notebooks. Something dark and terrible. I need to talk to him and learn what."

I looked at my corn dolls. I only wished I could give them life, let them move and protect me. "I don't want to. Have someone else act as your human puppet."

He grinned and then clapped and chanted under his breath. My mind swam and my body felt moist. I rolled in the rivers of my soul, falling over the earth and up below us into the undersun. I could see the curvature of the crust above me, and Uk-Olak-Ken taking over my body.

I fought and tried to swim up through my mind and back into my flesh. I did not want to be trapped in the cellar mind anymore. I wanted to be out and stopping him. The Master was doing dangerous things, and we are going to pay for them soon enough.

I crawled against the currents, and fought against the rebellion in my mind. I forced that Uk-Olak-Ken back

into the sun, forced him back into the ether and the dank cities of the dead and out of my body.

When I came to I realized I was sweating, naked.

A light was flowing out of the Master. It flew into my body in streams of fire. I started to cry as I realized what was going on. The light of him spun inside of my stomach, weaving against the walls of my womb.

When he looked down he realized it was me in my body and no longer Uk-Olak-Ken. "My child," he said as my stomach spun inside of me, "you are one of the Blessed now. You carry my seed, and the weight of Angels inside of you."

I wiped my tears away with my hands.

"Did you get the information?"

He nodded.

"Thank you, my child."

Good, I thought. Maybe you will do something to stop this, stop all of this. We are in danger of being eaten by the dead, our bodies used as costumes for them to parade around in and pretend to be alive.

He walked away, and I felt sick to my stomach, and certainly not blessed.

The next day I decided to wander through the woods and find the library. It took me a few hours, but I eventually found the ruins of an old catholic church, and inside of it notebooks upon notebooks scattered in the pews. The walls of the church looked like old bones, bleached and full of holes.

The notebooks were mostly arranged by importance and relevance. Most of them had pages bookmarked, and some were impossible to read due to water damage. I flipped through a few of them at bookmarked pages, and started to find an unsettling pattern.

Every bookmarked page mentioned a war of the dead. It mentioned fire from the sun, and the destruction of the crust dwellers. It mentioned war machines of unbelievable power, and of ways to travel between the lands of the living and the dead.

I felt something slick move in my stomach.

He knew all along.

And was going to do nothing.

It wasn't long before my stomach extended.

Fast, I thought, whatever it is, it grew fast.

I knew what ma meant—it felt haunted. More of a ghost inside of me than a child growing.

A night or two later I saw the rabbit again. He walked up to my corn doll army, staring at them as he went by. When he saw me he stood upright, his teeth shimmering in a grin beneath the moon. "Marybeth," he said, "Will you get on my tail and join me?"

I had nothing else to lose.

"Where are we going to go?"

His grin deepened, wide and wider still. "Someplace you need to see. The Door to the Dead."

I climbed onto his tail.

"Let's go then," I said, "And when we get there, if you still want me to, I'll marry you."

The rabbit turned his head almost fully round, his mouth full of human teeth. "I would and still might. But what grows in you is dark and deadly, and I will not raise it. Not I, not ever."

He turned his head and got on all fours, his body shooting out and darting with me on his tail towards the cave known as the Door to the Dead.

Above us I saw the light of red crows, dancing under the moon.

The cave was empty. The door was a chalk drawing, and the sounds of screams and horrible noises came from a cage full of geese that the Master poked with a red hot poker. Rabbit showed me these tricks, how he deceived the people. In the corner of the cave was a series of diagrams and maps. All these schematics, all this hollow earth—he did not get this from the dead at all.

He came up with it himself.

Using us to get information about the dead with his séances, never once putting himself in any danger.

I saw rituals described in other pages, tales of sacrifices and stones that make you immortal. I realized than what the Master was doing—that each of us would be used to make him live forever. Even if that meant to bring the dead here, and put us in danger.

I looked at Rabbit.

"Thank you," I said.

He held my hand in his paw.

"I love you. Come back to me when you are free from this burden. I will marry you, and we will live together in perfect harmony, far away from this dead world."

Outside of the cave I heard the red crows cawing, and the voices of the dead getting louder and louder still. It was so full in the air, and it corrupted our thoughts and poisoned our soul rivers. Outside the moon became bright and turned into the sun, and the sun became bigger and bigger, like it was coming right towards us.

And I could see cities on the surface of the sun.

Bright, brilliant cities of light.

I held the rabbit's paw in my hand.

So soft, so comforting.

"It may be too late," I said.

He nodded and then I jumped on his tail. Back to God's Foot we flew, fast and with the trees blurring around us.

In the sky above we saw the Zeppelins of the dead, flying from the sun cities to us crust dwellers. The voices around us floated in the air, angry, yelling. Wanting their light back. Wanting the stones of immortality back.

I searched for my ma when I got back, the rabbit following me, making certain I would be okay. The air felt like drowning, the water of it entering our

lungs and corrupting our breaths. We could not talk, not over the voices of the dead being amplified in the world around us.

My head was filled with so many thoughts.

So few of them were my own.

Rabbit helped keep me calm.

Helped keep me sane.

The creature inside of my stomach swam through me, licking my blood and grating against my bones. I wanted to flush it out of my system, to destroy it whenever possible. I was afraid to give birth, fearing that it might rip me apart as it crawled out.

I found the body of my mother with the others. Her stomach a mess, her ribcage poking out from her flesh. They were all stacked there, back behind the Dead Man's Tongue. They had all died in childbirth, their bodies being destroyed by whatever lived inside of them.

I saw the shadows of giants as they slouched about town, and heard the voice of the Master screaming and singing songs to them. The Master seemed to be almost completely light now, his skin discarded on the ground at his feet.

I wanted to tear this thing from my stomach.

I did not want to die like that.

I turned and looked at the stack of bodies. Standing next to them, all in a row were my corn husk dolls. The dolls turned and looked at me, and spoke in unison.

"They are here," the dolls said.

"The dead have come."

Rosanne Rabinowitz says, "The seed of this story was planted when I began a relationship with someone who happened to be a mathematician. Now, not only am I 'bad at maths'—I'd always been downright phobic about anything to do with numbers and calculating. With my tendency to reverse digits and just not read numbers right, I've wondered whether I indeed have 'dyscalculia'; a kind of dyslexia-by-numbers. So what am I doing going out with a mathematician? '96 Tears' was a somewhat skewed result of these musings."

Rosanne's published fiction includes stories in The Third Alternative, Roadworks, Midnight Street *and* The New Review *at www.laurahird.com. She has contributed to anthologies* The Slow Mirror: New Fiction by Jewish Writers, Deep Ten *and* Café Ole: Too Hot to Handle. *Her most recent tale—which features a character from "96 Tears"—has appeared in* Extended Play: the Elastic Book of Music. *She is currently at work on at least a couple of novellas and a mainstream-ish novel about a woman leader of the Pikarts (or Adamites), the anarchistic wing of the Hussite revolution in 15th century Bohemia.*

---

96 Tears

Rosanne Rabinowitz

Grow up you big fuckwitted wuss! Use your calculator. A monkey can do it!

It buzzes about Antony's mind, over and over. Nothing can stop that self-scolding refrain—not even his attempts to read an interview with a big-nosed indie film actress he used to fancy. He thrusts his *Guardian* away in disgust. Is it going to be like this all the way from Canada Water to Camden Town?

For the first time, he's stuck with calculating the month's expenses for the editorial team. Just thinking about it makes his stomach knot up. If he was at school now, they would diagnose him with *dyscalcula* or *dyscalculia*. When he was a teenaged poetry-monger, he would have preferred it spelled the first way. Rhymes with *Dracula*. But no one got "diagnosed" back then.

He didn't have to deal with this crap in 2000. Those heady days of dot-com start-up paradise! Perks, perks, perks everywhere. You walk in for some freelancing and the next day you're an editor. No one worried about petty cash. The money was just there.

He's luckier than others. At least he still has a job. On his wages he can get by without his problem becoming . . . a *problem*. He just hands over the plastic and signs.

Usually he gets the latest work-experience intern to do the expenses. But she's on holiday. Imagine, going on holiday from work-experience. That's OK, though. Yet another reason he lives in England, not the States. There are places here where people still believe in holidays, lunch-breaks and tea-breaks. They believe in *breaks*. So why doesn't he give himself a break and relax?

He looks up to a trio of freshly-

shaved female armpits in front of him, their owners balancing with one hand on the bar and holding newspapers in the other. The train still has that early summer-morning smell of deodorant and talcum powder before the heat sets in. Still fresh. But something else lies beneath it. It's almost metallic, like a whiff you get walking past a construction site when some guy's using a blow torch.

When Antony settles into the quieter end-carriage on the Northern Line, a much too familiar voice hacks out a greeting. "*Alriiight! Good morning!*" That guy sounds rougher than ever. Hardened strands of phlegm vibrating with a kind of snare-drum effect could make a similar sound.

Isn't it early for *him* to start? What are things coming to when even beggars are so infected with the work ethic that they're up at 9.00?

The blonde woman opposite him moves her Harry Potter book up to her face. When he started this job, everyone on the tube was reading either *White Teeth* or that big fat Harry Potter book. For just one lovely moment, he feels like he's hit a time warp and it's 2000 again—and he doesn't have to worry about petty cash.

"I'm here to play music for you, man!"

The tall thin beggar with a triple-plaited beard sways near the door. He wields a dented, rusted oil drum. A traffic cone wobbles inside it. He shakes the drum with a rattling and clinking of coins, then tips the contents onto the floor. Most of the people on the train are startled by the spectacle of a beggar throwing money around, but Antony has seen this before. Thump goes the drum over the coins. The beggar sits on it, then he puts the traffic cone to his lips. He spits and blows into his ad hoc instrument, hums and moans. He throws his head back and shouts: "mm-mmm-yeah! You're gonna cry, you're really gonna cry, too many tears, 96 of them!"

Within all that noise Antony can still hear the classic, rinky-dink organ riff of the old song. He loved it from the first time he heard the tune, sitting in front of a black-and-white TV in his pyjamas as the Mysterians performed. It was already an oldie by then, but he thought the singer was really cool and tried to find out everything he could about him. The singer called himself Question Mark or simply "?", wore shades all the time and claimed to be a Martian who lived with dinosaurs in a past life. He said he'd be singing "96 Tears" in the year 10,000.

When Antony came to London in the '80s he joined a band that specialised in 1960s garage music. He played that keyboard riff on guitar. Lead guitar was easy. You just listen for the right place to come in. No need to count like the poor drummer.

Traffic Cone Guy gets off his oil drum and staggers down the aisle.

Antony shifts his long legs as he walks by. "Gimme, 96 pounds," Cone Guy sings. He runs back and picks up his drum and scoops the coins in, leaving his cone next to Antony. People draw back into their seats. Harry Potter woman looks so terrified as it rolls with the lurch of the train that Antony picks it up before it reaches her.

But the sight of him cradling this thing in his arms can hardly be more reassuring. Antony turns for a glimpse of himself in the window, and watches his reflection floating ghost-like against the tunnel walls.

The train jerks to a stop, then begins a slow, swaying final lap into Camden station. Another train pulls up, sliding through the same tunnel onto another track. It dips down lower.

Someone stares out from the window of the opposite train, her face framed by a mass of frizzy dark hair that makes him think of an angry swarm of bees. She has those tilted eyes that make some people look like they're always hearing a joke. But she isn't laughing. She is gazing at him as if she likes what she sees. But there's a question in that look as if she expects something, but isn't sure what it could be.

Antony gets up halfway from his seat.

"Wanna dance?" Traffic Cone Man holds out a hand. "You wanna have a go? What songs you know?"

The dark-haired woman at the window smiles and her lips move. *What's she saying?* She's picking up her big over-the-shoulder bag. Then her train is away into its own tunnel, headed for another platform. She's getting off her train, and it's his stop too. He has to find her.

"Let's dance!" Cone Man shakes his drum. Those coins could also be rattling in his throat as he shouts. "Play us a tune, but first you gotta pay!"

Camden Town at last.

Antony is running down the platform, still holding the cone. He pushes through the crowd, muttering *excuse me*.

And that song stays with him, all about crying 96 tears. Organ music and everything, going round and round.

He'd been on a Bank train, so she must be on a Charing Cross—but is she Edgware or High Barnet bound?

A crowd exiting from another platform moves forward. Someone smacks into him and shoves him aside. "Didn't you learn how to say *excuse me*?" Antony shouts at a young man in a beige—or is it called café-au-lait?—suit and an abstract-arty T-shirt.

He looks at Antony and his traffic cone as if he'd just stepped in doggy-do. Did Antony look at the original bollard-bearer like that? He regrets it, because he wouldn't want to be like this smug bastard. So smug, Antony is moved to shout an improvised chorus: "Cry, cry you bastard! 96 tears!"

The man shudders visibly. Antony follows him up the escalator and sings some more. He doesn't usually behave like this, but today looks like a special occasion.

She's at the top, just beyond the ticket barrier. He fumbles for his travelcard as he shifts the cone to his other hand. She's so much larger than he thought, close to his own six feet-two. Broad in shoulder and hip, she wears a clingy dark purple skirt with boots and a violet V-necked T-shirt that accentuates her full breasts.

She really is laughing now. "There you are! It looked like you were getting off here. Couldn't miss you with that cone. But that poor sod you took it off must be shattered, it was probably all he had!"

"Oh, it was an accident." He drops the bollard. "I'll leave it here for him."

"The look on your face was priceless. You looked ready to bolt out of that train before it got into the station."

"Priceless? Is that what you call it? Dunno why I took the thing. But that song he was singing won't let me alone! Something loosely inspired by '96 Tears' by ? and the Mysterians."

Her eyes widen and she catches her breath, as if he just said something that thrills her. He wouldn't take her for a muso, but it might be an angle to pursue.

"It's from the '60s," he explains. "I was in a band that played that kind of music. It was ages ago. But I think our cover was better than the Stranglers', if I may say so myself!"

"I don't know that song. But when I heard you singing about '96' on the escalator with such passion, it made me think I'd like to meet you even more. Even coincidences can be clues." She lowers her voice, as if letting him in on a secret. "I have a *strong* interest in the number 96. There's a vital synthesis in it."

Antony wonders if this woman could be as mad as the traffic cone guy. But then, he was acting odd himself. So what if she's a bit eccentric?

"I'd like to hear about *96*," he says. "But perhaps we can meet later, because I'm on my way to work. You off to the office yourself?"

"Not quite." She sighs. "I'm unemployed at the moment. I was a researcher, but the job finished. Would you believe when I signed on, they told me to work in a shop because I'm a mathematician! Means I'd be good at figures and all. As if my work is for counting pounds and pence! But never mind. I'll be happy to meet later. I'm Briony, by the way."

She reaches out to shake his hand.

He almost cancels the date when she says "mathematician". What could he possibly have to say to one of *them*?

But Briony keeps hold of his hand. The roughness of her skin against his makes him want to find out more about her. She didn't get it just from pushing pencils.

Antony jabs at his calculator as he adds up—supplies, expenses, commissions—for the third time. Be methodical, tick the number off as it's entered. But did he tick it before entering, or after? No... He has to go through the lot again. How did he mix

up that great big freelancer's fee with the purchase of a box of paper clips? Has he done his usual, put a number or a decimal in the wrong place?

"For fuck's sake, I'm not a fucking accountant!" Antony doesn't realise he's speaking out loud, but a newish sub-editor called Joanie looks up and smiles.

"What's up, Antony? Anything I can do to help?" She raises her eyebrows suggestively.

Joanie must be in her early fifties. At 39 Antony is the youngest of the editorial team at *departures.com*, a website on death and bereavement issues. Like most of the editors and writers, he knows little about HTML coding or any technical stuff. That's best left to kids—the geeks.

Both the young techies and the older editors flirt with him. After his formative years as a despised and detested nerd, the attention still surprises him. He knows he looks young for his age. Perhaps others think he's mature enough because he's an editor. He hasn't figured it out yet. But he's also learned to make the best of it. Flirt back in a humorous way, but keep yourself to yourself. And maybe it gets you help when you need it.

He smiles at Joanie. "It's this petty cash. I'm hopeless at math!"

"So am I." Joanie shrugs. "But you know, Martin-et is off today. So you don't have to rush, eh?"

Ah, everything around him looks brighter. Now he can get on with real work. Look at the new articles. Research and write a piece of his own about funerals for pets. Give it a personal touch, recall the death of his first dog. He invents a black-and-white border collie named Lou for himself. As he writes, he imagines he is a boy again. He is stroking his dog's silky fur and then they run down a hill. Antony relishes the breeze in long 70s-era hair, in a world where algebra, figures and petty cash don't exist. He types out a draft and thinks about his date with Briony. That odd thing she said: "My work isn't for counting pounds and pence." But what else is math for?

Antony meets Briony at the Stag's Head, a little pub with a pleasant beer garden. Her T-shirt is replaced by a filmy raspberry-coloured thing that brings out a vividness in her grey eyes. Can grey be *bright*? Maybe she's just had a good afternoon sleep. He wonders why she was on the train at nine in the morning if she doesn't work, but maybe that's not really his business.

Talking to her comes easy, even though she's a stranger he just met on the train—and a mathematician, no less. With only a little prompting he's off, telling about his desperation to get far away from his hometown in upstate New York—and studying in London was the best way to do it. He doesn't mention his brief marriage to another student, or his failed attempt to adjust to life back in the States before returning to London.

"Studying in London was my escape too," Briony says. "Such an escape I'm

still doing it! I'm waiting for my panel, applying for posts—and doing more research of my *own*." She smiles cryptically, as if wanting him to press further.

But what's the point, when he wouldn't be able to understand a word?

She leans closer. The deep shadow between her breasts invites him, but he sighs. He can't pretend he's anywhere on the same wavelength.

"Look, I'll tell you now that I hate math. I can't deal with it. I could have that dyscalcula thing, or maybe numbers just bore me. No, they terrify me. I broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of doing expenses and petty cash today. You won't be able to talk shop with me."

Briony mulls this over, then pats his knee. "Not to worry. I don't want to talk *shop*. But I can show you another way to see numbers, and *everything*. Art, poetry, music—all the things you call creative—have maths at their heart. Say you go to a shop for paint in a special colour, they enter numbers into the mixing machine. Then you take it home, paint and surround yourself with the colour that makes you feel good. And how do you find the most beautiful colour? It's mathematical. The possibilities are infinite. We think a spectrum has only so many colours, but what if another light comes in? And I haven't even got on to *forms* . . . "

She flashes him that vivid grey gaze. He thinks of the sun just starting to shine behind heavy clouds, spreading that odd, transformative kind of light.

Grinning, she moves her hand further up Antony's leg. "Numbers and dimensions are not only central to art, they're at work when it comes to attraction and the exchange of magnetism. Numbers can be sexy."

"Oh, right. Ha, maybe that's what got Mr Whyte going." Antony gives a short laugh; it comes out with a bitterness that startles him. But Briony leaves her hand on his leg. He likes that tenacious attitude, and covers her hand with his. Her hand is wide, with long fingers.

"Mr Who?"

"Oh, my math teacher in high school. I had to suck him off a few times so I wouldn't flunk and fuck up my scholarship for London. Though I was crap at maths, I was good in English and writing. The guidance counsellor, excuse me, *careers officer*, said that was a typical *female* pattern. A dumb thing to say, but Whyte wasn't even aware that I was good at anything else except blow jobs."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I hope you don't think I've been too forward." She takes her hand off his knee and twists a curl of hair around her finger instead. She doesn't seem so confident now. "Errmm, I like to be open if I'm interested in someone, but maybe it's off-putting to someone with bad experiences. Sorry if . . . "

"Don't worry, it was only a few times." Antony shrugs. "And don't get the idea that put me off the math. I hated it long before I sucked off Mr Whyte. I didn't feel 'abused'. It was just an unpleasant chore, like mowing the lawn."

Briony recovers her poise, and crinkles of amusement appear at the corners of her eyes. "Mowing the lawn, you say? Some of us grew up in dumps where we didn't have lawns!"

"Oh yeah, and you're a would-be professor, born in a shoe-box in middle o' t'road, I presume," Antony replies, enjoying the banter. Now the formalities are really over.

She pushes her thicket of dark hair away from her face. "Well, I did say that opposites can have their synthesis. Or something like that."

She replaces her hand on Antony's knee. He has a good look at her big green plastic ring, a bit of cheap and cheerful tackiness that looks like it came out of a cereal box. It makes him smile. He likes her style. He likes her.

"Maybe we're not *that* opposite to each other. Just don't talk about math!"

"I can't promise that. I did say I'd tell you why 96 is so special."

"Why 96 and not 69?"

"'Cause it's not in the right order! But I'll explain when we get to my flat."

"Well, well Ms Prolier-than-thou, I didn't take you for a Hampstead dweller! Living in a hastily tacked-up, overpriced dwelling for the remnants of the dot-com *nouveau riche*, you forget what it's like for the real *riche*." They are walking up a steep street of tall Georgian-style buildings just past Parliament Hill Fields.

"Watch yer mouth! This is a council estate, *darling*!" Briony waves at the gracious black-and-white blocks with wide, old-fashioned sash windows allowing glimpses of soft lighting and luxuriant indoor greenery. "A rich old Victorian do-gooder donated this estate to Camden Council to house single ladies of slender means."

Venerable trees surround the blocks, bend and whisper over them. The air is full of crickets and the hushed humming of night creatures. It doesn't feel like a part of London. The air is fragrant—from what flower, he can't tell—its sweetness mixing with Briony's spicy perfume.

At the door, Briony bends down and starts to unlace her boots. She balances with one hand against the wall, poised like a much more substantial ballet dancer. He admires her ass. Lovely and round. Already, he feels overwhelmed by her abundance.

She looks up at him over her shoulder. "Don't just stand there, take your shoes off too!"

When he steps into Briony's tiny flat he understands why. It has the air of a sanctuary, though the furnishings aren't out of the ordinary. The room is white, the floors bare varnished wood. A few simple rag rugs in rose and lilac hues are scattered over it. There's a futon sofa that must also be her bed, a book-lined alcove where her computer waits, screen reflecting the moonlight.

A mural covers most of one wall. It looks like a tree.

She goes to the window and opens it. Antony stands next to her and looks into a garden fringed by woods. There's

a man-made pond with the barest trickle of a fountain in the middle. The croaking of frogs rises from it. The unlit room glows as if drawing in the moon and lamp light from outside. For the first time he sees glints of silver in Briony's hair.

Then she flips on the light switch and he gets a better look at the painting. At first glance, it seems like a child could have painted that tree. But he can't keep his eyes away from it. Something in its balance and its proportion seems so *right*. And something else—not right at all. The leaves seem to shift under his gaze.

"Oh, you like my Tree of Life?" She touches his arm and guides him closer to the picture. "There's some maths for you! Normally it's a kind of diagram, a geometric figure extending into different dimensions but I gave it leaves and all. It makes it messier. That's how it is though. The Tree's never neat and tidy, cut and dried. You get buds and shoots and branches. It's always growing. But believe me, it's still about maths. Look . . . "

He moves his hand up to her shoulder and into her hair. Did he think of a swarm of bees when he first saw her on the train? But there are no stings to be found here.

She leans her head back against his hand and closes her eyes. He lowers his hand to massage her neck, but she takes it and places it on a cluster of leaves at the end of a branch. She presses on each of his fingers as she urges him to look closer. The cluster has a number and a name. So does the trunk, the other clusters, the roots and a crown of leaves.

The foliage is made of a mass of angular shapes, especially thick at the crown. He keeps staring into the place where the shapes crowd together. They pull his gaze beyond the wall. It makes him dizzy trying to see into their centre. He steps back and the blend of colour and detail now hits him.

The blue and green figures form leaves in layers, and other layers show through. A rust-red like the colour of turning leaves underlies them. That's the only thing he misses from the States: hills wrapped in leaves ranging from deep russet to shattering orange and then the purest yellow. In London leaves just turn a dirty mustard and die.

There *is* something yellow on this tree, a Post-It note. It comes loose and falls to the floor. Briony ignores it.

Only one thing doesn't have a number—a vine winding up the tree. The stem and tendrils of the vine twist and turn on themselves in loops. A question mark labels it.

"Doesn't that vine get a number?" he asks. He touches the shiny surface. Its leaves are deep moss green, glossy with a slick glaze that has seeped through the paper and turned it solid and plastic-like. "These leaves look like they could be poisonous. But they're beautiful."

"It's the Hammerite," Briony explains. "I put it on later. It's glued the paper to the wall. But maybe *you* can help me find the name and number."

"Come on, you don't have to name and number everything!"

"But how else do we understand it?" Her voice gets an impatient, even angry edge. "How do we solve the problem? Look at this." She slaps the surface of her painting. "This is only a reflection or a symbol. And numbering and ordering its aspects—the reflections—is how we begin to understand their source. But it doesn't stop there. I want to approach the source, dive into it and see what's on the other side!"

Was that what he was trying to do when he was looking into the centre of those leaves? It made him dizzy, disoriented. But really, there's no other side to it but a wall. "What would you expect to find," he asks her. "What if it's just more of the same? Maybe it's really mundane. Like Milton Keynes on a Saturday night! Or worse—a Saturday night in my hometown."

"Or mine!" Briony laughs, and that tension leaves her. She slips her arm around Antony's waist and gives him a squeeze. "You think you're taking the piss, don't you? When I saw you in that train I thought you were fanciable, but there's much more. When you were singing about 96 Tears I *knew* you had a part to play—even if you think I'm talking bollocks! Or *because* you think that." She looks at him. Counting, perhaps. Calculating?

Play a part? Antony doesn't like the sound of that and steps away from her. "Well, it's not my interest, but I'm not totally ignorant either. I've come across this Tree of Life stuff. It's Kabbalah, isn't it? We ran an article on our site. Lots of daft celebrities are into it, forking over dough to a guru or rabbi or whatever."

"Hah! Those prats with their silly bits of string! They don't have rigour. They don't have a clue where it can go and it's not fucking Hollywood." She sends the celebs packing with a flip of her hand. "You ever hear the story about the four rabbis who look into the Orchard, the Garden beyond human knowledge?"

Antony isn't sure if she's about to tell a joke. He shakes his head "no".

"It goes like this. One rabbi drops dead straight away. The radiance of it is just *too much*. Another goes mad because he can't get on with ordinary life after this vision. Another becomes an unbeliever and leaves his community."

Antony is waiting for the punch line, or at least the end of the story. But nothing more seems to be coming. He clears his throat. "Even *I* can see that you're a rabbi short. What happened to the fourth guy?"

"Oh, he comes out alright. But much later he gets tortured to death by the Romans. Flayed, I believe."

"Oh, that's just a *lovely* story. But what relevance does it have? You don't strike me as the religious sort. A bit out there, otherworldly, but definitely not a religious nut."

"No, no, of course not. I grew up with too much of that. My dad is conservatively Jewish, my mum a fervent bead-jiggler and I ended up with the worst of both worlds. Missed out on the good Jewish grub and all. You know the

old joke 'what's the difference between Catholic guilt and Jewish guilt?' I had 'em both and I rejected it all. Working on a theorem or solving a problem took me away from those hectoring nuns at school, and the restrictions at home. Mathematics was freedom for me."

"Maths . . . freedom? You're joking!"

"No Antony, I'm serious. Why should I be joking? Why shouldn't maths be freedom?"

"Where can I start? Well, with sitting in a classroom, crazed with boredom, seeking any relief from the meaningless marks on the blackboard. It was a prison to me! If I even looked outside or started having nice distracting thoughts about girls, it was *Antony, Antony! Pay attention! Antony Antony you're stupid.* Those marks, those numbers were a prison too. They still are. You can't turn around without some part of you getting counted and quantified, turned to numbers."

"But what about this?" She gestures to her Tree. "You kept looking at it. You told me it's beautiful. Though I'm no artist, you found its form pleasing." She touches the glossy vine winding around its trunk. "See how this curves and twists? Can't you imagine the flower that will bloom from it? I came to *this* from maths and from applying maths to life. Escaping to a realm of logic broke the chains of superstition and poverty. What some people claim as God, a mathematician calls infinity—with a desire to *understand* rather than worship. But then, scientists working on this problem tended to develop a stunning range of mental health problems—Cantor, Gödel et cetera—so maybe the old tale isn't totally off track!"

"Dunno who those dudes are, but you seem sane. In your intense way."

She leans against the Tree and laughs. With her head thrown back, her throat is pale against her dark hair.

"I take that as a compliment," Briony says, "Sane but intense. Hopefully, madness is *not* an occupational requirement. A guy in the States picked up where Gödel left off and *he* didn't lose his mind—and he hasn't been deprived of his skin *or* packed off to Guantánamo Bay in an orange boiler suit and pair of earmuffs either!

"But then, he didn't really solve the problem. No one has. Symbolic systems from religions and sciences help us understand infinity, but they're only aids. Something's always been missing. Then I began to think that numbers and forms are only the skeleton of the solution. Where's the flesh, the mind? It's in the world of sensation. The infinite isn't an abstraction separate from the world we see, touch or smell. It is that world. It swallows it, yet it's the tiniest piece of it. It's the shape that encompasses every form, the number that bends, warps and doesn't stop. It's the corollary of chaos, the colour behind and beyond all colours. I *need* to know it in all its varieties, and there are many."

Briony's hands linger over the shapes and colours she is seeing—or wants to see.

He has little interest in numbers, angles or finding infinity. But he loves words, and he lets her words of colour and form and mystery wash over him. He gazes into clusters of leaves, almost expecting to find something looking back. A face he might have seen in a dream, or a fabulous animal waiting in the foliage. But waiting for what?

Briony comes close to him again with a sound that could be the swish of her skirt, her thighs brushing against each other.

"You *do* like those leaves, those fractals. I made them with a specially-adapted cookie cutter." Briony contemplates her Tree with both pride and a touch of weariness. "I've been doing this for years, and you might say my approach is rough-and-ready. No faffing or po-faced pedantry. Neither your Chasids or celebrity rabbis or even post-Crowleyites would approve. I've always worked on my own, but I'm now thinking that it isn't enough. Maybe you can help me."

Antony laughs. "Briony, I wouldn't know infinity if it tapped me on the shoulder and asked me for a light! You say colour and music are based on mathematics and I accept that to a point. But the way you create them isn't quantifiable, and too many other things are untouched by math. Feelings, desire. And what's so special about 96?"

"Think of '96' as a recipe. The base—and beauty. Sense and sensuality."

She strokes the trunk of the Tree towards a point labelled *Yesod*. Slow, up and then down. He thinks of her hand on his thigh when they were in the pub.

"That's where I differ from my colleagues," she says. "I deal with many more symbols—and senses. But I've not tried every sense. Yet. If you used them all, y'know what it would be like? Fucking with the universe! But that's jumping ahead. See this? This is the foundation. It stands for intelligence, science and books. But Yesod combines qualities we think of as being opposed, for it also represents sexuality."

She brushes her hand against his cock. She catches her breath, as if his response had already reached inside her. He wants her to rest her hand there, let it grow heavy and warm upon him. But she is restless, and reaches towards another numbered cluster. "We still need a branch that takes us higher," she says. "It's six—Teptherah. Its symbol is also the sacrificed god. It's about the sun, about beauty and transformation, and the mysteries of sacrifice."

"Sacrifice, eh? Have you got a Wicker Man in the garden out there with the frogs?"

He expects a quick comeback. But she is only thinking, frowning as she follows the curves and tendrils of the vine with her fingertips. Light, then firm. Exploring and searching. "It's not like that," she says. "It's about what you give—and also what you might have to give up. Sacrifice means translating force from one form to another. Energy may be locked in one static form, but we can free it to circulate. And who

knows what will happen then? Sometimes I think I've already made that sacrifice. Other times I'm sure there's more."

"What about that story you told me, with those rabbis dropping dead or going mad? Did they make a sacrifice? Why would someone go mad from that stuff anyway? Is it like a computer crashing?"

"Maybe, but it might not be as easy as pressing 'restart' to get going again. I also know that I would lose much more by not trying."

"I can't imagine what's worse than losing your mind."

"That could still happen in other, slower ways. You know a line that goes 'There are colours that are seen, and colors that are not seen.' No, probably not. But one time I woke up from a dream where I *saw* them all. When I opened my eyes everything was drab. It felt like someone close to me had died. When I was sixteen a mate of mine got killed in an accident at work, it felt like that but ten times worse. But I still don't really know what was gone. That's what science is about, or my science. It's like trying to find something that's lost that you don't really know you had."

He's not really sure what she means, but something catches at the back of his throat as if a part of him does.

Then he's shocked to see a tear making its way down her cheek. She seems unaware of it. He wants to do something, but feels useless. He can only wipe it away.

Without thinking, he puts his finger to his mouth and licks off the salt water. This brings an uncertain smile to Briony's face.

"See? You think numbers have nothing to do with feelings, but they do."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. What can I do . . . "

She draws him closer, backing up against the wall where the Tree of Life spreads its branches. "Hold me. Let's start at the foundation."

Her hair surrounds him as they kiss, her breasts pressed against him, thighs gripping his. The raspberry-coloured top slides away with just a little tug, the thin fabric still warm from her skin. He pulls the skirt down over her hips. When he takes off her black cotton bra, it leaves faint pink marks that he starts to kiss away. There is so much milky, faint-freckled skin.

Briony is undoing his jeans and soon he is also free.

Yes, she's right. Touching is the start, the foundation.

She stretches, arms over her head as he kisses her breasts. He looks up. He is sure that the leaves on the Tree do move.

"Sssh. Listen. Wait. And count with me."

He waits with her, hearing the chorus of frogs from outside.

"You like music and poetry? They are full of meters and rhythms. Words also contain vibrations you can count. Think of the number of heartbeats as they rise, the duration of each breath. The numbers aren't measurement, because they represent the immeasur-

able. They are a way of understanding. The counting is a meditation, expanding each second of sensation. Opening the mind, letting infinity in. Beats in a pulse, the open and closing, and opening."

Her voice is husky and it rises, about to break into a chant. Then she stops speaking.

Listen. Wait. Breathe.

As his breath answers hers, his heart matches her rhythm and he can't keep from counting himself as he stares into her eyes. He thought they were grey. But now he sees other colours within that grey. Pearl-grey, dove-grey, greens that taste of olives and apples, fragments of violet. Her breath in his ear reverberates, and he counts the beats as they rush over him.

Her hands play a syncopated rhythm upon him, and he answers with his own. Each touch sends a rush from under her fingers, spreading like branches of a tree. He loses himself in the never-ending form of each sensation and caress. A pressure builds, permeates the air as it touches their bodies inside and out. It lifts and he is flying out of his skin. The branches send out buds, and the buds open and close and burst open into scarlet flowers. The spicy-sweet smell of the night swells, full of notes ringing in continuous loops. Plunge in, into the source.

Briony arches her back, looking up. Light and shadows play across her face. He follows the beam of her sight beyond the crown of the Tree, just past that point where vertigo had blocked him before.

He hits the barrier again, he can't follow. "What do you see there, tell me what you're seeing!"

"Sparks of blackness", she whispers. "Fractals of sound, of rhythm, of touch. A forest of Trees. The leaves are falling, trailing sparks of blackness."

She kisses him, her mouth tasting of a fruit that could have fallen from the Tree. Points of light ignite under the skin, warming his hands. "Yes, keep touching," she says. "The surface of my skin doesn't stop. There's always more, and I'll wrap around you in Mobius loops."

Can you stroke that skin forever? He has to find it all, know it all. From the fine flesh of her inner thigh to a hidden spot between her breasts. The place above her heart. It beats fast.

Too fast? Her pupils almost swallow those many shades of grey.

"Briony, are you alright?"

She grips him hard. "Don't interfere, even if it scares you."

Something else reflects in her eyes, something that isn't in this room. A shape, a tint from another spectrum he can't assimilate. It isn't white, not black, not red, not green or anything in between. It tugs at his mind to be known. Form without end, fractals of feeling. Antony puts his face right up to hers. What is it, where does it come from? Perhaps it has a number. Uttering the number will keep it there longer, so he can look at it. Look at it and see it and understand it.

Briony spreads her legs wider, wel-

coming him to infinity. "Touch me more, there are so many more places . . . " Her voice comes from a great distance.

"Touch me all the way inside. *More*." A spark of blackness, points of light spilling out. "Take me into the forest. So many trees . . . Each has its own *light* . . . " A vitality leaps under his hands as if the blood vibrates in her veins.

The reflection in her eyes burns brighter and flares. For a moment he can't see at all.

Then her eyes roll back and her lids clamp down tight. She slumps on top of him, the light hidden, her body heavy. It's like seeing her on the train running parallel to his, just before she disappears into that other tunnel.

Antony is the certified First Aid Officer at *departures.com*. He went on the St John's Ambulance course and did very well. He got off with a nice guy there—he just *had* to stroke his cheek while putting him in recovery position.

This is what he does with Briony. Onto the side, there.

Don't interfere.

He puts a blanket over her. People in shock must be kept warm.

She is moving and twisting, almost flinging away the blanket. It doesn't look like a fit, though. There is fluidity to her motions, as if she swims in something rich and deep. *Dive into it.*

He sits with her, and maybe he falls asleep for a moment. He isn't sure. He can see her diving into a pool. It is a pool of light, spreading into circles. These rings keep getting wider, and more of them spread where Briony had once been.

Later her breath is deep and regular, her colour good. Antony whispers her name, hoping she'll wake up. He doesn't try again. *Don't interfere.*

As Briony sleeps, the sun brightens at the window. He's not sure if he should leave her. But she looks well, she just needs rest. He'll leave his number. He'll come back after work. See if she's OK. *Of course she'll be OK. She's only sleeping.* He finds a diary on the desk near her computer. As he leafs through it he sees *Me*, followed by a mobile number. He writes that down, plus a few other numbers from the front. He goes over the numbers several times to make sure he hasn't reversed or left out any digits.

He retrieves his shoes and puts them on. On his way out he stops in front of the Tree. The branches are still. It is only a picture.

Early sun bounces off the estate's white walls and shatters. Antony rubs his eyes as he comes out of the block. A breeze has finally dissolved yesterday's stagnant heat. He walks to the bus stop with a burst of energy. All-nighters can do that. Seeing the transition from night to day gives the morning a special kind of buzz. No matter that he'll be a wreck later in the

afternoon, and he probably won't get out of doing the expenses again.

But that doesn't seem to worry him now.

When he steps up to the bus, something yellow drops from the bottom of his shoe. That Post-It note fallen from the Tree of Life. It blows away. He reaches to snatch it back, but it is already fluttering down the road and the bus is starting to pull away from the kerb.

Antony goes upstairs and sits at the front, watching Parliament Hill fields go by. Branches striking the side of the bus jar him into sitting up and paying attention. When the bus stops, he stares at the nearest tree. He sees an intricacy in each leaf, a repeating yet subtly altering pattern. Spatterings of colour, shifting. The leaves speak in lush whispers, moving together and hiding something just beyond his sight. For the first time, he has an urge to describe what he *doesn't* see—that endless form reflected in Briony's eyes, the forest of Trees and everything that is concealed. He wants to remember how the darkness of Briony's hair is filled with black, brown, red and silver; how it later became damp at the nape of her neck and curled even more.

From downstairs he hears raised voices, a clink of coins, the thrum of the motor and the grinding of gears as the bus starts. Something yellow flutters in front of the window. Like that lost Post-It note. Would it have told him where she went? *Into another tunnel.* Will she wait for him at the top of an escalator again?

It's only a scrap of plastic bag.

"Alright?"

He releases a long shaky breath and turns around. It's the Cone Man.

"Hey, I'm sorry I took your cone," Antony quickly apologies. "I wasn't thinking. I was in a hurry to get to work and I had to catch up with someone . . . "

"It's *alright*, man. No problem. Got another." He lifts a new, shiny cone from the floor. He strokes it, then winks. "Mysterians get lost, but they'll be around. A thousand years from now, we'll still sing this song." He didgeridoos into the cone, a moist and spitty blast. *'Too many tear drops . . .* " he starts to croon.

Antony joins in on the chorus. ⊠

According to Iain Rowan, "'Here Comes The New Way' started with just the image of a man in a crowded market square, wreathed in flames, joyfully announcing as he died that the New Way was here. Where that image came from, I don't know. My subconscious works in mysterious ways."

Iain grew up in Kent but now lives in the north-east of England, near the sea but not near enough. He's had over thirty short stories published in magazines and anthologies, including Postscripts, Ellery Queen's, Alfred Hitchcock's *and others. His crime novel,* One of Us, *was shortlisted for the 2006 Crime Writers' Association Debut Dagger. You can contact Iain via his website: www.iainrowan.com.*

Here Comes The New Way

Iain Rowan

The day of the first burning, Piotr was at the market looking for the cheapest oranges. A man pushed his way through the crowds and scrambled up onto the statue of some long-forgotten general that stood crumbling in the middle of the square. People stopped their examination of cabbages and buttons and stared up at him.

"Here comes the new way! Here comes the new way!" the man shouted, and raised his arms towards the sky. The man standing next to Piotr laughed, others shook their heads, a child threw an apple at the man on the statue, missed, and darted away into the flapping canvas maze of the stalls. Then the man started to shake, as if he were very cold, and tiny blue flames flared up from within him, now here, now there, chasing one another over his body. The flames met and turned orange and the man was wrapped in the glow, arms still stretched to the sky. "Here comes the new way!" he said again, but this time more quietly, and the words were smothered when one of the market traders ran to the statue, clambered up, and threw a blanket over the burning man. As if this weight was too much to bear the man toppled to the ground, the blanket floating down over him. An occasional lizard's tongue of fire licked out from underneath the blanket, but after a while there was no more, just some blackened cloth lying on the ground with a shape underneath it that did not look like much of anything.

Piotr stood still, too far away to do anything other than watch. He rocked from side to side as some people pushed past him, running away, and others barged closer, wanting a better view.

Shouts came from the far side of the square, the authorities arriving, too late to do anything. The wind shifted slightly, and Piotr smelt roasting meat.

He turned and walked back through the crowd, hand cupped over his nose. He cut short his search for work that day. The burning man had unsettled him, not just because of the horror of the act, but because he felt as if it had changed the city itself.

Irina raised her eyebrows at his early return, but said nothing. Piotr knew that she was desperate for him to find new work, knew that she eked their savings out as weeks stretched into months. But she said nothing because she knew how hard he tried, how many other men like him wandered the streets of the city, shuffling from workshop to workshop, wringing their cap between their hands as they asked a question, already knowing the answer. It had been a hard year, a cold year, and the city had little to offer.

Piotr knew that when Irina knelt down on the hard wooden floor, and laced her hands in prayer, she was praying for intercession that would find him work before the winter really set in. Piotr did not pray any more. He had lost his faith long before he had lost his job. But he never said so to Irina, knowing how much her belief meant to her, knowing how much she might be hurt. Piotr believed in nothing but the next meal on the table, the next bag of coal for the fire.

"I saw a man burn to death," he said.

Irina's face turned blank with shock, and then she lowered her eyes and muttered to herself for a moment.

"Strange thing was," Piotr said, "it came out of nowhere. One minute he was standing on the statue in the market place . . . next minute, he was in flames."

"Someone set fire to him?"

Piotr shook his head slowly. "I couldn't see anyone near him. I think . . . I think he must have set himself alight somehow. I can't see any other explanation."

"Why would someone do such a thing?"

"I don't know," Piotr said, and then he felt ashamed because a week earlier, he had been standing on a bridge, watching the river swirl black and furious about the stained stone arches, and thinking about how low the wall was, how easy it would be to climb over it, and then fall. There was no effort in falling. None at all.

The burning man was the talk of the city for a few days, but then the daily struggle took over. It had been remarkable, but the remarkable did not put food on the table, and the most famous actress from the national theatre ran off with a minor nobleman twenty years her junior, and a prominent councillor went mad and took to hiding under tables in restaurants and biting women's feet.

Then a well-respected lawyer walked into the middle of the park where people still paraded in their Sunday best, even if these days it was not as good as it used to be. He smiled at everyone passing, raised his arms, called out that the New Way was here, and was wrapped all around in a shroud of flames.

Rumour spread through the city as fast as the fire. The New Way was a plot by enemies. It was the sign of the end of all days. It was a suicide cult of the deluded and the drugged, who soaked their clothes in spirits and then died a pointless, agonising death. Some strangers from another town were badly beaten by a crowd, and all across the city children threw stones at anyone with a deformity. A mob formed on the square in front of the council chamber and its bravest members tried to force their way in, demanding that something be done—and something was. The council brought the cavalry from the barracks and they sat at one side of the square, a dense mass of shuffling horses and clanking metal and implacable stares. The crowd continued to shout, and the cavalrymen walked their horses forward a few steps. Some of the crowd started to drift away out of the other side of the square, but others remained, still making their protest and demanding that the council do something to stop the burnings. The walk turned into a casual trot, and suddenly the drift away became a panicked run for all bar a couple of dozen who stood their defiant ground, and hours later there was nothing but workers from the city sifting sand onto the cobbles, sand that turned slowly red.

And the burnings still went on, more each day.

Piotr was out on his endless search for work when a huge hand clapped him on the back, sending him stumbling.

"Ha, thought I was the law, eh? Guilty conscience." It was Arnesto, who had worked alongside Piotr for many years. Back when Piotr worked.

"Arnesto. Still as shy and retiring as ever."

"As always, as always. You look like a man in need of a drink."

"I really ought not, I, I have to—" Piotr did not want to tell Arnesto that he had no money for a drink, not these days.

"Aye, you do have to, have to come with me for a drink because I'm buying. Just come off a job, it's burning a hole in my pocket, and the more you drink of it, the less I do, and the less I do the less trouble I'm in when I get home." Arnesto was already steering Piotr into a bar.

They stood at the counter, drinking in silence for a moment.

Then Arnesto said, "Those burnings?"

"I saw one."

"My cousin's one of them, believes in it all," he said. "This 'New Way'. Always was an idiot boy."

"It's a religion?" Piotr said.

"Something like that. Believe and get burnt to death? Not for me."

"It's not like that." A man at the far end of the bar with an orange flower in the lapel of his jacket leaned forward, looking intense, as if what he was about to say was the most important speech of his life. "It's not death, you see."

"Ha!" Arnesto snorted and drank

most of the rest of his beer in one swallow. "One of them, in the flesh, no less. Should have known by the orange. What's that for, hey? Why'd you all wear it?"

"It's not death," the man said, "it's more like . . . going on a journey. You leave one place, and go to another. Fire's just the vehicle for getting there. It purifies. That's why we wear the orange, to show our faith in the flames. When the New Way comes, the fire cleans away all the evils of this world."

"And then?" Piotr said.

"And then you're part of it," the man said, his eyes shining with excitement. "You're part of the New Way. And all you have to do is believe."

"Believe in what?" Arnesto asked.

"The New Way. That's all. So simple, it's the most beautiful thing in the world. Don't you see, it's different, this isn't like the old religions, with their books and rules and creeds. There's none of that. There's only one thing. Believe. Believe in the New Way, and when you believe with enough faith, the New Way will come to you."

"So how come you're not ashes?" Arnesto laughed at his own joke.

"Because I do not have enough faith," the man said sadly, and looked down at the bar. "Yet."

Every day, Piotr walked the city without any faith at all. He covered it slowly, with method, from the south to the north, from the east to the west, making sure that he did not miss a single street, any half-hidden alleyway. He had the time to do this. He had nothing but time. So he walked the city from end to end and he found places he had not even known existed, even though he had lived in the city his whole life, and he asked and he asked and sometimes he even came close to begging but the answer was always no, no work here, try somewhere else. And so he walked without faith, but he did not stop because it was not in his nature to do so. And because he knew Irina did have faith, and he did not want to let her down.

He was on the north side of the river, past the lumbering squat shapes of the dockyard warehouses, past the rows and rows of back-to-back houses where every man was a dockworker, back in the days when the docks had been busy. Piotr walked up the steep streets that rose high on the northern outskirts, climbing the ridge that looked down across the rest of the city. He lost his way amongst a tangle of quiet little streets, where not much disturbed the dust other than the cats that slinked and prowled, conducting their own affairs. He came to a courtyard where a fountain stood dry in the middle of a pond of cracked stone and straggling weeds, and stopped for a moment, judging how much further he would walk that day before he turned back towards home, to disappoint Irina again.

A door banged and a tall, thin man came out of it. He looked at Piotr and smiled.

"You look lost."

"Do you have any work?" Piotr said mechanically. "I'm a hard worker, willing, can turn my hand to anything, anything."

"Not the kind of work I think you are looking for. But you will find it, my friend, I am certain."

Piotr laughed, and it tasted bitter in his mouth.

"All you have to do is to believe", the man said, and smiled. He raised his hands, as if he was about to give Piotr a blessing.

"Is that all?"

"Yes." The man ignored Piotr's tone. "Just believe." He smiled and spoke softly, as if to a child.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Piotr said, annoyed. He started to walk away.

"You will," the tall man laughed after him. "Although we are not talking about the same thing."

"What? Believe in what?" Piotr turned and looked back.

The man smiled again. "The New Way. Be a part of it."

"Or?" Piotr asked.

For the first time the man showed some annoyance.

"Or be left behind," he said. "Be left behind with the damned and the cold." He turned and walked away down the steep hills towards the city.

The New Way spread through the city like a disease. Everywhere Piotr looked, people were wearing the orange, some slyly, a dyed handkerchief peeking from a pocket, others with pride, a bright orange sash around their waist. People spoke of the New Way, of those who had been transformed, of how amazing it must be to have the faith to be chosen, of how they were there when a neighbour, a friend, a stranger was transformed by fire. And they spoke of Michael, the charismatic stranger who had first started to speak of the New Way months before, long before the first burning. Now he led the way, preaching to crowds across the city.

"None of this," Piotr heard one woman at the market say. "None of this scratching around for the next meal every day of your damn life, giving your children mouldy bread and having none yourself because that would mean they wouldn't eat. Or choking to death like my man because the black breath's got a hold of you after thirty years in the factory, and you can't afford a doctor. That's why they're dying isn't it, the ones who burn, to show us the way, to show us that it's not dying at all, just a path to somewhere better than this."

"Path to the New Way," her friend said.

"The New Way," the woman agreed.

They were silent for a moment, and then her friend said "It scares me though, the thought of it. The burning."

"Yes," the first woman said. "It scares me too. But so does the thought of going on living like this. And winter's coming."

Her friend just nodded at this, and then they were silent in thought, and

Piotr moved on through the market. He did not want salvation in the next life, he just wanted work in this one.

He was roaming the city streets again, always looking. He turned a corner from an empty street and found himself in a road crowded with people, moving along like a mass of twigs fallen on a river, all flowing in the same direction. It was hard to stand still, as people jostled past Piotr felt drawn to follow. But he stopped, uncertain. A crowd like this often meant trouble, a demonstration or a strike, and then later there would be the clink of hooves on the cobbles and the rattle of metal, and he wanted none of that. A woman paused beside him, smiled.

"You look unsure. Come with us," the woman said, her eyes shining. "You must."

"Is something wrong, is there—"

She shook her head, and laughed as if the world were nothing but joy. "Nothing wrong—everything is right. Come with us and hear him speak."

Piotr realised then who she meant, where all the people were going. "No," he said. "He has nothing to say that I want to hear."

The woman paused for a moment, and touched her hand to Piotr's arm. There was a strange expression on her face, and for a moment he did not know what it was. Then she walked away with the crowd, and he realised that it had been pity.

He followed.

Hundreds were packed into the square. At the far side a man stood on a cart, tall and thin above the crowd like a heron standing above the marshes. Piotr thought that he knew him from somewhere. He struggled through the crowd, edging his way closer to the front.

"Why do those few get taken?" the man asked. He pointed out at the crowd, his finger moving slowly across them as if defying them to answer his question. "Because they *believe*."

A ripple of sound moved through the crowd, low and unquestioning. The sound of a thousand people saying yes, yes. Piotr got close enough to see that it was the man he had met in the courtyard a few days before. He tapped on the arm of the man next to him. "Is that . . . ?"

"Yes," the man nodded with pride, "It is Michael, here to show us the way. But now, listen."

"They believe with every fibre of their being," Michael said. "They believe with every last part of their body. They believe with every last part of their *souls*."

Again the great murmur.

"And you all—you do not."

The silent acquiescence of a faithful dog being scolded. No protest, just a hurt gaze.

"You cannot. And you know why. If you all believed, truly believed, believed like those martyrs believed, then the New Way would be here and upon us all and the whole world would be changed right now." Another ripple,

which grew like a rushing wave into a roar of approval. The man called Michael kept on talking, his voice growing to always stay atop the noise of the crowd. "For that is the message I bring, the only thing that I have to tell you, the only purpose in my life, the only thing you have to do is believe, and the New Way will come."

The roar took shape and became a chant, echoing Michael's final words. He cut it short with one abrupt gesture, cutting the air with his hand.

"Chanting is not enough," he said, and he spoke very quietly but his words carried all the same. "*I* am not enough. But you, together, all believing with your soul and your body and your mind—that, my brothers and my sisters, that will be enough. Your belief will bring it to those who doubt. All our faith joined together will be a force that nothing can withstand. The old world, this old world of pain, and suffering, and injustice, will be no more for you. The New Way will have come. But it will not come until there is belief. And you do not yet believe enough."

He clasped his hands together, as in prayer, and bowed his head.

There was silence for a moment. Piotr thought that they had expected to be whipped into a frenzy, not told that they were not pious enough. But then one voice called out "I want to believe," and a few others took up the cry, and then the man standing near Piotr shook with emotion and bellowed "I will believe! I will believe!" and Michael lifted his head a little and looked over at the part of the crowd near Piotr, and he stared for a moment and then nodded his head, unsmiling, and pointed a finger out. Piotr felt as if it was pointed at him. As the crowd's chant of "I will believe! I will believe!" grew in volume, he slipped away and out of the square, but although he walked as fast as he could without breaking into a run he could not escape the sound of the voices which seemed to follow him through the city.

For Piotr, the end started with a flower. He had been out early that morning. He stood in small shacks and large factory units, amidst the showers of sparks and the glow of molten glass being blown. Although there seemed to be plenty being made, the story everywhere was the same. Demand falling, laying off their own men, no chance of taking on an additional pair of hands. Try the next one down the street, try another time, try another line of work, everywhere the advice was the same.

He stopped on the way home for a small cup of coffee, and sat by the counter looking out onto the street. The drink was dark and bitter and the grounds in his mouth made him think of sand deliveries to the glassworks when he was an apprentice. He drank it slowly, as it was the only cup he would be able to afford that week, and he had time still to kill until lunchtime, when Irina would cook him some soup she had made from the vegetables she had bought that day. Bruised and scarred,

but they made decent enough soup. He watched the world go by, and wondered about the people he saw, where they were going, what they were going to do, what they had been doing. A thousand lives passed in just a few minutes, their stories secret and untold. Then he saw Irina, returning from the market, leaning to one side because of the heavy wicker basket that she carried, and he saw the flower straight away. It was the one point of colour in the street, a vibrant orange against the dull browns and faded blues of Irina's clothes. Maybe it is just a flower, he thought. She likes flowers, she likes pretty things, and these days I cannot provide them. Perhaps it was on the floor there at the market, or was given to her by a stallholder because he felt happy that for the first day in a hundred his bowels had stopped troubling him, or his wife had left him or had come back or a thousand reasons, a thousand other reasons why Irina might be wearing the orange.

He set his coffee down on the coffee stall and set off after her. He did not want to stop her in the street though, so he walked slowly and allowed her to reach their home first. When he came through the door she was in the kitchen, already chopping vegetables. She smiled at him, and went back to her work.

"Did you find anything?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Piotr felt as if the world had slowed down around him.

"Work, my love. Did you have any success this morning?" Chop, chop. "If not, there's always tomorrow. Something will come up." Chop, chop. "You're a good worker, you'll find something."

"Why are you wearing that flower?" Piotr had meant to approach the subject with delicacy, leading her round to the issue using subtlety and stealth, but he could not think straight enough and his mouth just moved of its own accord and the words came out.

"Am I not allowed to wear a flower now, am I not?" She smiled, to show that she had not really taken offence. "I last bought a new dress more than a year ago, you can't begrudge me a simple flower now and then, can you?"

"Not *a* flower. Not why are you wearing *a* flower. Why are you wearing *that* flower?"

Irina laid down the knife, rested her hands upon the table, and looked straight at Piotr.

"Because I believe," she said simply. "Let me talk to you, Piotr, please my love, you need to learn about this, all our worries, our cares, your work, it will make it all seem less important." But Piotr was gone, the front door banging behind him.

For a week they did not speak about it. They danced around the issue, which filled the air between them like a wall. Irina stopped wearing orange, although Piotr was certain that this was only when he was around. She had a look in her eyes, a certain knowing happiness, that kept reminding him that she was a believer. Where he had doubt, she had a quiet certainty, a sense of purpose that

left him afraid. He told her that he was looking for work, but he spent most of the day just walking the city, street after street with no real direction, his eyes downcast so that he did not see the increasing number of people with an orange scarf, or sash, or flower, and that same quiet assurance in their eyes.

Then he could not look away any more.

He was back at the market, looking for any fruit that was bruised enough to be cheap but not bruised enough to be inedible. As he turned between a row of stalls he thought he saw Irina walk past the far end, carrying a basket.

"Irina?" he shouted, but the woman had passed and the flapping canvas of the stalls drowned out his voice. He walked off in pursuit. He would walk home with her, carry the shopping, talk with her like they used to when life was better. He pushed his way through the crowds in the lanes, caught a glimpse of her only to find that he was falling further behind. Then he heard a woman's shout ahead, a confused hubbub of voices, and then screams. Piotr ran, pushing people out of his way, but by the time he got there he knew already that he was too late.

There was a circle of people, silent, a terrible, terrible smell, and in the middle of the circle a dark huddle of blackened flesh, an upside down basket, some oranges still rolling in lazy circles across the ground.

"What did she look like?" he shouted at numb faces. "What did she look like?"

A small man pushed past him, and walked over to the still smoking body. He bent down and fiddled with something. Then he turned back to the crowd.

"My wife," he said, and he juggled a wedding ring from hand to hand, wincing at the heat. "My wife."

Piotr felt relief wash over him in a flood, and then embarrassment at his selfishness. "I'm so sorry," he said, but broke off, because the small man was not crying, was not standing numb and bemused as his world fell down around him.

"My wife," the man said again, and his face lit up with a smile of joy. "Oh, my love, my love, I will not be long."

A murmur went round the crowd. "She's gone to the New Way!" the man laughed, and flung his arms up in the air. "She believed! I believe! Here comes the New Way!"

Piotr spat on the floor with disgust, and a few others did likewise, or turned away. But others stood and looked thoughtful, and more still smiled and clapped along with the small man. When they too started to call out "Here comes the New Way,", Piotr turned and ran back through the narrow streets, desperate to reach Irina, to kiss her and hug her and not to let her go, not ever.

He burst into the house, full of his love for her. Irina jumped up from where she had been kneeling, one hand going behind her back.

"What are you doing?" Piotr said, finding it hard to pull the words from his throat, which felt very tight, as if he

was just about to choke. When Irina didn't answer, he said again "What are you doing?", but this time it came out as a shout.

"I—I—how dare you burst in on me like this, shouting at me, frightening me, as if you expect to find me here with another man?"

"And haven't I?" Piotr laughed, but there wasn't any joy in it. He strode forward and grabbed Irina's arm, pulling her arm out from behind her back. She resisted for a moment, and he pulled harder. Then he saw the frightened expression on her face, and he let go, scared that he was about to be consumed by his own fire.

"Piotr," Irina said. "You're scaring me. Stop it."

He turned away from her, trying to push the anger deep down inside himself, but he failed and it came welling up again like blood from a wound and he kicked a footstool flying. It hit the wall, splintered and broke and the pieces rattled against the wall.

"Piotr!"

"Your hand," he said. "Show me what is in your hand, Irina."

"Piotr—"

"Show me."

Irina's face went from fear to sadness, and then to something that looked like anger. She took a deep breath, and closed her eyes for a moment. Then she opened them, looked at Piotr with a steady gaze, and slowly brought her hand from behind her back and held it out.

Piotr felt sick, his knees weak. "You said you'd stopped. You said."

Irina kept the orange flower held out, a delicate barrier between them. "I do not know why you are so shocked, Piotr. You never believed me anyway. Now you know that you are right."

"Irina, I thought you were *dead* today. I thought you had been burned to death. I-" Piotr turned away, tears welling up in his eyes.

"My love," Irina said gently, and Piotr felt her hand on his back, small and warm.

"I thought you had been burned," he said, and the tears came.

"No, my love," she said, and he felt a wave of love so strong that he felt like it would sweep him away.

"No, my love," she said again. "Not yet."

Piotr left the house without saying another word, and without looking back.

He walked through streets which grew dark and full of shadow as the night stole the last light from the sky. As he walked he tried to remember where he had been the day he had first seen Michael. There had been a courtyard with a fountain in the middle, the fountain still, the pond around it dry and bare. A shop mending shoes, an inn that was shut and looked as if it would never open again, cats slinking around every corner, the spies of the city. It was on the north side of the river where the ground rose steeply, somewhere high on the ridge beyond the warehouses of the silk trade, beyond the narrow back-to-back streets where the dockworkers

lived. He knew that he might be on a fool's mission. Michael might have been visiting a friend. Leaving a room he no longer rented. Holding a meeting with other conspirators who wanted to steal Piotr's wife, have her die in agony for the promise of something that wasn't there. If there's nothing at the house, then I will think about what to do next, Piotr thought. If there is anyone else there, I will beat them until they tell me where that man is. And if he is there . . . but I have to find it first.

It was night when Piotr turned around a corner, and saw the shadow of a fountain in the middle of the courtyard, no water splashing. He slunk along the side of the walls, and the cats watched him pass through their kingdom. There was no sound, no lights. I have come to an empty house, Piotr thought. He tried the door. It was open.

The house was almost empty. The guttering light of a match Piotr struck showed a few sticks of furniture. A half-eaten apple, on a plate with the knife that had been used to cut it into pieces. Shadows. Silence.

Then a voice called out.

"I am on the roof. You have to come up the stairs at the back of the house."

Piotr picked up the knife, blew out the match, and climbed up the stairs.

At the top, a door let out onto a flat roof, at the side of the house away from the street. A tall man stood by the parapet, looking out. The ground dropped away on that side, and the city was laid out before them like a child's toy.

"If I am who you are looking for, you have found me," Michael said. "I need no locks, no guards. I have the New Way." He turned and smiled at Piotr. "Have you come to find your faith, my friend?"

"No," Piotr said. "I have come to find you." Michael took a step backward. "Why haven't you been taken? You're so holy, why haven't you been taken?"

"We are not *taken*," Michael said gently. "There is no force that takes us anywhere—that is not the New Way. We take ourselves." Then he stepped back again, as Piotr took his hand from behind his back and showed the knife.

"You have to stop this now, leave the city." He paused for a moment. "Or I will kill you myself, before you are taken to the new way."

"I would pass to it anyway," Michael said, but there was a little shake in his voice, not much, but it was enough.

Piotr grinned. "So all faith can be tested. Tell me what I asked. Why haven't you been taken? Are you not fit for it?"

"I like to think I am. But I am here for another reason, and until that work is done, here I stay. One day that work will finish, and I will pass to the New Way. It is coming very soon. I can feel it. Days. Hours, even."

"What? What's coming? Nothing's coming. *You* are going."

"It's coming when my work is done. I am here to spread the word of the New Way, that is all, to be a sign that points the way. I'm not special, whatever they may think. I am just a sign, a way to make people open their eyes. And when enough of them have done

so, there will be no need for me. Even if I left now, it would make no difference. You are too late, my friend. Can you not feel it in the city? This is your city, you must do, you must feel it in the streets."

"Feel what?"

"The time when I will no longer be needed. The more people who believe, the more others will follow. It is the way of the world. Once enough people believe in the New Way, believe in it, then most others will follow, because they will think that the others must be right, and they will not wish to be left behind."

"It spreads like a disease," Piotr said.

"Not the way I care to think of it. The New Way is its own example. It leads. And in time all will follow. First, one believed, and all others scoffed. Then another believed, and then another. *This*, my friend, is the New Way."

"I won't believe."

"Well, maybe there will be a few left in the old way, ones like you. But you will be welcome to what is left of this world of sorrows. You and the ones like you."

"And my wife," Piotr said.

"No, not her, I think," Michael said. "I think from your anger that she has come to belief. And if she has come to belief, then she will be blessed indeed. She will come to the New Way, and very soon."

"No," Piotr shouted.

"You have no say in it, my friend. If she believes, if she really believes . . . "

Then Michael broke off, stepped back as Piotr jumped forward but then Piotr was upon him and the knife was in him and then they were both on the floor, and Piotr was pushing the knife deep, deeper, and Michael was drawing his breath in ragged gasps. Piotr stood up.

"That is for my wife," he said. "Believe that. It is the only truth you have left to know."

Michael wheezed and waved his hands in small circles, as if he were trying to ward off a fly.

"Too late. When enough believe . . . "

Piotr stepped forward and kicked him, very hard, in the side of the head.

"It is the New Way", Michael said, and then he made a shape like a yawn but blood came out of his mouth, bright red, and ran down onto the tiled floor. Then although Michael's eyes were still open, Piotr saw the life leave them and the man became empty.

Piotr staggered to the edge of the roof, the parapet the only thing that kept him from falling. His breath rattled and rasped in his throat, and for a moment he thought that he would never be able to breathe again. He raised his cheek from the cold stone of the wall, and looked up. All across the city he could see a thousand little orange flames, dancing and twinkling like candles. After a time, one by one, they all went out.

Will McIntosh tells us, "'Three Unlikely Futures' began as one unlikely future. The brief story seemed unable to stand on its own, yet at the same time it seemed finished, so I devised two equally unlikely futures to accompany it." As an American, Will has a deep distrust of France for having its own opinion about things (and often being correct).

Will is a psychology professor in the Southeastern U.S. His stories have been published (or will be published) in Asimov's, Interzone, Chizine, *and others. His* Interzone *story "Soft Apocalypse" was shortlisted for both the British Science Fiction Association and the British Fantasy Society awards for best short story of 2005. He is currently at work on his first novel, set in the Soft Apocalypse world.*

Three Unlikely Futures

Will McIntosh

One

There was a strange man in the road outside Cyril's house. He was dressed in a pistachio suit and straw hat, and appeared to be attempting to measure the road, lengthwise, with a wooden yardstick. Cyril squeezed through his screen door and walked across the lawn, which was still wet with morning dew.

Cyril stood a respectable distance from the man and watched as he set the yardstick on the pavement, placed a finger at the leading edge to mark his place, lifted the yardstick and moved the trailing edge to his finger. He whispered under his breath.

"Excuse me," Cyril said. "I couldn't help noticing—"

"Eight thousand seven hundred twelve!" the man shouted. "Eight thousand seven hundred twelve!"

"Pardon?" Cyril asked.

"I can only speak to you if you promise to remember that number—eight thousand seven hundred twelve."

Mrs. Crumpe, from across the way, tottered to the end of her driveway. She opened her mailbox and made a show of peering in, although it was only eight in the morning, and the postman never came until three in the afternoon.

"Yes, all right. Eight thousand seven hundred twelve. If you like I can fetch a pad and pencil and write it down."

The man shook his head. "Very kind, but that won't be necessary. The number will be changing soon enough." He eyed the yardstick lying in the road.

"Would you like a cup of oolong, perhaps?"

"No, no, very kind, but I must be on my way soon." The man stood, brushing his hands on the back of his trousers, and introduced himself as Professor Durant, from the physics department at the university.

"May I ask what you're doing?" Cyril said, struggling to keep any hint of incredulity out of his tone. He looked at Mrs. Crumpe, who was still clutching the door to her mailbox. She had already looked inside thrice in a feeble attempt to appear to have business within earshot of their conversation. Being noticed, she headed for her door, albeit at half her usual pace, exaggerating the limp of her bad hip.

"There's something very wrong," Durant said. "I suspect the roads are shrinking. The autos as well, proportionally, so I can't use an odometer to measure."

"I see," Cyril said.

"I suspect that all the roads have shrunk, and autos, but I'm using this as a test road to confirm my suspicion. According to the map it should be sixteen point two six miles long, or nine thousand six hundred two yards." He had a head like a pumpkin; his orange hair reinforced the resemblance. "Now, what was the number?"

Cyril went white. He'd forgotten. Durant's mouth dropped open as he read the panic on Cyril's face.

"No! Eight thousand seven hundred twelve. There it is. No worries."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure. Completely sure."

Durant stared intently at him for a moment, gauging his honesty, perhaps. Then he nodded, wished Cyril a good day, and set back to work.

Cyril headed toward his house, happy to leave the clearly unhinged man to his unlikely task. It occurred to him that, as long as he was out, he might as well nip down to the chocolatier. The night before he'd had an extraordinarily vivid dream of shopping in a warehouse which housed huge blocks of chocolate. In his dream, he'd selected a block of dark chocolate as big as a dishwasher. He'd awakened while arranging delivery, and had been craving dark chocolate since.

He couldn't quite get comfortable in his auto. He adjusted both the rear-view and side mirrors, and set the seat back two notches. As he backed into the road, the steering wheel felt wrong, somehow. Loose, as if it was turning too easily. Smaller, almost.

Frowning, he pulled alongside Durant and rolled down his window. "Why would you think that the roads and autos are shrinking?"

"This morning I visited Vagabond Gulch. It was not as impressive as I remember it being. A complete disappointment. Last time I visited it seemed vast, boundless, majestic. This time, it seemed nothing special. As if it had shrunk. Plus I have other information."

"I see." The man was clearly a lunatic. Clearly. "But if the hills and streets and autos were shrinking, wouldn't yardsticks be shrinking as well?"

Durant looked at his yardstick, stunned. "That hadn't occurred to me." He laid his hand atop it. "How long do you suppose my hand should be?"

Cyril put his car in park and got out. "May I?" He squatted and put his thumb along the edge of the yardstick—the first segment of his thumb was almost exactly an inch long.

Now it was nearly an inch and an eighth.

"How tall are you?" Cyril asked.

"Five foot seven."

Cyril plucked a cigarette butt out of the gutter and put it at the end of the yardstick to mark Durant's place in the road, then set about measuring him.

"According to this, you're roughly five nine!" Cyril, who was five foot ten and a half, straightened to his full height and stared down into Durant's watery, wheat-colored eyes. Five foot seven was about right. He turned and looked at his auto, still idling, wisps of black smoke trailing from the tailpipe. Was it smaller? He looked down at the yardstick, rotated it in his fingers, and noticed his trouser cuffs.

"Hold on," he said, turning his foot to one side. A good inch of white sock peeked from beneath the trouser cuff.

Durant eyed the cuff. "No, that doesn't look right at all." He examined his own legs. "Mine, either." He offered a leg—showing too much sock—for Cyril's inspection.

"What on earth is going on?" Cyril said.

"It's the French, I believe," Durant said.

"The French? How do you mean?"

"I have reason to believe the French have developed a means of stealing matter. There have been clues in the scientific journals, if you know how to look."

The front door of Mr. Champine's house opened. Champine strode down his front walk, his suit cuffs inches too high, the button of his jacket bulging at his belly, his briefcase appearing the size of a lunchbox. He glanced at Cyril with an expression leaking confusion and embarrassment, as if he'd wet his trousers, then quickly looked away. He squatted, bent almost double, to squeeze into his auto.

"How the hell can you steal matter?" Cyril asked.

"It's quite complicated."

Cyril's house was clearly smaller now. The hood of his auto barely reached his chest. Cyril had always been afraid of becoming smaller, stooped by old age, or shrunk by the light of others' estimation of him. It felt no better getting large than he'd imagined it would getting small.

Champine drove past, his head pressed against the roof, bent at an angle.

"Christ! This can't be. It's not possible," Cyril said.

"I imagine the Eiffel tower is enormous by now," Durant said, pulling off a shoe. He pulled off the other, then unzipped his trousers and pushed them to his ankles. "Best strip out of your clothes."

"I'm not taking my clothes off in the street!" Cyril said.

"Suit yourself. I don't imagine fabric can strangle you, but it may get unpleasantly tight before it tears."

Mrs. Crumpe's door opened. She crawled out on hands and knees, dragging her cane. She struggled to her feet and looked around, wild terror in her eyes. Shouts of alarm emanated from nearby houses. Cyril imagined late sleepers, waking to find their legs dangling off the end of the bed, the ceiling almost within reach. He kicked off his shoes.

An auto pulled around the curve, weaving. "Watch out, watch out!" Durant said, stepping onto Cyril's lawn. The auto slammed into a telephone pole. They hurried over.

Mrs. Crumpe was back at her mailbox, clinging to the catch on the open door, staring at the tiny auto, which was hissing and spewing steam from under its crumpled hood.

Durant pulled open the door. Mr. Champine was curled in a ball, his head pressed under one arm, his knees pinned against the ceiling.

"Help," he whimpered, the plea muffled.

"Here, help me," Durant said. Cyril grasped an ankle, tried to work Champine's foot past the door's molding while Durant dug to get purchase behind his shoulders. Champine's leather shoes were the size of a child's; his toes must have crushed and splintered.

It was no use. They clawed and tugged, but Champine was jammed tight, and getting tighter by the moment. His pleas became more shrill, though no less muffled. Then he began to scream.

A baritone hum filled the air, quickly growing to drown out Champine's screams.

When the French planes appeared, low on the horizon, they were the size of skyscrapers.

Two

They took Spot for a walk along the surf in the waning sunlight, long after all the kids had gone home and their parents had hosed the sand off them. Donny and Beatriz were arguing metaphysics, as scad students are apt to do. That's what everyone called them—scad students. No one said Savannah College of Art and Design students. Scad students are creative types—free thinkers. They don't watch much TV.

"You know what your problem is?" Beatriz said, and, before Donny had a chance to come up with a clever answer, she answered the question herself. "You believe in nothing, that's your problem."

"That's exactly right!" Donny said, stabbing the air with an index finger. "I believe in nothing. But not what *you* mean by nothing: I believe deeply in the underlying *concept* of nothing, in the fact that the universe is random."

"That's depressing and nihilistic," Beatriz said.

A big old frigate, the kind stacked with red import/export boxes, cruised along parallel to the beach, headed for the port.

"No it isn't. Randomness is a gorgeous, perfect animal; it's true justice."

He bent down, grabbed a handful of sand, and flung it into the air. The wind, which was at their backs, scattered the sand. Each grain came to rest in its perfect place.

"See—" Donny said.

"Watch where you're stepping!" Beatriz interrupted, pulling Donny toward her by the elbow.

"What?"

"You almost stepped on a sand crab."

"So? I didn't mean to. You ate turkey for lunch." Truth be told, Donny was still working out what he did and did not believe. But he liked to take a stance and defend it.

"We shouldn't kill animals needlessly," Beatriz said, her thick black hair blowing around her face; a few strands caught between her lips. "Everything is interconnected, in a great nest of being. When you cause suffering to another living thing, you're also harming yourself, and me."

As if to underscore her point, Beatriz cut a wide berth so as not to disturb a little sandpiper who was running in and out with the surf, hunting whatever it was sandpipers hunted underneath the wet sand.

"If everything is interconnected, and we're all part of one big entity, then killing is no big deal. It's like pulling one leaf off a tree." He spotted one of the little tan sand crabs up ahead, its tiny claws held out like a gunfighter's, and, although he wasn't a violent person, and had never pulled the wings off butterflies when he was a kid, he stretched his step and stomped the crab.

"Donny!" Beatriz shouted.

"See? The universe is random," he said. "Life and death are random. The first crab lived, this one died, although it might easily have happened the other way around."

Beatriz wasn't smiling. Donny reached to put his arm around her waist, but she pulled away.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "It was supposed to be a joke."

A seagull screeched overhead; it suddenly changed direction and flapped violently out to sea.

Spot moaned low in his throat, like he did when he heard a police siren. It was an eerie sound—primordial, a reminder that Spot was not far removed from animals that hunted in packs in deep forests.

"What's the matter, buddy?" Donny said, relieved that Spot was distracting them from his crabicide.

Spot turned his face to the sky and howled again, louder, deeper.

"Jeeze," Beatriz said, squatting next to Spot, cradling his big brown head. "You okay?" she crooned. Spot whined, pulled his head out of her embrace, which was unlike him—normally he was an attention whore. He howled again.

Another howl, far down the beach. Then another, from the street, or maybe the verandah of some hotel room. Spot let out a pitiful wail, and pulled hard against his leash, toward the breaking whitecaps.

"What is it? Do you want to swim? Hmm? Do you want to go in the

water?" Donny patted his head, but Spot kept his gaze fixed on the ocean, whining pitifully, pawing the air as he strained on the end of the leash.

Donny plucked a stick out of the sand, cocked it behind his head. "Okay buddy, want to fetch the stick? Get the stick . . . " He unhooked Spot from the leash, then threw the stick as Spot bolted into the water.

Spot hit the water at a sprint, leaping high over a crashing wave, and paddled frantically. He ignored the stick and kept going.

"It's right there! Buddy, you missed it!" Donny shouted. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

Spot's hind end reared up. He disappeared underwater.

"Spot!" they shouted simultaneously.

Donny ran into the surf, dove over a breaking wave. He loved his dog, and swam with the desperate energy of someone who loves someone who's drowning. Fifty yards out he reached the spot where he thought Spot had submerged, and dove underwater, swinging his arms blindly in the black water.

He surfaced to take another breath, treading water, barely noticing that there were fish all around him, swimming toward shore. He screamed Spot's name, his voice breaking. From the shore, he heard Beatriz scream as well.

A pelican crashed into the water right beside him with a fat splash. All around, birds of all sizes and colors folded their wings and dove into the water. He heard the patter of a thousand splashes, like giant raindrops; the surface of the water was mottled with bullseye-shapes. Underneath, the water was alive with fish, bumping him with eager little heads.

When he saw something slick and grey break the surface in front of him, his first thought was *shark*, but the grey flesh kept rising, lifting out of the black water like a wall. He heard a wet puff; a black eye appeared on the grey wall and stared at him.

The whale turned and came right at him. Donny held his breath and dove, flattened himself on the sandy bottom, feeling the urgent ripple of fish passing overhead. A second later he felt the whale's mass pass over him, just barely brushing his back.

Donny surfaced just in time to see the whale surge onto the beach with a last powerful thrust of its tail, as if eager to strand itself as far on dry land as possible.

Beatriz ran toward it. Taking one last look out at a turbulent, Spot-less sea, Donny swam for shore.

The surf was thick with fish and crabs and other unrecognizable, twitching sea life. Donny had no choice but to run on the wriggling, multicolored mass. He slipped once, landing with a soft squish before clamoring to his feet.

He found Beatriz pushing on the whale with both hands, her face red, as if she could roll it back into the sea. "What's happening?" she screamed, her eyes wild with fear.

"I don't know." Donny had to shout over the deafening cry of birds, the bark

of dogs, the nattering of insects. "We have to get out of here." They ran for the car.

The road was nearly deserted of cars, but littered with animal carcasses—dogs and cats, squirrels, and something that looked like a small sea lion. On the radio they learned that it was happening all over. A panicked reporter described animals gone berserk, racing through the streets, killing themselves. Dogs leaping out of high-rise windows, birds diving into pavement, cattle cutting their throats on barbed wire.

A squirrel ran out from under the steel guard rail and leaped at their front grill. Beatriz shrieked. Before Donny could react, he felt a soft thump.

The radio report was peppered with theories. Physicists working at the supercollider in Austin reported an unexplained breakdown. Religious leaders blamed humanity's sinful ways. Some blamed solar flares, or comet radiation. There was a rumor that France had developed a new sort of weapon, and was unleashing it on its enemies. International communication had been disrupted, so this was hard to confirm.

A bluebird thudded into their windshield and stuck, its little beak mashed to bloody paste. Beatriz squealed in anguish.

"I know what's happening," Beatriz whispered. "The great nest of being. It died. We killed it. One dolphin, one gorilla, one crab at a time until it passed some tipping point. The animals are adrift. Motherless. And they can't stand it."

"The France theory makes more sense. Or the supercollider."

"It started right after you killed that crab. Right after! That little crab was the tipping point."

They sat in silence. Donny tried to think of some hole in Beatriz's theory, some exoneration. Why had he stepped on that crab?

"If we reached a tipping point, why aren't we killing ourselves as well?" he asked. "Why don't we feel it?"

"We divorced ourselves from the nest a long time ago—Watch out!" A deer sprinted into the road. Donny swerved, but so did the deer. It slammed chest-first into the grill, flew up and over. In the rear view mirror, Donny watched it land. He pulled over, pressed his forehead against the steering wheel.

Beside him, Beatriz sobbed, her palms covering her face.

Something plopped onto the hood of the car, unmoving. A little green tree frog, the kind that stick to the outsides of windows. It was dead, because of him. And the deer, and Spot, and the whale. It was his fault. Beatriz was right; deep inside he knew it. He started to cry. Beatriz leaned over, pressed her wet face against his neck.

"I'm sorry. If I'd known, I never would have done it," Donny said.

Beatriz shook her head, sniffed. "Even if you did it, if it wasn't you, it would've been someone else."

Donny looked at the lifeless frog, at its tiny green suction-cup feet. He pounded the steering wheel and screamed. In his mind he saw that little

crab, going about its business in the shadow of his foot. He saw its life snuffed out, saw the tread of his sneaker in the sand as he lifted his foot to reveal the thing's little lifeless corpse. Alive then dead, just like that.

There was a concentrated din of chittering, whining, and splashing outside Donny's window. He looked out, saw a steady stream of animals, from stoats to grasshoppers, crossing the lawn of the motel across the street, toward the swimming pool.

His fault. All his fault.

Donny jumped out of the car, headed toward the pool at a jog.

"Where are you going?" Beatriz shouted. Donny just kept going.

The pool was a churning mass of claws and fur and teeth, as the animals fought to get under the water. Donny knelt at the pool's edge, reached in, pulled out a handful of wriggling animals. He tossed them clear.

"What are you doing?" Beatriz asked, standing behind him.

"I have to save them. At least some. Put them in the car."

Cats and mice, snakes and spiders, flies and squirrels—he scooped them onto dry ground. He grabbed a possum by the tail; it swung around and bit his thumb. Blinding pain ripped through him as its teeth sank, and clung. Donny grabbed it by the snout, tried to pull his thumb free, but the possum only bit harder. It stared at Donny as blood welled along its gumline, with eyes filled not with anger, but with terror; a terror so black, so raw, so . . . final.

And Donny was certain of something, perhaps for the first time in his life.

He wrapped his free hand around the thing's throat, and squeezed. It let go of Donny's thumb, and closed its eyes, and stopped struggling. Donny went on squeezing.

"Stop it! You're killing it!" Beatriz said.

The possum twitched once, twice, and lay still. Donny let go. He reached into the pool to pull out something else, then noticed that there was no need: he was surrounded by animals, all looking at him with that same black terror in all their eyes, waiting their turn. He grabbed the closest (a squirrel) and snapped its neck.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Beatriz howled.

"It's the least we can do," Donny said.

Three

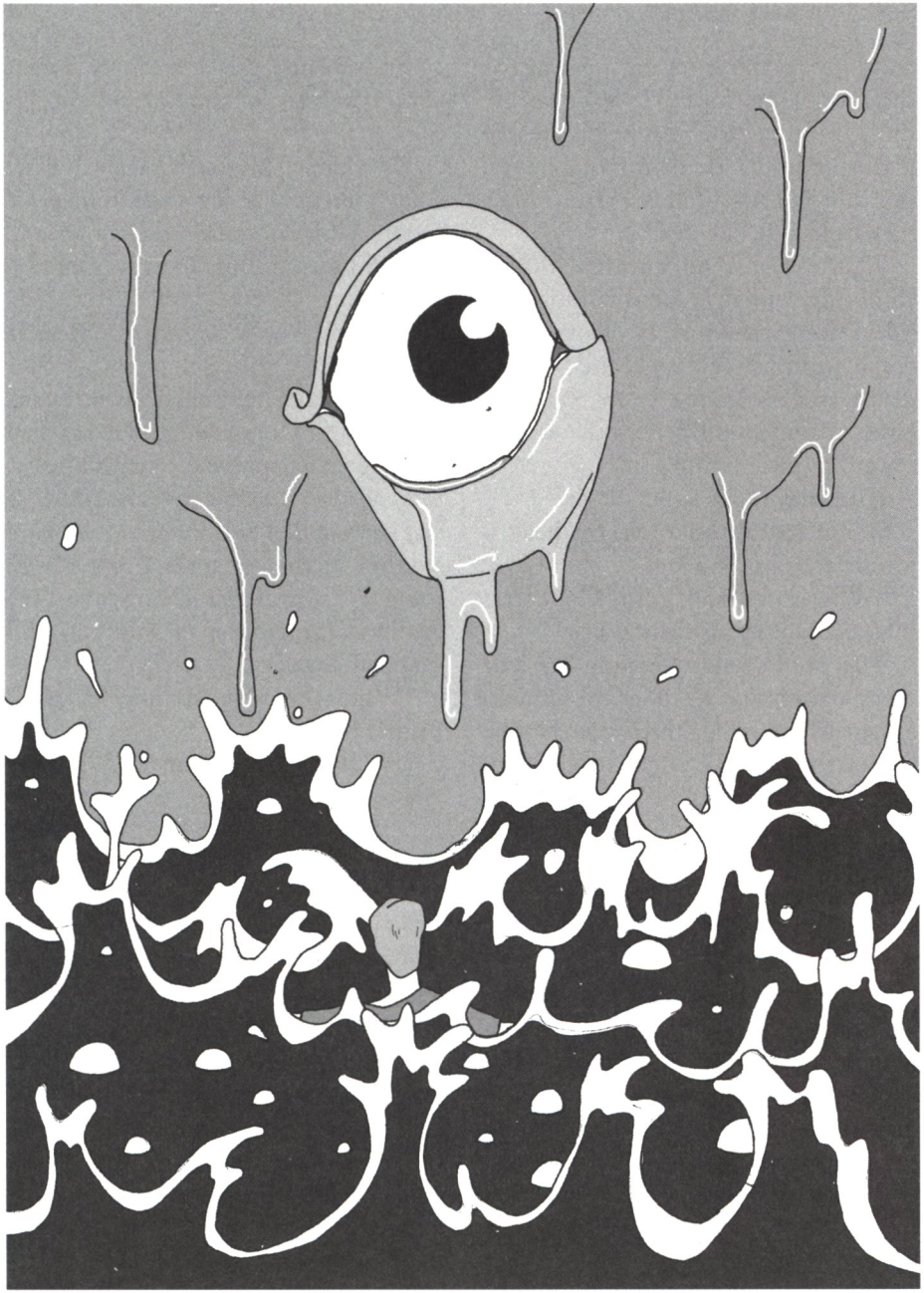
There was a metal screech that set Gordy's teeth on edge, and a shrill scream.

"Shit! Oh shit!" someone shouted.

Gordy looked around, followed the stares and the pointing fingers: one of the cars near the top of the Ferris Wheel was hanging at a sharp angle, swinging like a pendulum from a single hinge.

Then the car snapped free.

Marla grabbed his arm and squeezed it, hard. "Oh lord Jesus Mary and Joseph," she wailed. She got it all out



while the car was still in the air, while the people in the car, two girls and a guy, screamed. Gordy could see their faces. One of the girls, a blonde with a round face, had dropped an ice cream cone in her lap. The guy, who was wearing a red baseball cap, was staring at the upturned ice cream. Then the car slammed through the red steel railing, caught the silver walkway, flipped, and slammed to the ground. Gordy had never heard anything so loud.

"Stay here," he said to Marla. He didn't want to see this; it was the last thing in the world he wanted to see. He'd never understood people who rubbernecked when they drove past bad car accidents. But he was maintenance, he had an obligation.

The car was upside-down, canted half on and half off the silver walkway. There was a jutting arm pinned between the car and the elevated walkway. A girl's arm. A half-dozen cheap colored bracelets dangled from her wrist. Gordy recognized the bracelets—she'd won them at Rolf's balloon game.

He squatted and looked inside the car. God, he didn't want to see their faces, but someone needed to check to see if they were alive or dead.

They were dead, still secured behind the double-safety bar. The guy's cap lay in the dirt, along with the remains of the ice cream cone. A dollop of vanilla dripped from the blonde girl's white pants, like she was melting. She still looked scared. There wasn't much to do until the police arrived, except keep people back.

Gordy couldn't get the guy's expression out of his mind, the way he stared at the ice cream dumped in his girlfriend's lap. What was he thinking? He'd seemed about to reach over and brush the ice cream off her.

His feet ached something awful. He sat in the grass until the police came.

Why was fun associated with primary colors, Gordy wondered as he slapped a fresh coat of canary yellow on the Happy Hippo ride. Geren and Sons Amusements was a lake of red, blue, yellow, pink. Not a speck of tan in sight; not a dollop of seafoam. Gordy guessed primary colors were the primordial ones—the ones that tugged at the beast, that got the heart pumping and the wallet opening.

He didn't hear the glass shatter in the Hall of Mirrors. A couple of people who were closer claimed they heard it—said it sounded like someone had smashed a bottle on the pavement. What he heard was old Bob-O screaming "Somebody help!" He dropped the brush and ran, toward the Hall of Mirrors. A dozen other people were running as well. Carny folk are tight—they look out for their own. The marks, no one gave a shit about the marks. One of them could keel over with a stroke on the Round-Up, carnies ain't gonna shed too many tears. But they looked out for their own.

Juanita was lying on the floor, panting like she was in labor. Fluid dripped down the side of her cheek, toward her

ear, and her eye was deflated like a flat tire. The mirror had shattered while Juanita was cleaning it. She said she wasn't even pressing hard.

Weke drove to the emergency room. Gordy rode shotgun; Marla sat in the back, cradling Juanita's head in her lap. The van blew a tire halfway there; Weke just kept going, until they were riding at an angle and trailing sparks.

They sat in the waiting room and watched the Golden Gate Bridge collapse on CNN.

"Something's going on," Weke said, shaking his big head till his dreadlocks rustled. "This ain't right. Something ain't right."

Gordy craned his neck as they pulled out of the K-Mart parking lot, staring at the rides, abandoned on the brown grass. The Scrambler, Gravitar, the Mini-Coaster, the Round-Up, the Ferris Wheel. They were big, worthless dinosaurs. Even if they hadn't become dangerous, no one wanted to ride them. Who wanted to feel extra G's? With the pull of gravity increasing daily, the thrill had gone out of feeling heavy.

The scientists were working night and day to figure it out, or so they said. Go on about your lives, go to work if you can, keep using currency. Be fruitful and multiply. Shit, the only position where both Marla and he could breathe was side-by-side.

No one seemed quite clear on why this was happening (although there was a theory, that the French were somehow behind it), or how bad it would get, or if it would ever go back to normal.

The tips of Gordy's fingers were black, even though he'd washed them half a dozen times. He'd spent the last four days converting all of their tires. The conversion kits had cost Geren and Sons a month's profit, and installing four tank-like treads on the rims slowed the vehicles, but there'd be no more blowouts.

Gordy understood why Eskimos had twenty-two words for snow. They dealt with snow every day of their lives, so they had a lot to say about it. So why was there only one word for pain? There should be at least twenty-two. Eye pain is completely different from ear pain, or joint pain. Eye pain is scratchy, stringy, and wet, while joint pain is blunt, twisty, and aching. But none of those words really described either type of pain very well.

Marla sat across the chrome fold-away table, resplendent in her cushioned wheelchair, as Gordy pondered pain. A couple of years ago he would have spoken such thoughts aloud to Marla. Not any more. She rarely looked up from her plate, and when she did she looked to the left or the right—never forward, because if she did she might inadvertently meet his eyes, and that much intimacy would be uncomfortable at this point. She shoveled a fork heaped with mashed potatoes into her mouth. Her wide, greedy, open mouth,

nestled between drooping cheeks, under bulging brown eyes. Gravity was not treating her well.

The plate in front of him was a wide, white, empty expanse broken only by a strip of fish the size of half a popsicle stick, three baby carrots, and a dozen lentils. Not thirteen lentils, and not eleven. He knew, because he'd counted them carefully. He speared a lentil with one tong of his fork, plucked it between his teeth, and chewed. Hunger was a whole different kind of pain. The hooks of hunger ripped into your mind more deeply than your belly.

Gordy's knees throbbed in time to the faint beat of the music coming through the walls of the RV. His ankles throbbed too, but that pain was buried under the knee pain.

He cut his fish in half, speared a piece, slid it into his mouth. He could feel the protein soaking his tongue. His fingers looked like chicken bones wrapped around the fork.

He couldn't take the silence.

"Those potatoes good?" he said.

Maybe he needed to verbally jam his fork in Marla's eye before he did it physically. He was starving, and Marla wasn't, and he resented the hell out of her for deciding on the easy route while he took the hard one. Someone had to pay the bills.

She nodded without looking up, swallowed. It looked like she had a little trouble with the swallow.

"Mmph," Gordy said. "Maybe I'll have one." She shoved the bowl in his direction. He scooped a spoonful of potatoes onto his plate. What the hell, go nuts.

There was a rap on the RV door.

He planted his palms on the table and heaved himself to his feet. His hip caught the arm of Marla's wheelchair as he squeezed past her in the cramped RV. Shoving open the door, he was hit by the full-force of Geren and Sons Traveling Amusements—the flashing colored lights, the thudding music, the stink of sausage. The smell of a traveling carnival was sausage. Forget cotton candy, forget candy apples—every other smell is overwhelmed by sausage.

Frankie, the assistant manager, sat in his wheelchair at the foot of the RV's steps.

"The belt on the Dumbo Train just went. Have we got a spare?"

"Yeah," Gordy whined. "Can't Smiley take care of it?"

"Smiley's drunk," Frankie said.

"That's just great," Gordy said. "He gets rewarded for being a drunk, I do all the work."

He took the RV's steps one at a time. Steps were the worst, but he refused to use the lift he'd rigged. He was proud he was one of the few who had made the sacrifice, who could still move up and down, into nooks and crannies. He grunted with each step, loud enough so Marla could hear, a reminder of the sacrifice he was making to keep the potatoes flowing.

He plodded down the midway, feeling as if he was carrying a sack of concrete on his back. He passed Pitch Till U Win, the Balloon Game, the Duck

Pond—each capped and skirted in red-and-white-striped canvas tenting, stuffed animals dangling from the ceilings. Colored lights strobed everywhere, an epileptic's nightmare.

Weke was working the Duck Pond. He didn't return Gordy's curt hello. The pain peeled away everyone's masks, reduced everything to the next step, the next breath. There wasn't much business, but what else could they do, besides carry on and hope things got better?

He stumbled on the lip of a rubber mat covering a section of power lines. His foot rolled; sharp pain stabbed his shin as he went down. When he hit the pavement, it felt like a 300-pound linebacker landed on top of him. He couldn't breathe, couldn't lift his head.

He dreamed he was running. His feet glided effortlessly, like he was on springs, or on the moon, his breath flowing effortlessly.

He woke up in bed. Marla was sitting beside him in her chair, her eyes shiny with tears.

"Hey you," Gordy said.

"Hey." She leaned forward in the chair, clawed her way onto the bed. The middle of the mattress sank like a hammock, spilling them together, hugging them in blessed softness.

"It's not getting better, is it? It's getting worse," he said.

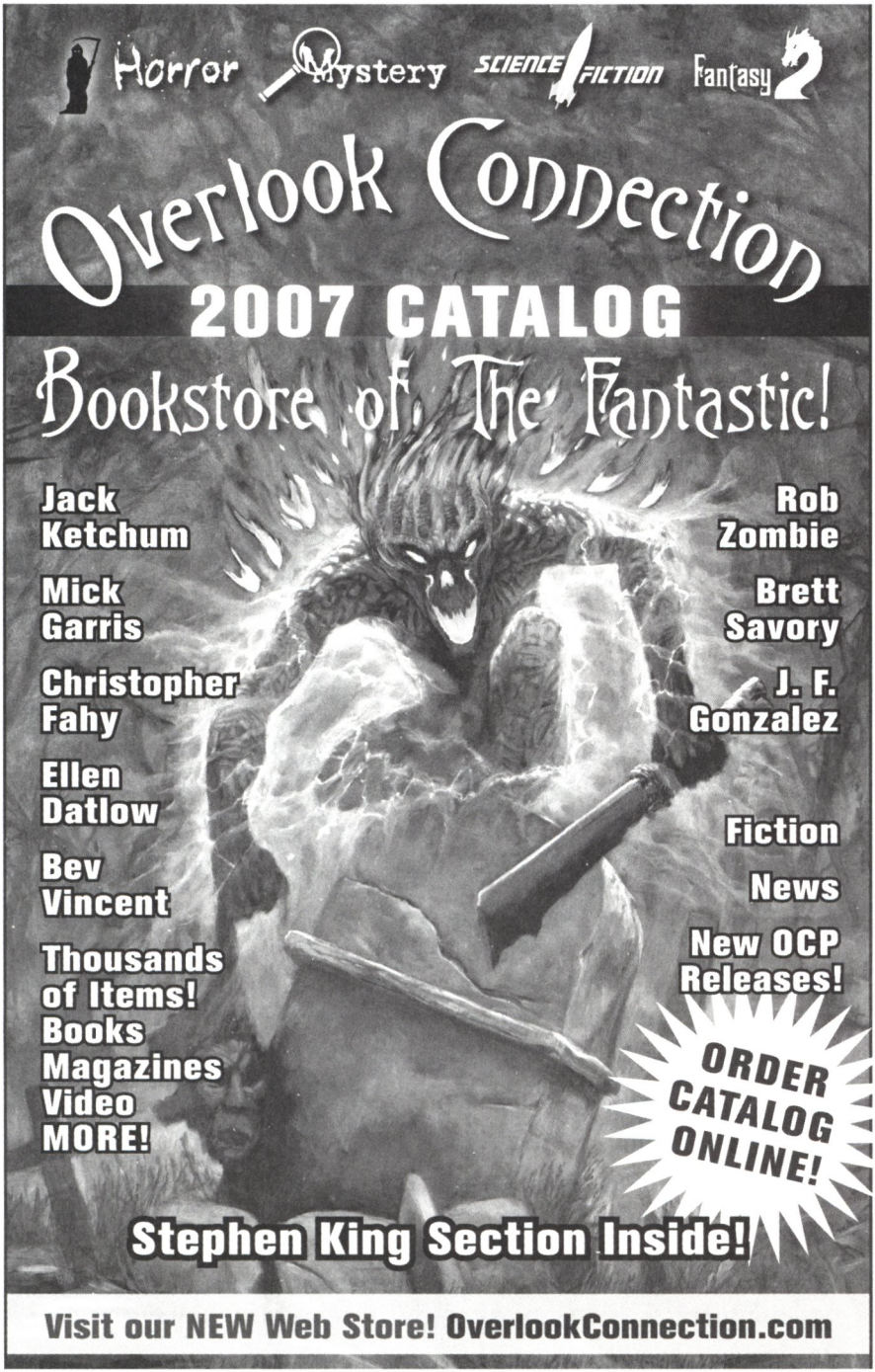
She nodded. "I think so." She reached into her shirt pocket, pulled out a Butterfinger bar, and unwrapped it. The smell almost made Gordy cry. She broke off a piece and held it to his mouth. "Eat," she said.

"But, how will we survive?"

"We'll figure it out. Or we won't. Eat."

He opened his mouth, and she fed him while he cried.

When he'd finished, he told her his thoughts on pain, on the need for more words.


Horror
Mystery
SCIENCE FICTION
Fantasy
Overlook Connection
2007 CATALOG
Bookstore of The Fantastic!
Jack Ketchum
Mick Garris
Christopher Fahy
Ellen Datlow
Bev Vincent
Thousands of Items!
Books
Magazines
Video
MORE!
Rob Zombie
Brett Savory
J. F. Gonzalez
Fiction
News
New OCP Releases!
ORDER CATALOG ONLINE!
Stephen King Section Inside!
Visit our NEW Web Store! OverlookConnection.com

"When I first moved to Vancouver, I was a little unnerved by the calm of the city. Having spent time in Osaka, Paris, Mumbai and others, Vancouver struck me as a stately hush of a place. The impression was amplified (ha-ha) by the fact that my first apartment was in a Graduate Studies high-rise at the University of British Columbia. When the grounds emptied of undergrads in April the campus was like a well-forgotten graveyard; on a bright afternoon in May the silence was desperate, oppressive. That's where 'Hummingbirds & Pie' came from."

Robert Weston's fiction has appeared in Kiss Machine, On Spec, Fugue, Crimewave *and* The New Orleans Review. *He has been nominated for the Journey Prize in Canada and the Fountain Award in the United States. His first book, an innovative novel for children entitled* Zorgamazoo, *will be published by Penguin in autumn of 2008.*

Hummingbirds And Pie

Robert Weston

Alan's dream father was a man of the suburbs. He despised the city, but hardly on the usual grounds. The cramped quarters, the traffic, the noise. None of these things troubled him. Instead, Alan's dream father disapproved of what he considered the overly permissive politics of urban life. "Too many bears," he claimed. It was an assertion Alan had heard many times. Too many bears. Muttered over a teacup or from inside his dream father's thickening hydrangeas. "Bears. Unnatural. Ungodly."

Later that evening, Alan would be hearing those same complaints. He would suffer them without comment. He understood why people found that sort of talk offensive, but objecting to the views of a parent was tricky business. Besides, goading his dream father toward a more tolerant stance might make Alan a hypocrite. (Hadn't he chosen to take the job at this firm expressly because it had been among the last to adopt affirmative action hiring policies?) Even still, the company couldn't hold out forever; already, there were several bears at work on the lower floors. None in Accounts, of course. But they were certainly well represented in Plant Ops. There were even a few in HR.

"Off early?" Alan's boss had appeared silently in the doorway.

"I'm having dinner with my father. He lives outside the city."

"Ah," said his boss. He was a tall man with a tall man's crooked posture. He had a leveling stoop that compensated poorly for both his ungainly height and his formal power. He stepped past Alan's bare desk and stopped before the tiny window that overlooked nothing at all. "You'd better get going. Avoid traffic."

"Thank you, sir."

Alan made his way to the elevators

slowly, paying close attention to his feet. One foot fell mutely in front of the other. The corridor was empty of everything but the thrum of fluorescence. At the elevator bank, he pressed a glowing button. The doors opened immediately, as if by magic. A bear stood inside. Alan hesitated. It appeared as if the car was full. When the bear moved over, however, Alan saw there was more than enough room for two.

A bell rang.

The phone. Alan lurched from bed. He went into the next room. The house was cold and empty. The phone was like a siren.

"Hello?"

"Alan? Sorry I'm calling so early. I wanted to make sure I got you." A pause. "I'm not feeling well." It was Lily, Alan's assistant. She was a tiny Korean woman he'd hired after the success of hummingbirds. He couldn't remember her ever being sick, but presently she sounded awful. She cleared her throat with a phlegmy gurgle. "I don't think I'll be in this morning. Maybe this afternoon."

"Lily, please, don't worry. If you're not feeling well, take the whole day." Alan stretched the cord. He craned his neck to see the clock. It was early. There wasn't yet a sliver of sunrise. "Don't worry about the afternoon."

"Thanks, but no. I'll do my best. I promise."

Alan didn't answer. He was staring out the window.

"Alan?"

"I'm still half asleep. I had this dream."

"Oh?"

Alan told her about it. About an office building vivid with fluorescence. About the city full of bears. About a father he'd never met, out in the unfamiliar suburbs.

Lily coughed. "Yes, I think it's going around. I had that same dream late last year. Wasn't a good one."

"No?"

"Sometimes, I get inspired by my dreams. You know, with something at work. They'll help me notice something I've missed. But not the one with the bears. That one just shook me up."

"How so?"

"Don't let me spoil it for you. I hate that. I should get back to bed."

"Of course." Alan listened as a series of *thups* pelted the window. Rain. "And like I said, don't worry about today. You sound awful. You stay home, okay?"

He heard Lily smiling down the line. "Thanks, Alan, but really. I'll make it in if I can."

Having been awakened by the call, Alan arrived at work uncharacteristically early. The shop was a second storey loft, built on top of a private ESL school in a strip mall at the corner of Grant and Commercial. The shop's only amenity was a small bathroom with loose tiles and unreliable hot water.

Covering his head with his jacket, Alan ran from his car. By the time he'd scaled the exterior stairs, he was drenched. Inside, the equipment filled the room like a crowd of garden statues. Alan had collected them one-by-one from rural auctions and bankruptcy sales. Two drafting tables—one his, one Lily's—sat stiff against the far wall beneath the only window, a broad pane with a nearly unobstructed view of the north shore. Alan flicked on the lights and the room brightened. Small, low wattage fixtures were buried deep in the ceiling. They were custom fitted to mask the ambient hum of electricity.

For weeks, he and Lily had been experimenting with footsteps but had made little progress. Nevertheless, Alan was keen to keep up the work. He feared that sooner or later one of the conglomerates would beat them to it. A mainframe somewhere would apply an uninspired algorithm to produce something serviceable but inevitably flat; something lacking in tone and resonance. The sort of sound that was all too common. Alan believed footsteps should be subtle. In this respect it would be similar to hummingbirds. Footsteps deserved special treatment, the treatment only a small boutique could offer. Perhaps that was beside the point. Bluntly speaking, a success with footsteps would mean royalties. Possibly enough for himself and Lily to retire. If first patented by one of the big firms, the earning potential would evaporate. Worse, the number of catalogable sounds was dwindling moment by moment. Each unproductive day with footsteps meant missed opportunities elsewhere.

Alan began with sketches. He hashed out hypothetical waves on enormous broadsheets. After several drafts, he shifted to the equipment. He tried to manifest for the ear what he had visualized on paper. He kept this up, moving back and forth from the drafting board to the machinery, until mid-afternoon. Then he laid down his instruments and gave up.

It was then, his mind wandering, that something caught his eye outside the window. It hovered, darted to the corner, hovered again. It moved quickly, like a hummingbird. But when Alan turned his head, the thing zipped away and left him with only a vague but brilliant blur of colour.

The flap of hummingbird wings had come to Alan intuitively and with little effort. It had been a deceptively simple sound to produce. It had been the inspiration for his career. Deceptively simple. If only the same could be said for anything he'd done since. Moreover, the ease with which he conceived of hummingbirds was inversely proportional to the recognition it received. That whispering, unadorned flicker of sound had been nominated for several awards. It had won none of them, but nominations were nothing to sneeze at, especially for an independent manufacturer.

Alan leaned over the drafting table. He peered out the window in hopes of

catching a glimpse of something. He hoped to take hold of an old muse. But whatever he'd seen was gone. There was nothing outside but rain. It was letting up.

Exhausted, his ears thrumming with silence, Alan allowed himself to settle forward. He folded his arms on the tabletop and cradled his head in his arms. With his eyes closed, the silence swelled and then receded. He was drifting off.

Alan pressed his back to the far wall. A thin, hip-high railing skirted the perimeter of the elevator. Alan gripped it tightly behind his back. The numbers descended—181 . . . 180 . . . 179 . . .

The bear said nothing. Its tie hung from its throat like a mottled, half-eaten fish. In spite of its size, the bear's breathing was inaudible. The only sounds were the building's myriad of electric whirs and the strain of joists, drum-wheels and cables. The faraway things that toiled at holding the elevator aloft. On the sixty-fourth floor, they stopped. A woman Alan recognized got in. He couldn't think of her name, so he merely smiled.

"Alan," she said. "Chris."

"Hello, Susan," said the bear. It shifted its weight and the elevator swayed. With a thin black claw it rapped the door-close button. "How's the account?"

Alan saw that Susan was pleased. She didn't expect anyone to take note of her work. "Good. Great. But I'm hoping for a new assignment." The fabric of her dress swished against the bear's baggy pants. "You know how it is."

Susan and the bear went on to discuss the company's marketing strategy. Alan contributed nothing. He merely listened. The bear's voice was gruff. It pitched and sizzled with something like radio static. It was interesting to hear at first, but Alan soon found it tiresome. He loosened his grip on the railing.

The elevator stopped again, on the twenty-first floor. Human Resources. When the bear left the elevator, Alan felt the car rise an inch or two. Standing outside, the bear reached back through the doors, preventing them from closing with one tremendous arm. He gave Susan a wolfish grin. A grim display of incisors and black, rubbery gums. "Take care," he said. "Good luck with the project."

Susan waved her fingers and the bear allowed the doors to close. She fiddled with her purse. "Nice guy," she said. Alan nodded. The numbers kept going. 19 . . . 18 . . . 17 . . .

The elevator opened in the lobby. The sudden blast of sunlight was overwhelming. Alan shut his eyes to help them adjust. When he opened them, Susan was gone. As always, the lobby teemed with people, as well as a smattering of bears. Their great heads rose above the crowd like stilt walkers at a carnival. Everyone moved silently from one elevator bank to the next. Alan fought his way to the parking garage.

At the security gate, Alan turned left and took the causeway north to the sub-

urbs. In no time, he was beyond the city. The roads were straight and endless and framed with farmland. Eventually, bright green signs loomed up. They led him to a small town with a name he recognized. There he found a familiar bungalow at the bottom of a cul-de-sac pocked with diseased trees, all of them leafless and sallow. Alan pulled in the drive. He knocked several times on the door. There was no answer. Alan felt his chest fill with a sudden and unmanageable tension.

It was enough to jolt him awake. He was still slumped forward in his chair, his body crawling with the pale shadows of rain. The folds of his shirt were embossed on his cheek. His temple throbbed.

Alan's real parents had died in the usual way. His mother had been taken by cancer, his father by a plane crash. He'd been sixteen when his mother succumbed and twenty-three when the plane went down. Alan was understandably nervous to meet his dream father. He marveled at this conceit, found only in dreams, the odd foreknowledge of places, events and loved ones you've yet to encounter.

Alan yawned. He looked over the sketches on the table. Footsteps was even subtler than he thought. That was why it was still available for manufacture, why it was so valuable. He sketched a while longer, producing a pair of facile drafts. Not anything worthwhile. He powered down the equipment, locked the office and went home.

When he arrived, he was surprised to find Cheryl waiting in the driveway. Her convertible idled loudly, its top sealed against the clouds. Alan rolled up beside her. He watched her for a moment through two panes of glass, but she ignored him. He got out and tapped her window. "Cheryl? What's up?" She snubbed her cigarette in the tray. The window rolled down electrically and the last of the smoke curled into the open air. She smiled. "You look well."

"What're you doing here?"

"It's Charlie." She jabbed her thumb backwards. The dog lay on the rear seat, heaped like a wet rug. "It's come back. Vet says this is it. Says it's moved inside. Not just on the skin this time."

Alan opened the convertible's rear door and knelt on the pavement. Rain soaked through to his knees. Charlie's eyes—they had always been poor—were set steadily on the small sward in front of Alan's townhouse. Behind his ear, the once stricken patch of skin was bereft of hair. Alan looked at Cheryl. She was staring through the front windshield. "So what is it?" he asked.

Cheryl undid her seatbelt. She twisted herself around. Pinched between her lips was a new cigarette. "They say it's his lungs and maybe," she scrunched up her nose, "his colon."

Alan sighed. He tried again to catch Charlie's eye, but the dog was intent on the grass.

"So I thought you could take him. It's

not in the settlement, I know. But I thought what the hell. It's fine with me."

Alan laid his palm flat on Charlie's forehead. He stroked backwards, ironing down what little hair was there. "Sure, okay. Thanks, Cheryl, I really appreciate this."

"He'll be happier with you."

Alan plucked Charlie out of the car and folded him gently against his chest, shutting the door with his hip. "Really, Cheryl, this is a great thing you're doing."

"It's nothing." She reached down around her knees, past the hem of a short green skirt. Her forearm grazed against sheer stockings. She popped the trunk. "I brought you some kibble. You can have it if you want."

"Thanks."

She started the engine.

"Do you have to go right away? I've got coffee. And tea."

Cheryl's body relaxed. She cocked her head to the side apologetically. She gave Alan a maternal grin. "Why don't you get the dog food out of the back? I should really go." And she did. Alan stood in the drive for a moment, Charlie under one arm and a bag of dry kibble under the other.

In the front hall, Alan put Charlie down but the dog loped as if drunk, so Alan scooped him up again, switching him for the bag of kibble. "You're in a rough state, hey boy?"

Charlie sneezed.

In the kitchen, Alan stir-fried sausages in a pan with rice and onions while Charlie lay coiled up at the foot of the stove. They ate together on the tiled floor. For the rest of the evening, they watched television. Charlie started snoring. He breathed in laboring gulps, so Alan picked him up one more time and carried him upstairs to bed.

Alan found himself standing at the painted wooden fence.

"Dad?"

There was no answer. The gate was locked. Alan knew his dream father liked to toil in his garden. The old man's hydrangeas surrounded the patio like a coffle of prisoners. The fence itself struck him as taller, more solid than usual. But with stumbling effort, he climbed over.

"Dad?"

One of the bushes trembled. "In here, son."

Alan parted the thick flowers with his hands. Everything was unexpectedly prickly. His dream father was there, down on his hand and knees. "Hello, son." His face was ruddy and damp with sweat. When he climbed to his feet, his knees had a murderous wobble to them. His hands, his pants, the front of his shirt—everything was soiled. But the man himself was grinning. His thrust-up cheeks made his eyes a pair of crescents.

Something stabbed at Alan's conscience. "Dad, your heart. You oughta be taking it easy. Don't overdo it."

Alan's dream father shook his head. He exhaled powerfully, setting an example. "You're my son, not my doctor."

"I'm concerned. And I have a right to be. What about dinner? You can't go looking like that."

"Just need to get changed."

The dream father's favorite restaurant was a fifteen minute drive north. It was in one of the more affluent suburbs, one with larger houses, smoother roads and trees that weren't withered with illness. Alan took it easy along the way. He slowed to a crawl at the winding curves. "You won't find bears out here," said his dream father, gazing out the window. "This is beautiful country."

The restaurant had a French name. *La Vieille Auberge*. It had been built into a white stucco home with a ridiculous picket fence. Alan wondered if the real French countryside had picket fences. He thought not. *La Vieille Auberge* was a slick, suburban mock-up. It was best suited to poorly traveled diners with conservative palates. Alan kept these thoughts to himself. From the passenger seat, his dream father sighed deeply and uttered a pair of dismal clichés. "Now that's what I'm talking about! Don't make 'em like they used to!"

Inside, the restaurant was equally white. The only daubs of color were the beige of the baseboards and the pale blue of the menus. Everything else was the color of eggshells. Even the hostess was pale. And dressed in a uniform that made her resemble an army nurse. With quick, silent steps, she led Alan and his dream father to a secluded booth.

Alan's dream father didn't open the menu. "I'm having the steak," he declared. "And then pie. Pumpkin pie."

Alan frowned. If he didn't take care of his dream father, who would? Steak and pie were precisely the wrong choices. But it was the old man's birthday. What harm was there in one steak and a slice of pie, once a year?

Alan remembered the package. He had brought it with him. It was under his chair. He brought it up and placed it on the tablecloth with a distinct thud. "Happy birthday, dad."

His dream father sucked his lips inside his nearly toothless mouth. "You treat me good, son." He undid the ribbon and lifted the lid. Inside was a trowel of stainless steel and graphite. The best of its kind.

The door to the kitchen opened and a waitress approached, squeezed absurdly into a starched white uniform. She looked monstrous. She padded across the restaurant on all fours, rising up like a great wave when she reached the table.

Without turning around, Alan's dream father pronounced, "I'm having the steak. The steak and then pumpkin pie."

Alan tried to moisten his mouth. The waitress cleared her throat with a staticky growl. "And you, sir?"

Alan's dream father flinched. Alan watched as the color drained horrifically from the old man's face. He blinked his eyes, twice, and closed his menu with an audible slap. "I think I've changed my mind."

The waitress stared. Alan found his voice. "Maybe just the steak, then? It's

probably for the best. Just one or the other."

His dream father put his birthday trowel back in its box. "I've changed my mind. I'm not hungry. I want to go home."

Alan summoned a smile for the waitress.

She shrugged. "I'll come back."

Alan tried to apologize, but his voice had retreated again. In any case, the waitress was ignoring them. She dropped back to all fours and moved off, loping silently between the tables, her shoulders rolling like dough in a mixer.

Alan awoke abruptly. His whole body felt clammy, likely because Charlie was lapping at his fingers. He retrieved his hand and wiped the slobber on Cheryl's pillow.

Downstairs, he and Charlie once again dined on the floor. Sugary cereal and bacon. Alan was determined to feed Charlie well. To feed him like a human being. There was dignity in that.

He even took Charlie to work with him.

Lily was already at her drafting table. Her forearms were propped against the edge, sitting idly.

Alan watched her for a moment. "Morning. You feeling better?"

Lily cleared her throat. "I think so. And who's this? I didn't know you had pets."

"This is Charlie. Used to be my dog, before the divorce. He's sick again, so Cheryl thought—well, she's never been good dealing with illness. Just one of her things."

Lily looked into Charlie's face. "Poor thing. He looks awful." She closed her eyes. "My father used to say: learn to deal with pain, in yourself and in other people, but especially in yourself. That's the most important thing you can do." Her eyes popped open. "'Only a few of us go easy,' he'd say. 'For most of us, there's two kinds of death: a violent surprise or a nasty disease. The sooner you see that for yourself the better.'"

Alan raised his eyebrows. "Did he always talk like that?"

Lily laughed. "Only then. He was quite pleasant otherwise." She sat back, tapping her fingers on the edge of the table. "It's the only thing I remember him teaching me. Funny the stuff we hang on to about our folks. I think I remember that stuff because a part of me figures he was right. We all have fantasies of going the easy way out. Fall asleep one night and never wake. Or else you don't think about it at all. But at some point, you have to. So maybe it's best to be prepared."

Alan couldn't remember a time when Lily had strung so many words together in one sitting. She usually sat silently at her desk, worked hard and went off to a private life Alan knew nothing about.

"It's true," he said. "I suppose that's how I see myself going. But yeah, I guess odds are I won't be so lucky. In a way, your dad was a smart man."

To this, Lily said nothing. She'd

clammed up again, returned to her old self.

Alan took his seat and put Charlie on the floor by his chair. Lily had a handful of sketches in front of her, neatly compiled in disparate graphs. Just glancing at them, Alan knew they wouldn't fly. Something about them seemed odd. There were very unlike Lily. Generally, her drafts were intuitive. In many ways, they were inspired. Although he was better with his hands, more adept at manipulating the instruments, Alan had no illusions about working at a conceptual level. On that count, Lily was his superior. That's why they were such a good team. But if Lily had lost her touch, there was a good chance footsteps would elude them.

Alan's train of thought was interrupted by a flurry beyond the window. The air outside was full of hummingbirds. There was an entire flock, hundreds of them. There were so many that the hum of their wings was audible through the glass.

"Alan? I need to tell you something."

"Uh huh?" Alan couldn't look away from the window. The hummingbirds vibrated as one, buzzing with a sound he knew better than any other.

"I wanted to let it go another week, but I don't think I can."

Alan tore himself away from the view. "Oh?"

"I've been offered a job with one of the bigger companies."

"You have."

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer not to say which one."

"I imagine I can't compete with the offer."

"No."

"So that's it?"

"You don't have to pay me a thing. I can just go."

"Must be quite an offer." He looked at Lily's shoes. Leather moccasins. They had plastic beads machine-sewn over the toes. It made them look like touristy junk. Had Lily uncovered footsteps on her own? If so, she'd be foolish to admit it. And it seemed petty to ask. Only time would tell. "Well then. I doubt I'll get anything more done this afternoon. I think I'll shut down for the day. And what—I guess congratulations are in order." He looked out the window again, but the flock had dispersed. "If you don't mind, maybe we could hold off on celebrating right away."

Lily chewed her lip.

Outside, at the foot of the iron stairs, they parted ways with a handshake and a sudden embrace. Alan wondered if they would honestly ever celebrate. He suspected the next time he saw Lily it would be in a photograph, part of a feature in one of the trade journals. Portrait of the artisan at work.

By dinnertime, Charlie was still asleep. Alan couldn't rouse him, even with the scent of fried steak, so he ate alone at the table. But he left a slab in the fridge for Charlie's breakfast. Alan arranged his dog neatly on the unoccupied side of the bed and opened a window. A night of fresh air might do him good.

But Alan wasn't tired. He stared at the watery patterns of lamplight on the ceiling. He listened. He thought of his youth, when there were still great gaps in the soundscape. These days, there were hardly any. Indeed, lying awake in bed, Alan could detect none. All the spaces in the world were being filled. All the mysteries were being solved. But Alan felt only a powerful absence. His life, it seemed, remained full of them. Full of gaps. Vacancies once occupied by his mother, his father, Cheryl. Now Lily. And any day now, likely without fanfare, Charlie would go as well. Alan's world was shrinking and he longed for action. He longed for success. He wished he could draft an image that would perfectly fill in everything that wasn't there. But that wasn't how the world worked. Inevitably, he longed to be elsewhere.

He pulled the blanket up to his throat and closed his eyes.

The elevator rose silently. Its motion was imperceptible. The corridor on Alan's floor was empty. As Alan walked its length, the thrumming light fixtures made shallow valleys of sound. In his office, anonymous cabinets swelled with paperwork.

At noon, precisely at midday, Alan's boss stooped in the door without knocking. "You have a visitor."

"Me?"

"You." said the boss. He eyed the clutter on Alan's desktop. "He's waiting in reception."

Implicitly, Alan understood this was unusual. He had never had visitors at the office before. His chest overreacted. It tightened uncomfortably. He thought of losing his job. Staving off panic, he gave his boss what he hoped was an infectious smile. "I'm sure it won't take a moment."

When he arrived, the reception area was deserted. Alan experienced a peculiar wave of abandonment. He had a sudden sense that, save for himself, no one in the office existed—not his boss, not the bears in HR, not anyone. He felt like the whole city had emptied. The loneliness collapsed, however, when he spotted his dream father, rumpled behind the water-cooler. The old man's features were tinted blue and distended by the huge plastic drum. He waved some fingers. "Hello son."

"Dad?"

"I wanted to apologize."

He wasn't comfortable speaking to this alien face. He took a step forward. "Why? Apologize for what?"

"For last night. My birthday." His dream father's eyes were glazed and red. "I ruined it, didn't I? I just can't adjust to things like you. I'm old."

"You don't have to apologize for that. I completely understand." Alan put a hand on his dream father's shoulder. Even hung with a hefty wool cardigan, the joint felt like cheap pressboard. Alan lifted his dream father out of the chair, inflating the old man like a balloon. "Let me buy you lunch."

Alan led his dream father to the elevator. Two floors down, it stopped.

Chris, the bear from HR, stood waiting, placid as a totem. Reflexively, Alan's hands again sought the railing. He gripped it again with anxious fists. Chris stepped into the car and clicked a button, but Alan couldn't see which. The great paw obscured the whole of the panel. The doors shut and the only movement came from Alan's dream father. He was glaring at the heel of his shoe as he twisted it into the carpet.

Alan released himself from the railing. He put out his hand. "Chris, how've you been?"

The bear regarded him. Alan grinned, but he could feel sweat popping out of his face. "Chris, I'd like you to meet my father." The old man's attention remained on his writhing foot. "Dad, this is Chris. He and I are friends."

The bear grasped Alan's hand and shook. The paw wrapped round his fingers like an oven mitt. Chris turned to Alan's dream father. "Nice to meet you."

The dream father said nothing. He merely stared at his shoe. Chris' paw hung in the air for a long time, until Alan made a small noise with his throat. Chris' paw fell to his side. The elevator stopped again. HR's floor.

Alan smiled. "Good to see you again, Chris. We should really—you know."

The bear stepped out of the elevator. The doors shut.

Alan's dream father was still doing it, still staring and hanging his head. Alan exhaled. "See? Not so bad, was he? I don't know what makes you so uneasy. Just look at Chris and I. We're *friends*, dad. See what I mean?"

Alan's dream father said nothing.

"Things change, am I wrong? And honestly, dad, it's good if you change along with them."

His dream father didn't make a sound. He didn't move. Even his heel had stopped gnashing against the floor.

"Are you listening to me? I just want us to see eye-to-eye. It's hard for me too, but I want us to relate. Because you're it, dad, you really are. You're all I've got."

His dream father looked up. His eyes were enormous. His lip was trembling. A luminous, startling thread of saliva fell from one corner of his mouth.

"Dad?"

Alan's dream father fell forward, into the arms of his son.

"Dad!"

But his dream father didn't answer. He was limp and feathery, already insubstantial. Alan squeezed and squeezed, as if clumsy pressure would bring him back. Quite suddenly, the doors opened on the lobby. The sunlight was dazzling. Alan couldn't see anyone. But he could hear them. He could hear the tromps and clicks of a thousand heavy heels. He cried for help, but his voice was lost in the clamor. No one heard him. They all kept moving. No one noticed the two men in the elevator, one propping up the other like a half filled sack of grain.

Brian Aldiss, the dean of British SF, is well known for his epics about places like Helliconia, Malacia, and his home country, Britain. Here, however, his vision is focused on one place and one man, and a state of ignorance that might just be one of the more intimate surprises the future holds in store for us . . .

Life, Learning, Leipzig, And A Librarian

Brian Aldiss

It was marvellous. But it certainly was not easy. His brain knew too much.

These were early days. He was still scared of it.

The college had been brilliant. Although his small apartment was not far distant, he had his room in the college, the windows of which looked out on well-kept lawns and rather pious statuary. He had but to ring a newly installed bell and assistance would appear immediately.

In a way, Steven-Peter Muinarc's case resembled that of John Nash, the brilliant games theorist who received a Nobel Prize yet suffered from deep schizophrenia. A book had been written about Nash, called *A Beautiful Mind*, later made into a film. Following the outbreak of his cancer, Muinarc, like Nash, had been particularly well-treated by his college.

"Its south side is taken up with the lofty line of chapel and hall. On the east side is the Founder's Library, which—"

"Stop!" went his internal cry.

He had to avoid any thought concerning the college. If he did not, facts immediately spilled from his new brain regarding the history of the college, from its founding in the fourteenth century onwards. All other thinking was paralysed until he switched the flow off.

This lack of control impeded his seminal work on ancient human responses to the sun. Indeed, Steven-Peter was still feeling weak from the effects of the operation and the lengthy general anaesthetic he had undergone. He had been under anaesthesia for ten hours while the brains were exchanged.

He rang the bell.

Almost at once, his scout appeared. "Yessir? What can I do for you?"

"Scout's name George Burton, forty-five, born Hampton Ferrers in Oxfordshire, parents working class. Attended local grammar school. Married Sheila Watts May A.D. 2000. Two children so far—"

"Stop!", he commanded his brain. "A coffee, please, George."

"Yes, sir. At once. Filter as usual, I assume?"

"Coffee, popular caffeine beverage produced from seeds of plant of genus Coffea. More than one hundred different—" Stop!

He managed to make his brain rest while he sipped the cup that George Burton brought him. His head ached.

Steven-Peter was still a fairly young man when cancer in the frontal lobe of his brain had been diagnosed. What he had determinedly dismissed as mere headaches was found to have spread deeply into surrounding tissue. He underwent radiotherapy and swallowed the new drugs. Still the cancer advanced. He found himself dying by the day. His research on ancient attitudes to the sun and its journeys lay abandoned on his desk.

Now he was at work again, and eager to consult an ancient tome published in Leipzig in the nineteenth century.

Undoubtedly, the new organic substitute brains now being developed in the U.S.A., Germany and the U.K. represented triumphs of neuroscience. Given another eight or ten years, artificial brains would become the equal of ordinary brains—indeed, better than natural brains. Or so it was predicted. Obsolete inherited sections of brain would be discarded to permit a more rational thinking machine to emerge.

Such brains would retain easily accessible knowledge. Failures of memory—of names in particular—a notable handicap of the present phylogenetic brain—would be abolished. Storage capacity would be tripled.

Oh yes, an amazing advance! No doubt of it. In a lengthy operation, his diseased brain had to be entirely removed from his skull.

But to preserve Muinarc's life, an early experimental model had perforce to be substituted. It contained information on a myriad esoteric facts. Yet some of the most ordinary facts of human life had not been implanted. His was an impromptu brain—and Steven-Peter knew how fortunate he was to possess it. Now he was able to enjoy a second life. A life of learning.

He worked until some time after four. Feeling fatigued, he decided to go home. On the way out, he cautiously avoided students. By letting himself through the rear gate of the college grounds, to which he had been given a key, he had only a short walk through the venerable townscape before he reached No.19, where he rented a first floor apartment.

A running commentary accompanied him. Every Bath stone on which he trod, every house he passed, had its history, which his new brain recited to him. He let it run on, as he concentrated on every step he took. Left foot, right foot, left . . .

He looked well. UV treatment saw to that. Indeed, he had lost two stone through his illness. He looked more youthful in consequence. But felt like a patient still. A patient glad to be breathing the air.

"With an oxygen-rich atmosphere,

our Earth—" "Shut up," he told his brain.

Once in his apartment, he switched on the coffee kettle and flopped on to the kitchen chair. He had been renting this apartment ever since his divorce, five years earlier. His glance fell on the little antique Chinese bowl which had belonged to his mother. His brain told him the name of the potter with his dates and where he worked (in Kunming), also his mother with her maiden name and her dates (where she was born—Bridlington). But, as usual, all personal, human, data was lacking.

Such is what happens, Steven-Peter thought, if the neural patterns have been designed by scientists . . . Nothing personal crept in . . .

The hour had passed eight that evening when his doorbell buzzed. He let in his visitor. It was none other than Sir Alastair Anstruther, Chief Neurologist of the local hospital, the hospital that had performed Muinarc's revolutionary operation.

"Just an informal visit," said Sir Alastair, formally. "I know your next visit to the lab is due on Friday, but I thought we might have a little chat before that."

He was neatly dressed in a dark suit and his leather shoes shone.

The gaunt cliff-like structure of his face had been neatly shaved, preserving the moustache.

Steven-Peter felt uneasy about this visit. However, he offered Alastair a glass of wine and they retired to the little sitting room-cum-study at the back of the house, where the two men established themselves, sitting facing one another.

"No particular problems, are there?", Steven-Peter asked. His brain was telling him that Alastair had been born in Tillicoultry fifty-nine years ago.

"Not on our side, no," said Alastair. "Without having you run through another of our boring tests, I thought it might be pleasant to hear more personally how you are managing with the new—er, with the new equipment in place. How are you managing, really? Any headaches? Forgive my asking."

Much of this Steven-Peter did not take in. He had just reached a section on Alastair's service in the Royal Navy.

"When I walk, I have to concentrate on every step I take. Will that feature disappear as I grow more accustomed—"

"Don't worry about it. Later models, more sophisticated models, will have the equivalent of a hippocampus installed." He sipped at his glass. "Mmm, not a bad little wine. Chilean, I'd guess?"

"Australian."

Alastair ignored the information. "As I suppose you know, the hippocampus stores long-term memories—such as, well, for instance, how you learnt to walk. Sorry if it gives you problems, Steven-Peter. You'd better buy yourself a car."

Steven-Peter blinked. "A car? What do I need a car for? I am only a stone's throw from college!"

Alastair put his head on one side and smiled. "Not much to complain about, then, eh?"

Steven-Peter's brain was busy explaining the main modules of the limbic system of the brain. He silenced it.

"Another thing," Steven-Peter said. He rose from his seat and attempted to pace to and consequently fro. The action required too much concentration. He desisted. "Automatic thought-processes are rather too ready to come into play. I do have difficulty in stopping thinking," he told the neurosurgeon.

"Ha ha, yes, that's a problem all we intellectuals suffer from," said Alastair, with evident satisfaction. He spread his hands wide on the table top, in order to demonstrate a degree of frustration which even he, as an intellectual, experienced.

"Yes, but there seems no way one—I, in fact—I can cut off unnecessary flows of data." He stared hard at Alastair until the latter's glow of amusement faded away. "Dry as dust factual stuff. Nothing human."

"I see what you mean," said Alastair, picking his left nostril with his thumb nail in a thoughtful fashion. "Fact is, our corpus callosum is not operating entirely as it should do in these early models. It's a bridge between the two hemispheres and the—well, what you might call the on/off switch seems to be missing. Mind you," and here he lapsed into confidential mode, "once we neurosurgeons have a more sophisticated model off the drawing board, we can haul you in again, reject your early model, the one you are now using, and insert our new super-brain in its place. You'll be well away then."

Steven-Peter looked interested. "How long before this new super-brain, as you call it, is perfected?"

Alastair shrugged. "Shouldn't be more than nine or ten years. Depends a bit on funding. Doesn't everything? Nine if we're lucky. 2017, at a guesstimate. Another miracle out the hat! Ha ha!" He drained his glass and stood, preparing to leave.

Noting the expression on Steven-Peter's face, he asked if his patient felt anxious or depressed.

Steven-Peter shook his head.

"Good, good, plenty of left-brain activity, then. Well, keep it up, old fellow, nihil desperandum, stay off the drink, and we'll see you in the lab on Friday. . . "

Nodding to Steven-Peter in a friendly way, he left, muttering to himself as he went.

Next morning, Steven-Peter found it necessary to go down to the Founder's Library to consult a rare volume. He took the lift. The volume he needed had been written by a German scholar in the last years of the nineteenth century. The publisher was a Leipzig company, long defunct. This was a study of ancient Egyptian computations regarding the sun and its journeys. He believed the volume contained a reproduction of a diagram drawn up by a priest of Akhenaten, the self-designated Sun God of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty—a

diagram which had been ignored by previous scholars.

The library was empty, apart from a young man working on a laptop, totally engrossed, and an assistant. This assistant had dark hair close-cropped neatly against the head, and was wearing a pair of spectacles which were removed as the person rose from the chair by the main desk.

"Desk made in seventeenth century of Italianate design, mainly of cherry wood and mahogany," said Steven-Peter's brain. "Was used by Isaac Newton once only and later sixteen times by Jeremy Bentham. John Betjeman is known to have sat on it. The desk was purchased by the college—"

"Stop!", Steven-Peter ordered, as he turned to confront the assistant now approaching him. It wore blue jeans and a sort of waistcoat over what looked like a shirt. He was confused.

"Excuse me," he said, "but are you masculine or feminine?"

"Why, you must be the celebrated Steven-Peter Muinarc," exclaimed the assistant, looking mischievous. "I recognised you of course from television, but only you, with all you have been through, would ask such a question!"

"I can tell from your voice you are female," he said, noting a pleasing swelling beneath the shirt, although a little disconcerted by the woman's response. Her face positively glowed. Meanwhile, his inner voice was telling him this girl had been born in Ilfracombe in Devon and was now twenty-seven years old. She had graduated in—

He shut it off. "So sorry not to guess. You are extremely pretty. I don't need my brain to tell me that. It was the pair of jeans that misled me."

"Oh, but girls have always worn jeans," she said smiling. She held out her hand, which he took. It was slender and cool. He was reluctant to let go of it. He saw a tiny erotic tattoo on the first finger. "What can I do for you, Mr Muinarc?"

For the moment, those ancient Leipzig diagrams were forgotten.

"If you don't mind my asking, what is in your jeans? What do they contain?"

She frowned, puzzled. "Nothing much. They're rather tight-fitting, aren't they? Only my bottom and my—well, my reproductive organ, you know."

"Goodness, your reproductive organ! No, I'm afraid I don't know. My brain never mentioned reproductive organs!"

The girl burst into laughter, which she quickly suppressed. She took hold of his hand again and led him away to a corner of the library, behind the Nineteenth Century theology shelves.

"So you mean to say you don't know what a girl's reproductive organ is? Or what it looks like?" She was watching his response intently.

"I'm afraid I don't. Perhaps before my illness. I was married . . . "

He saw she was trying to keep a straight face. "Married in Tallinn, city of my birth. Sorry I tend to go on . . . "

"I see. So you don't really know—"

"If you could tell me, I would be delighted to file away the data."

She doubled up with suppressed laughter. "Look, I can hardly believe you are so innocent. Are you teasing me, to talk dirty? Is this the effect of your operation for a new brain? It can't be a very good brain if it doesn't know what's in a girl's pants!!"

"Oh, but it is. It just lacks personal data. Um, biological data. Sorry if it upsets you."

She was looking into his face. "I'm not upset. I just marvel at meeting such an innocent man. A tabula rasa of sexual experience in his—what?—thirties!" She licked her lips. "Wow! My reproductive organ is commonly known as a fanny, by the way. And I'm commonly known as Sue."

"Fanny... I see..." He breathed the word.

He felt a vague excitement, as if he were drawing close to a great secret. "I see, Sue. I'm Steven-Peter, as you know. So what is this fanny of yours like? Is it different from a dick?"

"Oh, quite different," she told him. Biting her lip to hold back laughter, she asked, "Would you like to slide your hand into my jeans and feel my fanny? Then you'll understand how different they are."

"That's very good of you! I certainly would like to."

"Just for learning's sake," she said, with a cosy little grin.

He came close against her body and planted one hand in the small of her back, as if by instinct, to stop her backing away. His other hand slid down between Sue's flesh and the fabric of her jeans.

It encountered a soft fuzz of hair, where the flat of her stomach acquired a little mound. His breath was coming faster now.

He slid the exploring hand still farther down, among the entanglements of hair, and found an opening. He felt two soft lips and slid a finger in between them.

Sue began to squirm. "Okay, darling, that's enough research for now."

As she pushed him away, he had to withdraw his hand from that warm damp nest he had discovered.

So then came the business of looking up the boring diagram in the boring book from Leipzig. All the while, he sniffed his finger and thought of Sue's charming reproductive organ. When he finished capturing the needed diagram with his copier, Sue had gone off duty.

Feeling a dismal sense of disappointment, Steven-Peter went home. Left foot, right foot, left... He was annoyed with his brain and wanted to rest.

He ate a frugal supper of smoked salmon with Hollandaise sauce and a salad, followed by some yoghurt.

In fact, he was snoozing in his armchair when, at eight o'clock, his doorbell rang. Surely not Alastair again?

He went and answered the bell. There in the doorway stood Sue, smiling an enigmatic smile. She was still wearing her tight-fitting jeans.

"Can I come in, do you think?", she

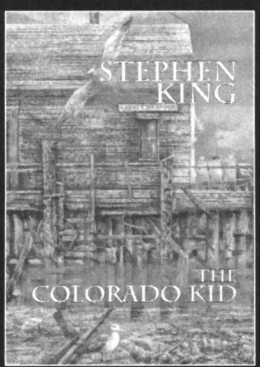
asked, demurely. "I sort of thought you might like to see what a girl's reproductive organ looked like. In the cause of science, naturally."

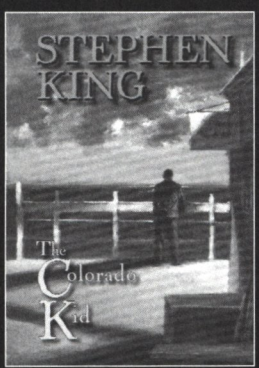
"Oh yes, naturally," he said. "I'd be very interested!" He pulled her in and locked the door behind her.

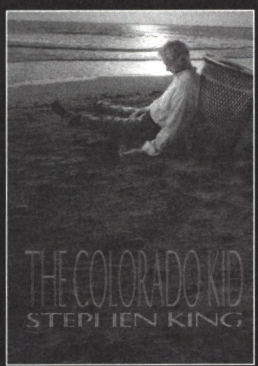
On an island off the coast of Maine, a man is found dead. There's no identification on the body. Only the dogged work of a pair of local newspapermen and a graduate student in forensics turns up any clues, and it's more than a year before the man is identified.

But that's just the beginning of the mystery, because the more they learn about the man and the baffling circumstances of his death, the less they understand. Was it an impossible crime . . . or something even stranger?

In its first appearance (as a mass market paperback under the Hard Case Crime imprint), this rivetting story about the darkness at the heart of the unknown—and our compulsion to investigate the unexplained—split fans and critics alike . . . seemingly frustrating as many as it delighted. One thing is certain: there is no middle ground with *The Colorado Kid*. As the author says in his Afterword, "We always want to reach for the lights in the sky, and we always want to know where the Colorado Kid (the world is full of Colorado Kids) came from. Wanting may be better than knowing. I don't say that for sure; I only suggest it."







Darren Speegle explains, "The seed for 'Elephant Speak' was planted some time before I actually sat down to write it, when my then wife suggested I do a piece based on the premise that all the people of the world would eventually share dark skin. The story didn't actually begin to take shape until I read an article about Russian and American scientists doing research on test groups of feral and domesticated mammals to determine if Neolithic farmers sought specific qualities out of the mammal species they domesticated or if tameness was the single criterion. While the tale isn't specifically about this, the genetics at its heart sprouted from there. Any resemblance of the story's title to the musical group King Crimson's wonderfully bizarre 'Elephant Talk' is probably unintentional."

In addition to Postscripts, *Darren's fiction has appeared or is scheduled to appear in such venues as* Subterranean: Tales of Dark Fantasy, The Third Alternative, Crimewave, Cemetery Dance, *and* Brutarian. *He has recently sold his yet to be titled first novel to Prime for an early 2008 release.*

Elephant Speak

Darren Speegle

1

On the eighteenth day of December, in the year 2534, a ghost was born in Euristanbula for the first time in a century, and I was there to witness it. Blond hair, blue eyes, skin the color and quality of prayer wax, in stark contradiction to the dark complexion my wife and I and everyone else in the world share. My name is Saro. My son's name is Hayalet, of the old tongue meaning simply *ghost*.

I will never forget my wife's reaction when they hurriedly removed the frenzied babe from the delivery room. Through the mucusy film they didn't pause to wipe away, she caught a glimpse, a mother's intuitive glimpse, of the color of our new son before the nurse vanished through the doorway. Then my wife turned the naked discs of her eyes on me, as though to implore that the thing not be so. That is the second face that would visit Leyla's normally calm countenance that I shall not forget.

The third occurred ten days later in an otherwise empty section of the neonatal unit that might have been reserved specifically for our son, in his strange capsule. He was neither premature nor ill, but the incubatory environment was deemed best for his unique situation. I remember vividly not only Leyla's face as she first beheld our tranquilized though still somehow recognizably feral son, but also the tremor that passed through her hand into my own body as we stood there together above the glass tube.

Her words were as much a contrast as skin color. "What are we going to do, Saro? They will want to *work* on him."

Of course there was nothing we could do. The ghosts appear two or three times in a generation at best, in various parts of the world. I once heard them likened to albinos of the past, but albinos were less rare, and a far easier trek along the genome. Not because of pigment, but because of behavior. Ghosts are born feral. As though they cannot tolerate a civilization that has bred them out through natural dilution. As though they awaken into life remembering something the rest of us don't.

Officials necessarily became involved and we were given no choice but to take Hayalet to the FDH (Facility for the Domestication of Humans) in Prague, the haunt of ghosts worldwide.

2

In the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, biologists in Russia and America performed extensive research on control groups of feral and domesticated mammals, seeking the answer to the question of whether Neolithic farmers sought specific qualities out of the mammal species they domesticated or whether tameness was the single criterion—in which latter case, all other benefits from the human perspective were side effects. Through the generational process of straining out and interbreeding human-tolerant specimens of wild groups of rats and silver foxes, it was learned that not only did the tame test stock become more amenable to humans, they also developed physical characteristics that differed from their wild cousins, such as droopy ears and white spots in their fur.

Additionally, the "tame" specimens of silver fox seemed to be able to follow human gestures, like the dogs that had been domesticated from wolves before them. It was theorized that this ability had to do with the removed fear of humans, and led ultimately to a scientific breakthrough. If the process of certain genes in the neural crest cell were slightly delayed, the maturation of the adrenal glands that underlie the first fear response of young mammals might also be put in check. From there it was a matter of isolating the specific genes responsible for the timing of neural crest development, and addressing them accordingly.

Sadly, none of this could be made to apply to ghosts, which came out of the womb tortured—for lack of a better word. Tortured—for lack of a worse one. The specific genes as addressed by science proved contextually meaningless. They better fit quantum theory than genetics, describing a chaos impulse that stuck like mud in parental hope. The ghost was a true Asimovian mutation in the vein of the Mule, only without the power, and the at least superficial tolerance for society.

3

Like the ghost he was, Hayalet haunted. He haunted before we had even seriously broached the subject of leaving him in Prague, among his kind—which meager unit totaled six without him: two born in Indochina, one in Africa Proper, one in the Polynesians, one in the United West. And none expected to live beyond fifty years, though the average human lifespan was nearing one hundred. Unanimously, the parents had elected to leave their aberrational spawn there for the duration, with visitation privileges if they so chose.

Most of them, we were informed, did not so choose.

We decided against the grain. In terms not of visitation, but of actual guardianship. It was then we met Doctor Ekka. She said she had been looking for exactly the volunteers we, as Hayalet's biological parents, represented. If we would agree to let the lab periodically observe the Caucasian (we cringed at this derogatory term, but recognized its place as a scientific reference), then the State of Euristanbula saw no problem with the experiment.

Experiment? The keeping our own son at home? We agreed very much, they dispensed the necessary tranquilizers, and we returned home to Bucharest with our lab child. No, it wasn't so simple as that. There were months of bureaucracy to endure, faces to pretend to talk to, forms to shuffle, clouds to convince. We remained steadfast, and eventually the fog cleared and a plane came in, bearing a child whose eyes were the blue of a vagabond tongue of fire rather than an iris or an afternoon sky. Fortunately for us, we had all three in our house; we burned symbolic prayer candles as easily as we watered the irises or remembered the afternoon sky. Conversely, *he* had the advantage of viewing *us* through the still clinging film of his freak birth.

Against all advice Leyla managed to massage milk from her all but dried up breast, and tried to feed him.

He tore her nipple with his gums and newly cutting teeth. Screamed from his eyes.

Experiment indeed.

4

The candles are sculptures, things of the past: Mosques, Cathedrals, Temples. They burn as though remembering the past, his eyes, dripping what is life into a pool that would be blood in another context. Leyla claims to have some sense of him, but I know it is a mother's wishes. What sense of him I have takes ominous forms.

I dreamed once as I fell asleep with his wearied, ever reluctant body at my chest. I'd meant to place him back in the pen, but his breathing somehow converged with my own and the moment slipped away. There were terrific concussions, superimposed seas of blinding radiation, sands and rivers and skyscrapers blown to obscurity. There were skies, white, Caucasian, ghostly.

Great bloated serpents spinning among them, spreading oily darkness from their mouths wherever they flung. There were people. Clowns standing on top of wheeled machines, grasping the spewing hoses in their fists, laughing at the seminal saturation of the sky.

He woke with me, the surviving petals of unpolluted firmament returning to their original azure as they converged into twin vortexes. I hated him that he terrified me, but loved him that his exotic eyes gazed at me before peering about in anticipation of the next mood fix. One wonders what might happen if such a fix were withheld from so fierce a creature as a son.

I didn't tell Leyla. She was only his mother after all.

I did tell the lab techs when they next visited. Although the dreams were indescribably personal, I felt that anything, however peripheral to the core, which might improve my son's condition was worth the exposure.

5

It is endlessly slow, the wax. Through the window in his cage, Hayalet took to watching it melt over whatever lay in its path. We, regrettably, took to his tranquilizers. There had been that caveat at the outset—"If you keep him, you may find yourselves on tranquilizers yourselves"—but we'd ignored the opinions of scientists, in favor of psychologists, in favor of naturalists. We'd ignored so much. We ignored nothing now as he grew from babe to boy in the essential cage supplied by the FDH.

The Facility's lab techs came and went with increased frequency, as if they expected that at any moment Hayalet would abandon what docility he had demonstrated in his drug-controlled state and slash my wife and me to ribbons. One afternoon, in another dream dreamed with my son, a knife capable of such materialized. The technician held it up so that I could see its serrated edge against a harsh glare that my dream sense likened to the effulgence trained upon my wife's vagina as she spilled forth Hayalet into eager hands representing the fold of mankind.

As Leyla entered the stage as a separate cognizant fixture in the chromium reality, the tech turned the blade just so, studying the edge, drawing from its energy before embarking on ceaseless questions. Did we think the Caucasian would do himself harm? Did we think he would do *us* harm? How could a kitchen knife have landed in his room? Had we allowed him to eat with us in an unsecured location like the dining room? Had we dined with him in his own room? Was he eating meat? Were we not sticking to the vegetarian diet prescribed?

Hayalet's heart drummed against mine, though he was too old now to cradle to my chest. I woke from my melted posture in the easy chair we keep in his room to find him looking at me from his poised position on his bed. It passed through my mind that he

might strike. Such a notion hadn't occurred to me in at least a year.

I motioned for him to lie down. After some moments he obeyed, into an extravagant flood of piss whose smell, as it exceeded his diaper, alerted me as always to a humanness that was as often lost in a mist of science.

Much like the cluster of genes they could name but could not rename.

6

When he turned four a contingent of higher level FDH officials, including Doctor Ekka herself, arrived with an unprepared for surprise of a birthday present. Her name was Golge—of a tongue, *Shadow*, in keeping with our own use of Turkish in naming our son—she was three years old and had been genetically spliced from Hayalet and his mother upon our son's birth. Standard procedure with the Caucasians, Ekka said. Environments must be formed. Parameters changed. Interactions observed. Sites along the genome compared. Old beakers replaced with new. It all might have boggled the mind if Leyla and I weren't already acclimated to the FDH's Elephant Speak and clinical indifference to our own needs.

Of course we accepted Golge with—hesitantly—open arms. Forget that the officials would have insisted on it anyway. Forget that she seemed almost gentle as she absorbed her new surrounds through heavily dosed sable eyes set in soft almond skin. We had already accepted one anomaly into the neatly woven fabric of our lives. We weren't going to turn away another, blood of our blood, however difficult it might have been to specify which relation in the family unit she occupied.

Indeed, any specifications came from the FDH. Modifications upon previous modifications were made to our home, so that his cage abutted hers, a clear resin wall separating the two. The sole difference in their environments was that only she had the ability to open and close the door in the synthetic barrier. When we voiced our skepticism they assured us no harm would come to either of them. They were both internally equipped such that any physical contact between them would result in an unpleasant electrical charge passing between them. As the cage's had no free objects lying about that they might hurl at each other if the tranquil state broke down, they could—and in Prague, did—coexist.

Welcome to the calm skies of our household then, *Shadow*. Let the experiment continue in all fervor.

7

On the fourth day, amid the lava-like dance of prayer wax, she opened the door. Leyla saw it on the monitor in the kitchen and literally screamed my name. This action on Golge's part was an event, to be certain. The FDH techs had told us to expect a month at minimum, given that the fear response in even half ghosts dwarfed other motions,

e.g. curiosity. Add to this that Golge's response to Leyla and me, her providers, had been less than familial—and that she must have smelled Hayalet's temper bleeding through the barriers on some level—and a snarling recipe conspired in the pot.

For Hayalet's part, at first he merely stared in apparent fascination. Leyla and I watched on the screen, not daring to interfere with whatever developed. His sister approached like a Clarke image as interpreted by Kubrick. He was the monolith and she was the ape. Her hand, as it explored the air before him, seemed to shine with his own radiance. His mouth moved and she immediately withdrew her hand. He in turn recoiled at her action. My wife and I were witnessing a single presence, one that wished to be reunited with itself but was unsure how.

While watching this in my own trance, it occurred to me suddenly how vicious our interpretation of viciousness. How alien. As though we had arrived at its discovery from far away when in fact the primal fire, that snarling recipe conspiring in the pot, had bred us all.

In their now merged cage Golge and Hayalet communicated without ever touching, his lips hovering over her ear in potential revelations that Leyla and I had only dreamed of extracting from him—not least because *he had never spoken a single word in our presence*. The two were signs to each other in the universe, it was clear to me, neither caring how they had come to be in the company of the other, neither wishing for more than was given—whether that gift be confession, conciliation, or conspiracy.

On the sill of the kitchen window, the wax dripped palely, like the skin of a literary corpse.

8

Who are *you people*? I wanted to ask Hayalet and Golge. I wanted to wax existential, but the purposes and ideals inherent in so futile an exercise restrained me. Still the prayers melted. Still my children—may I call them that?—came to be comfortable with each other, though some random, shared chemical kept them abreast of the fact that physical contact remained taboo.

We do not believe in an ancient Allah as we burn our prayer wax, Leyla and me. We also do not believe in specters. What *do* we believe in? The F in FDH is for the Facilitation of that grand question. I believe in the possibility that my son may live beyond fifty. I believe in the possibility that his ferity is permanently suppressible, with time. I believe that Leyla believes. In that I do.

So who were they then, our Hayalet and Golge? Where had they come from? What was their purpose? If their hides were membranes stretched over drums, what ear to hear but that of the dancer, who does not distinguish between ghosts and shadows as she fulfills her dance? Ivory, honey, bone, coffee, milk, ebony, wax, they all dissolve into

the earth eventually. What value, one freak and one half freak, in the progression of humankind? I was naïve, yes, but I didn't have to blindly accept that droopy ears weren't intrinsically elephantine, in the way of FDH's Elephant Speak.

There was something beneath things. I decided, one night when we stayed awake watching the strange interactions of our children, that the only way to it was through Doctor Ekka. At least we had a name there, a somebody of some involvement. I contacted her the next morning, demanding to know why anyone in Prague cared.

All arrayed in her glimmery doctor uniform, she was a ghost, herself, there on the screen. "We care because we are scientists. We care because he is a boy without identity. We care because he is a boy. Believe it or not, we care for that reason."

I chose "or not" and asked about his sister. Why did Golge have to be involved? Weren't the "siblings" in Prague enough to write the record?

"There are no siblings in Prague," she said plainly. "Golge is the only such addition to our research. We developed her after hearing about your dreams. If your empathy response is so strong, think of what hers must be."

"Then you lied."

Her image seemed to tense with her features.

"We are not in that business, Saro. Sit still. I will be on the next flight out of Prague."

Saro. She didn't even have the clinical decency to eschew familiarity.

9

"It is theorized that in the direst hour of what we now refer to as the Century of Uncertainty, when the survival of the human species was in the balance, bloodlines were genetically altered to breed these ghosts. A code was installed that modern science, which we like to think of as superior, thus far has been unable to break—though there is some solace, I suppose, in knowing that hiding a thing is much easier than finding a thing."

Ekka and I sat in the kitchen in front of the monitor. Leyla had thankfully taken me up on my offer to tend to the children while she went to her parents' to relax a while. The stress in the house was both that palpable and malleable.

"Breed them why?"

She pretended to watch the nonactivity on the screen. "To be carriers of the crimes of the past."

I remembered dreams. Strange and terrible dreams. "But why? As some sort of punishment? That would seem as regressive as the ghosts themselves."

She abandoned any pretense now, looking at me squarely as she said, "So that *people might never forget*."

Dreams. Empathy response. Ferity. It all came circling back in the mind of science, bless it its fortitude.

10

I happened to be watching on the evening Golge lay down to sleep beside Hayalet. The mundane chore of cleaning the kitchen fell immediately into the background as I observed him almost touch her as she turned to face away from him. In that aether the camera exploited, I saw a slight smile form on her face, a sweet something that seemed as hard to place as the tear that burned for release from my eye.

Though I'd have guessed to the contrary, they fell almost immediately into their medium, a comfort zone that was as palpable, and I hoped as malleable, as the stress that had so long pervaded the house. I left the world and its melting wax behind in favor of him, my son; them, my children. Being with them, a part of their experience, whatever its nature, whatever turn it took, was all that mattered.

Quietly entering the cage, I placed myself in the easy chair and invited all the science, all the data, all the input away. If tomorrow we woke cleansed only of wakefulness, then so be it.

If all I heard was Hayalet's whispering into my sleeping ear, *Sit still, father. I am on the next plane out of the wilderness.*

The landscape was vast, desolate, debris-strewn. Doctor Ekka approached out of it, a young silver fox perched on her shoulder looking at me curiously, without fear. When it began to speak, I woke suddenly, remembering I was dreaming, but then the stirrings of my children on their bed drew me back into the waste. It seemed to change before my eyes, length and breadth, scrap metal winds driven by destitution, observation. The sky full of oily black, the sun like a great swollen teat generating a milk of hopelessness.

The milk pooled into cloaks, and walls. Of doctors and their laboratories. Scalpels and syringes shined against waxen walls. The smell of liquefaction permeated everything as it oozed into the eyes and noses of every object in its path, stifling breathing, suffocating out any future, any past. I saw her rise desperately in response, seizing and clutching him through the hot sculptor of electricity, against his halfhearted struggles placing her ear against his mouth, and the world dripping eternally in its elephantine wax. ⌧

The enigmatically named B.B. Roo informs us, "'Rap-Tap-Tap's' character Liza is fed by the spirit of my grandmother—abuse survivor, seamstress, and life survivor. I began writing the story in 1978 with a single line about a dumpster. A dumpster situated in front of my South Georgia childhood home (haunted by the way)."

B.B. Roo lives in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, with her very tolerant husband, four dogs, four cats, and a large albino catfish that lurks in a pool beneath the kitchen window.

Rap-Tap-Tap

B.B. Roo

"Overturn and crack my clamshell birdbath. Steal my mail. Rap-tap-tap on my bedroom window in the night," Liza Reynolds said.

From a white-banister house she watched the children. Watched them troop from the row of tenement houses to the dumpster behind Nick's Grocery and Tackle Shop. Houses squeezed, bulging one into another, spilling out into the asphalt and concrete. Houses infected with children.

All of seventy-eight, stooped at the shoulders, a worn rag-doll body, there was fire in her soul. Fire that glinted out of smoky-blue eyes in her prune-creased face.

Move out of her house? The children living in the tenements were fools if they thought she would.

Fifty-three years ago she had taken off from South Carolina on a Tuesday morning in 1907, left her husband Ray while he was laying crossties for the R&M railroad, left him after he had chased her around the kitchen table with a knife he said was an Arkansas toothpick, carried in a holster across his back. He had slapped her for the last time. She walked, mile upon mile along the edge of the roads, through mosquito swarms and thickets of pine and palmetto brush, to Georgia. Crossing state lines so the law couldn't force her to go back to him in South Carolina.

She stitched and hemmed and patched at Carmichael's Fine Clothing. Headed the County WPA Sewing Group during Roosevelt's New Deal years. To buy her own house—proof that she had succeeded in spite of her husband. Board and shingle, glass and mantle—a safe place, where she'd never let a man cross the threshold and sleep in her bed.

She pushed back in the rocking chair.

Cracking birdbaths, rap-tap-tapping, stealing mail. All to force her to abandon her house. Her yard was the Emerald Isle in a murky ocean. A yard filled with magnolia, pine, and mulberry trees. The children's kin could get her Sears-catalog cottage,

Model No. 2015, for a few paltry dollars compared to what she had paid.

Steal her mail. There were consequences when the envelopes didn't reach where they were supposed to go.

She shifted in the rocking chair. Wind chimes over her head twirled, making metallic tinkling sounds.

Yesterday morning the city water department called.

"Miss Reynolds," the clerk said. "You've got seven days before we shut off your water. We've not received last month's payment."

"I mailed the check. I put it in the mailbox nailed to the porch. The postman, Eddy Andrews, picks up every day at 2:00 pm. You've lost it. Look behind the desks. Look in the paperwork stacked around the office."

This morning the bank called. "Your account is overdrawn," the bank clerk said.

"I mailed you my stock dividend check a week ago today. I did. I know I did," Liza said exasperated.

At 12:15 p.m. while she slowly chewed stringy dark meat in a potpie it came to her.

The children stole her mail.

She crumpled a pansy-embroidered handkerchief up to her nose, leaned forward, and peered across the street with her owl-set eyes.

From the dumpster a tendril of foul air streamed through the heavy heat, stirred the fronds of the palm tree in the front yard.

She twisted her mouth to one side. "Phew."

The children climbed over the dumpster—their only playground—monkey bars, and tree house. Up the rust-red sides, through the open clanging doors, and into the belly of the dumpster.

They were thinking things, she just knew. Things children shouldn't be thinking. Foul things. How to tether a horsefly with twine to a finger, flying it in hapless circles around their heads. What to do with a butterfly's body after they tugged off its powdery wings. How they could upset her day, turn her inside and out—get her to move out of her house.

She'd turn the tables. She'd scare them, make them afraid to play behind Nick's store, afraid to watch her through the ragged rust holes in the sides of the dumpster.

She'd tell them about Randy Peters. Up to when he died last year, he'd been the town clown, the town fool, dressing up in women's clothing—a polka-dot skirt, black-lace brassiere worn outside over the blouse—parading down Gloucester Street sidewalk with a fifth of Jack in one hand.

She squinted and looked toward the dumpster.

A brown-headed, caramel-tan boy hung upside-down from the top of the dumpster, his knees bent over the rim.

"Come here boy," she called out. "Come over here and talk to me."

The boy quickly did an upside-down

sit-up, pulled his rump to the rim, and dropped down into the dumpster.

Up popped four heads. The brown-headed, caramel-tan boy; a soot-headed, pale-faced girl; a copper-haired boy with a pockmarked face; and, an oval-faced girl, her hair sand-colored and wind-whipped.

They climbed out of the dumpster, walked slowly over to Liza's wire fence, in through the gate fitted with a cow's bell, up the concrete path, and stopped just short of the red-painted brick steps leading up to the porch.

Liza looked over the group, the short one, the two tall ones, the tiny one. Smudges smeared their faces.

"Hmmp."

The children stood there grinning.

"I got to tell you about that dumpster you're playing in. Playing in and stirring up germs, and stirring up roaches. And most likely stirring up something else, something you don't want to stir up. Randy Peters died in the dumpster just last November. He crawled in and drank himself to death. His liver rotted. His heart exploded. Blood clotted in his veins. Nick found him in the morning when he was throwing out boxes. From what I hear the rats chewed his nose and fingers off. He died right where you're crawling around, jumping in and out."

Liza smiled, heady with the horrid detail she was giving the children.

Laughter flew, out of one child's mouth, then out of another's until each one had hee-hawed or guff-hawed.

They cried out, "We know, we know."

The children chimed in singsong voices, "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the ants play pinochle in your snout."

They formed a circle, holding each other's greasy hands.

"First you're sick and then you're worse and then its time to call the hearse."

Liza gasped.

The circle of children spun clockwise. "They put you in the cold, cold ground with all your relatives standing around."

Dizzy and giggling, they fell to the ground.

"The blood it turns to a slimy green and pus runs out like whipping cream."

She raised herself up, blue-veined hands fluttering, spittle forming at the corners of her mouth.

"Get out of here. Get out of here." She squealed and raised a hand over her head, its palm curved inward, pushing the children away.

The children ran, back down the concrete path and through the gate with the cowbell.

Their voices faded. "They sop it up with a piece of bread. And that's what you eat when you is dead . . . "

Face ashen, skin January cold in the July heat, she jerked herself out of the wicker rocker, and walked, tottering, into the living room.

Close the door. Fasten the chain. Lock the deadbolt. Pull down the blind. All of seventy-eight and she didn't want to die.

Next morning Liza lay in bed. Her hands crossed over her bosom, the coverlet pulled over her head. Sleep had come and gone in riotous fits, and when it came there was foreboding of death in the spastic storminess of dreams.

"The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out," she whispered.

"Shut-up, Liza. Stop this wallowing. You've got to go on the counter-attack."

Froth rose up to the top of the pot of cream-of-wheat and she turned the flame down. She cracked a brown-shelled egg.

The worms crawl in. Rap-tap-tap.

It was Nick's dumpster. He'd bought the shop from the Hammonds six months ago. She didn't know him well, but there was directness about him, a plain "I'll do what you say" and nothing more. He was solidly built, thick neck.

It was his dumpster.

"Nick," she said into the receiver. "We've got to scheme to keep the children from playing back of your store. Get them to watch TV and play Mr. Potato Head and Clue. Instead of spying on me. Singing about how a body turns after the heart stops pumping."

She pointed a finger and jabbed it into the air as if Nick were standing in front of her.

"I'm going to dress up an old mannequin from Carmichael's and you can place it in the dumpster tonight. Set it up in a corner just like Randy Peters. We'll drench it with booze. You don't know my history, but my husband chased me with his Arkansas toothpick one too many times. I didn't take that and I won't take this. Ray's dead. I'm here and I'll be here after the children that play in your dumpster are grown. I swear, by God, I'll be here."

"Miss Reynolds, you can depend on me. I don't want to get sued if a child gets tetanus from a rusty dumpster," Nick said.

"Come over tonight and get the mannequin. No lingering. I'm not asking you to supper. Come in and get out. Don't like men nosing around in my house."

She hung up the phone, not allowing him to reply.

In her bedroom's walk-in closet packed with remnants of her life—zigzag checks and tweeds, Victorian florals, thin stripes and black paisley—was a 1930s imitation Lester Gaba mannequin, a Gaba Girl. She brushed her fingers across the cool plaster of Paris, across the apricot pale of its face, the unclouded cobalt of its eyes. Her fingers leapt to the bridge of her own nose, the roughness, the pits, traced the valleys and crevices around her mouth, and caressed the folds of skin at her throat.

After Carmichael's closed for the day, she'd stand next to a mannequin so that its curved fingers touched her waist. She'd turn the radio to WY105, Jazz for the Soul. Dizzy with want she'd dance next to the unyielding figure. As her hips swayed, thoughts of her husband intruded—the knife, the fists pounding her stomach, her books he'd burned in the potbelly stove.

"Remember, Liza," she said, "no man will ever sleep in your bed."

The dance exhausted, she'd close up Carmichael's and go home.

Liza tugged a pleated blouse onto the mannequin. A sleeve on the right arm. A sleeve on the left arm.

She fastened the buttons. "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out."

A plaid skirt over a pair of trousers, a bra slipped over the blouse. A beret with a paper carnation. Nick would complete the face with a beard of Spanish moss.

1:00 a.m. Liza sat on the couch and rubbed one corner of the rose-patterned curtain between a forefinger and thumb.

She watched for four children, creeping about—their quick movements parodied in moon shadows. Watched as the earth spun, as clouds changed shape, as the night-blooming moonflower opened its white petals. The darkness drew down her eyelids and her head dropped onto the arm of the couch.

Tap-tap-tap. She started, then calmed. It was only the tapping of her foot on the sewing machine pedal. She was about to dance.

The glare of morning light hit Liza's eyelids. She sat up and rubbed her hand across the side of her neck, massaging a knotted muscle.

She squealed. The mannequin with its arched eyebrows, crescent-shaped eyes, the plump salmon-colored lips, stood against the dumpster, pointed straight toward her house. Straight toward the window, the couch she sat on.

So, the children want to play games.

The security light at the rear of the store flickered off. Nick stood in front of the dumpster looking at the mannequin, one hand on his chin, the other on his hip.

Liza hobbled on bare feet to the porch, her cotton nightgown about her like a shroud, and waved him over.

"You see what the brats did. They're daring me. Like in chess. I made a move, now they made a move. Well, I'm going to play. Get the mannequin, put it in your store for the day. You'll place it back in the dumpster tonight—but only after you come pick up a surprise for the children. Something to make them cry."

She glared at him, her face puffy and red.

Nick smiled. "I'm your crewman, captain, I'm your slave, master."

He turned and walked down the concrete path, plucked an orange marigold and shredded the petals, crushing a beetle clinging to a leaf.

Liza went to the kitchen pantry and brushed dust off two boxes. She squinted at the faded writing. *Godzilla Giant Rat Trapper. Be aggressive when trapping rats. The Godzilla Trap's teeth*

make rat escapes impossible. Perfect for the Norway rat and Roof rat!

She'd seen Nick pellet rats with a BB gun. Keeping the meat for crab-bait. No reason he couldn't clamp a couple of rats into the traps strung around the mannequin's neck, the blood running down. Let the children think the mannequin was the dead drunk, Randy Peters. When they realized it wasn't, let them take the dead rats as a warning not to play tricks.

Midnight. Liza leaned back in the lounge chair. She listened for a clang. A rusty grating and screams. For screams of children. Children who thought they were centuries from the grave. The bloodied mannequin would show them that life was not so secure.

1:00 a.m. Heaviness and silence draped the house. She raised up. A drawn-out glassy screech. A fingernail scratching a windowpane.

Then.

Rap-tap-tap. Rap-tap-tap.

"Go on now," she shouted.

Her chest heaved. "Did you get your comeuppance?" She laughed.

Rap-tap-tap.

Children's voices sang out. "First you're sick and then you're worse and then its time to call the hearse."

Liza pushed herself up off the lounge chair, walked to the front door, and pulled on the blind's cords. She swallowed. Hard. Light from the gas lamp in the yard lit up the bloodied mannequin propped next to the gate. The gate's cowbell rested in the mannequin's unyielding hand.

Twisting the door's deadbolt to make sure it was locked, and feeling faint, she fell onto the couch.

Nick. She needed him this very minute. Now. Not at 5:30 a.m. when the store opened.

She hated the weakness she felt within. That she needed him to protect her as no man ever had.

Rap-tap-tap.

With a sudden vigor, she stood up, took up an umbrella and held it tightly at her side.

Rap-tap-tap.

The mannequin's head pressed against the door.

Liza backed up, struck the window with the tip of the umbrella.

Rap-tap-tap.

She struck the window again.

"Rap-tap-tap to you," she said bravely and jerked the blind close. But, a queasiness rose from her stomach to her chest. Her bravado, like iron, melted in doubt's red heat.

Panting, she slammed the bedroom closet door closed behind her.

Stop this, Miss Elizabeth Reynolds. You're letting a simple song get to you. If a word dropped out of a line here and there, the song wouldn't mean anything. Where's the dauntless woman who walked from the Carolinas?

She knew. The dauntless woman was a fragile seventy-eight-year-old

skeleton cloaked in wilted flesh. Couldn't run from an Arkansas toothpick now.

"Rap-tap-tap to you. Worms crawl in and out to you," she said. She sniffled and quelled a tear building at her lower eyelid.

"Nick, Nick," Liza said into the phone, her voice a rising crescendo, a trickling pouring into a full rush.

"Did the children take the bait?" Nick said in a slow drawl.

"No, no. They put that darn mannequin against my front door in the middle of the night. They scratched and tapped and sang. Come get it this minute. Take it off my porch. Take it to your store. I won't open the front door. I won't open the blind till you do."

Nick said, "Calm now. . . "

Static interrupted him. Liza put the receiver down. "What are those children up to?

Her hands formed a cross over her throbbing chest.

Rap-tap-rap. Rap-tap-rap.

"Rap-tap-tap to you," she said.

Rap-tap-tap. Louder.

Still. Sit still, Liza. Don't call out again. Don't let the children know you're scared, that you're too frail to confront them face-to-face.

Rap-tap-tap. Rap-tap-tap.

"Liza, it's just me." Nick knocked on the door harder.

Old fool. It's not the children. How weak of her to react so, how so like a cartoon character of a woman alone in her late years.

She walked to the living room, tapping the umbrella against the knotted-pine floor, and opened the front door.

There stood Nick.

"There's no mannequin here. It's still in the dumpster," he said.

"It was here. Rapping and tapping and scratching."

"Look, I'll take the mannequin out of the dumpster. Just let the children be. Let them look from across the street at you. So, they cracked a birdbath and sang a silly song. That's all they are—silly."

"I've worked too long and hard to be treated like this." Her lips puckered, the flesh crinkled tight.

Nick walked down the steps.

He sang softly, a buzz like that of a hummingbird's wings, "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out."

"Nick, did you hear the song faintly?"

"What sound, Liza?" Nick turned and scrolled leisurely down the concrete path. He fingered the cow's bell at the gate, and let it fall with a dull clang.

Umbrella in hand, she went to the bedroom closet, pulled her night-potty and water pitcher in, unwrapped a tufted chair of its dust cover and sat down.

"Rap-tap-tap," she said.

Her terry-cloth housecoat hung on the inside of the closet door. She tugged at a corner of something, something poking out of a pocket.

It was a window envelope. She

squinted at the printing—City Water Department, P.O. Box 19. She'd never mailed the water payment.

The children hadn't stolen from the mailbox. She was losing her mind, losing her strength. Soon it would be time to "call the hearse."

Was the mannequin ever at the door, was senility calling the worms to play?

She cried, slept exhausted, awoke, cried and slept again.

Light seeping under the closet door washed bright, dim, dark as the sun traveled through its cycle.

8:00 p.m.

Rap-tap-tap.

Liza woke. Her heartbeat quickened.

Rap-tap-tap.

She pushed one foot out of the closet, then the other, then her body, back hunched over, the umbrella in front of her like a divining rod.

Rap-tap-tap. She shuffled toward the door, twisted the deadbolt, and cracked the door open, peeking out at the night.

No child was on the porch.

"Children," she called out. "I found it. I found the water bill I thought you had stolen. I never mailed it. I put the mannequin in the dumpster. You can stop tricking me. I know you're just children, foolish children, singing a children's song."

A rusty drawn-out sigh came from behind her. A pungent whiskey odor filled the air. She turned to the darkened room.

The mannequin lay in the lounge chair. Metallic glints sparked off the blade of a knife, an Arkansas toothpick, in its hand.

The mannequin's arm raised.

". . . then its time to call the hearse."

Her lungs rattled.

Nick stood in the Emerald Isle of Liza's yard, the oval-faced girl by his side, her hair sand-colored and wind-whipped, her faced smudged with dirt from playing in the dumpster.

"Daddy, are we truly buying this house? We're moving from across the street?"

"Yes, we truly are," Nick said.

Scott Edelman reports, "I have been leading a double life for as long as I can remember. I've been writing fiction since I was a child, telling tales I might not have bothered to write had others written them for me—which for a little kid meant stories in which every comic-book superhero I'd ever read about teamed up to fight both crime and each other. But at the same time, I was also an editor, painstakingly handwriting out a daily newspaper read only by my family. So the impulse to publish, whatever the role, was always there.

"I continue to lead that double life today. I work as an editor—seven years for the SCI FI Channel editing the internet magazine SF Weekly *and the bimonthly print magazine* SCI FI, *with eight years as the editor of* Science Fiction Age *before that—I am also a writer, with 60 stories published in anthologies such as* Forbidden Planets, Once Upon a Galaxy, Metahorror, Treachery and Treason, The Mammoth Book of Awesome Comic Fantasy *and magazines such as* The Twilight Zone, Absolute Magnitude *and* Weirdbook.

"I've realized over the years that I'm not the only one who leads a double life—my fiction does the same. Even as I simply try to tell a story (as opposed to trying to tell a story simply), I'm constantly attempting to figure out why *I want to tell stories, as well as why people tell stories in the first place. What is this impulse that we have as a species? 'Almost the Last Story By Almost the Last Man' probably represents my ultimate attempt so far to tell a story while exploring this drive to make sense of our lives through the tales we tell."*

Almost The Last Story By Almost The Last Man

Scott Edelman

Maybe it would be best to begin this way.

Let's start, in fact, on the day that it *all* started, with Laura already at work in the county library. But here's the thing—as the day goes by, maybe she won't even come to realize yet that the dead are suddenly refusing to stay dead, because life happens that way, with momentous things occurring across town while we, in our homes, in our ignorance, clip our fingernails or floss our teeth. Earthquakes roar, floods rise, towers fall . . . and somewhere on the other side of the globe a man who may not hear of these things for many months, if at all, scrapes with his stick in a small patch of dusty earth and prays for rain. If he ever grows perturbed on that day, it will only be because the rain fails to come, and not due to dark happenings on continents far away.

For our purposes, let it begin that way for Laura, who did not notice her world tilting on its axis. She noticed little that first day of the change because little affected her personally, save that fewer patrons than normal

wandered into her branch of the library. The ripples had not yet reached her.

But still, that small alteration to her routine puzzled her a bit, as over the years she had grown accustomed to the predictable rhythms of her week, but she let that feeling drop, and on the whole, it turned out to be an unusually good workday for her. She was able to spend less of her time that shift reshelving books that had been left on tables, and more of it catching up on paperwork, so she ended the day pleased.

As she headed back to her apartment that night, she treated herself to Chinese take-out. Maybe when she unpacks her dinner special, she should even find an extra fortune cookie at the bottom of the bag. Now *that* would cause her to smile. Because there's something else that you should know about Laura. She's been using the vocabulary words printed on the back of each fortune to teach herself Chinese, not the best method, perhaps, but still, hers, and the surprise cookie put her one word closer to her goal. See, she was planning to visit China someday. Adding that information just about now should help add poignancy to her tale, considering what we already know is inevitably to come and what she does not.

And so, later that night, after the additional reward of a very special episode of one of her favorite television shows, during which two estranged sisters are reunited, plus the rush she got from the way she'd been able to avoid a phone call from her mother thanks to caller ID, she would tuck into bed pleased with herself and with the world and ready to fall into a peaceful sleep, knowing nothing of the chaos elsewhere and suspecting less, much as our man working his field with a stick might finally set aside that stick and stretch out on his straw mat to drift away while looking up at the stars, never knowing that he had just lived through a December 7, or an August 6, or a September 11.

It was only the next day, when Laura slid that morning's newspapers onto the rods that kept them from getting tattered as they were being read, that she learned there had been anything special about the day before. She wasn't sure that she believed it, though. The facts of the miraculous resurrection seemed to her as if they should instead be shelved under fiction. She grew angry with herself, and angry with her former ignorance as well, believing that had such a grand difference been born in the universe, she should have been able to feel it. That the rules of life and death should change without her knowledge and permission didn't seem right.

She overheard much talk at her branch (all in whispers, of course) as to what it meant, and how one should proceed to walk through such an unexpected world, but she knew of no other way to live, and believed that one should accept the directions in which fate pushes us. She had never been able to see a different way for herself before, thanks in part (or so she felt) to the

mother whose call she had avoided the night before, and saw no reason that she should try to see a different way for herself now. And so, in the face of the death of death, which would likely cause most people to abandon their routines, she still returned each day to carry out her duties.

Each successive day, however, will bring fewer of the living and more of the dead to browse in her department, until her regular clientele is completely replaced. At first, perhaps, she'll hardly notice that the undead *are* undead, for there'll be no slavering over her flesh the way she would have assumed. They'll just be shuffling slowly along, extracting books from the shelves, and sitting at the tables much the same way the regulars had. They won't behave so differently from the living, and so she won't notice that they're *not* living.

But then something will happen that will finally cause her to see and believe the great change that has occurred. Perhaps she'll notice that these new visitors are more intense at their tasks than those who had come before. Maybe it will be the fact that there is no whispering and no cause for her to shush. Or perhaps it's that she finally notices that no one is taking any bathroom breaks. Whatever the catalyst, she will eventually *see*. They'll seem more serious than those she was used to, and though more and more of them will drift in each day, so that some will finally have to stand, they'll be even better behaved than those who over her long years of service she'd grown used to, who by that time will have been entirely replaced, so that she is the only living creature who shows up there each day. But still, even that, even noting that only the dead surround her, will not cause her to change her routine.

She'll come to understand that the men, women, and children (though they really have to be understood as *former* men, women and children) are actually looking for something in the pages of those books, something that matters to them a great deal. They're not just going through the rote motions that had obsessed them in life. But what exactly are they seeking?

She watches them eagerly, intently, knowing that if she could only figure out what they sought, that she would find something meaningful there for herself as well, something that had waited just one step ahead of her her entire life.

Somehow it would all start to make sense. *All* of it.

No, forget that. Forget about Laura and her mother and the stale taste of fortune cookies. That's no way to begin this. It doesn't seem right at all. There's got to be a better way.

I'm going to start over, which is something that's a lot easier to do here on this page than from where I'm standing.

How about this for an opening, then?

The day the zombies came, Emily was dropping by the library (yes, there's that library again; it's important; you'll see) to visit her friend Rachel, which

also means that it was the day that Rachel died. But as Emily arrived to take her friend to lunch, she doesn't know that yet. She knew that there was something odd about the day though. In fact, as she parked her car and fumbled for change for the meter, she wondered, what with the strange news reports that had been coming over her car radio during her drive, whether the two old friends should postpone their outing to another day.

Maybe I'll even have her pause for a moment and think it a hoax. She'll wonder whether this was just like that old-time Martian invasion that drove everybody mad when it was first broadcast on the radio, or man's supposed landing on the moon. (Which will have *you* wondering for a moment which of us didn't believe man ever made it to the moon, Emily or me. It's Emily. At least, most of the time, it's Emily.) And then she'll think, whether the broadcasts were a ratings trick or not, did it really matter? Regardless of the dangers of this world, life had to go on. She knew that. Life happened, and you had to happen, too. There would always be disruptions worthy of locking the doors and pulling down the shades, if you wanted to find them.

As you can tell, Emily is the sort of person who lives in two worlds, both this one, the one we all agree upon as reality, and another one, one slightly askew, to keep that first one at arm's length. She always felt that though a person had to live *in* the world, it did not mean she had to be *of* it. One should be able to keep the world at a distance so that it did not disrupt one's plans, and live as if all life's problems were on the other side of the world, as if she lived in a hut somewhere, her husband out most of the day poking at yams in the soil. Together they would be happy, less because of any affinity they had for each other than because of their separateness from society and its ills. They would live in ignorance of headlines and be bound together by that simplicity. The beating drums of the world would appear muffled and distant.

Emily survived many tragedies that way. Compared to her divorce, dealing with the resurrection of the dead would be a snap.

As she walked up the steps of the library, approaching the intricate wrought-iron gates at the entrance, wondering whether she and Rachel should do Chinese or Italian, a man ran toward her and then past her, screaming as he headed for the street. Blood spurted from one shoulder. In Emily's shock, it took her a moment to edit that initial thought to, no, not from his shoulder, but from the place where his arm used to be. She was ashamed to admit to herself that she felt relieved when he passed by her without spattering blood on her new blouse, which she had bought just for this occasion.

As she stood frozen, halfway between the street and the library entrance, one of the undead stumbled out the gates above her after its escaping prey. Its skin was grey, and its clothing still spilled clods of earth from its disinterment.

Blood dripped from its mouth. Emily will do her best to force her legs to move before the dead thing shifts its focus to her, but her internal struggle proves unnecessary, as the shell of a man totters as it tries to move from one step to the next, loses its balance, and then rolls past her, tumbling down the length of the stairs.

After it finally struck the pavement, it lay motionless for a moment, and Emily thought it could be taken for a pile of cloth and bones, but then, as she watched, it slowly rose to its feet and looked up at her, really *looked* at her, she thought. She'd heard the radio hosts surmise that these undead things were beyond thought, but it certainly seemed to her to be thinking, almost considering for a moment whether it could make its way back up those steps to her.

Before it turned from her and shuffled down the street, in search, apparently, of an easier target, Emily would have sworn that it shrugged.

Emily rushed inside, calling out her friend's name. There'll be some personal detail seeded into the text before this so that you'll know that even with what Emily has been handed in life, she is still an optimistic sort, one who even in the face of what she has just seen expected to find her friend alive. (Maybe you'll learn of a lost dog who made its way home, or a parent whose cancer scare passed. Let's make it the dog. I'll have her see one on the street earlier as she parks her car so that there'll be a reason for her to wistfully remember a few details. People are often taught more lasting lessons by pets than by parents.)

From across the room, Emily could make out that Rachel stood where Emily had always found her, behind the counter where she checked out books, but by then, Rachel was no longer Emily's friend. A bite that had been taken out of Rachel's neck had allowed blood to spill down the front of her blouse. Her skin was not yet grey; it was deathly pale, but not yet the color of the creature who had fallen past Emily on its hunt, so perhaps it had happened not so long ago. Emily will think that if only she had arrived a half an hour earlier, perhaps she would have found her friend alive. It does not occur to her to think that if she had arrived a half an hour earlier, maybe they would both be dead. But that's just the kind of person Emily is.

(Thank the dog.)

Emily did not enter the vast room to approach her friend. She hung back in the hallway and noted that no one else remained there, neither human nor zombie. That was a good thing. Emily took that to mean that perhaps she could be safe there, in a building at the top of stairs which seemed untenable to the dead. It all depended what her friend had turned into. It did not seem to Emily as if Rachel had become a predator. Her friend had always been gentle. Could she ever become anything but, whatever the circumstance? Emily did not think that death necessarily had to be a life-altering experience.

Emily noticed that the whole time she watched, Rachel stayed by her station, her fingers on her keyboard, her dull eyes looking straight ahead, waiting . . . but for what? Did some spark that still glowed somewhere inside her still expect customers to come? Maybe she was merely doing what had always been expected of her in life, out of a habit that transcended death. Or was she waiting for Emily, only for a different reason than she would have been waiting earlier, cannily hoping to entice her close, too close, with a feigned calmness that was truly no longer hers? If only Emily could figure it out, unravel the suddenly mysterious why of her friend, she felt that somehow everything would then make sense, and she'd know, with or without a dog, with or without a husband who poked at the earth with a stick, how she was meant to live her life from that day forward.

No . . . that's all wrong, too.

This is getting frustrating. I usually don't vacillate like this, at least not when it comes to putting words on the page. Give me a few moments . . .

I've got it. Let's begin this way instead.

Walter was at the main branch of the library researching his next novel the day the zombies came. (I know, I know. What's with these libraries, you're thinking. Surely there's a more exciting place to go with this. But no, for me, there isn't. And you'll soon see why.) When the screaming began, echoing down the narrow hallways and filling the cavernous room in which he sat, there were so many books stacked about him that he needed to stand to see what was happening. The first thing he saw was that the librarian, who had been so kind to him over the years, but whose name he had never bothered to learn (later, he would berate himself for that), was beating her fists against the back of a man who was no longer a man. The thing was biting chunks out of her neck and spitting gristle as it growled. They soon both fell behind the counter so that Walter was no longer able to see them, but he could still hear the unsettling sounds of feasting.

Walter ducked back down below the wall of books that he had built around him (and I will have to think later about whether to stress the metaphor of this, with examples of how he had shielded himself with books during all other aspects of his life) and crawled from the room, unashamed (well, only slightly ashamed), for he had learned long ago that he was a writer, not a fighter. He did not lift his head, thinking unrealistically that if he couldn't see zombies, they could not see him, until he bumped up against tiny chairs, and realized that he had reached the children's section.

Craning his neck to look up, he saw one of the undead holding a young girl up to its mouth and chewing its way through her organs. Perhaps flecks of her blood will splash onto his face. Perhaps he will only imagine it, as the reality might be too much for you. Or perhaps it will be both, that flecks of blood will splash onto his face but he

will only *think* that he imagined it, because it won't be too much for you; it will be too much for *him*. The girl wriggled erratically as she died, and Walter, noting that the zombie was too lost in the frenzy of its feast to notice him, leapt to his feet and ran past.

Walter knew the layout of the library intimately, as it had become his second home (well, actually, more like his first home, as his apartment had never become a true home to him), and made his way to the vault in which he knew the rare holdings were stored. At night, it was kept locked, but during the day the staff left it open for easier access. He had a hunch that he could be protected in there. He would lock himself in, and no zombie would be able to figure out how to get in after him. Surely, zombies couldn't calculate combinations. Numbers were too complex for them. All they knew was one body, another body, another body . . .

Getting out again once things had calmed down again, when he would be seen once more as a person, and not just a body, not just a snack, would be easy, because safes were designed to prevent people from breaking in, not *out*. Right?

He hoped he was right. He was sure he was right. At least that's what he kept telling himself as the air inside the vault grew moist and stuffy, and he struggled, mostly in vain, to hear whether the screaming outside had stopped.

Sigh.

No . . . no . . . no.

I'm afraid that last try didn't hold together any better than the first two. It didn't bring alive what it's like to live among the dead.

But . . . unfortunately . . . that third account is really the best narrative I have to work with. Because that one's my life. Because that one's the truth as I have lived it.

And because now, especially now, metaphor has to go. From now on, I should only write what actually happened.

I should only write the truth.

On the other hand, my old tools seem so reassuring at a time like this, and my old coping mechanisms so tempting. I keep thinking that there must be a reason for that. With so few other comforts left in the world, I hope I can be forgiven for backsliding. (Come to think of it, are there *any* other comforts left in the world, not counting the mere fact of just being alive itself?) Or maybe it's more than just backsliding. Maybe, like a cigarette smoker teetering on the verge of quitting, I just need one more dose of my drug before giving it up for good.

So let me try once more to explain. I hope that this time it will work out better for you. For both of us.

Here we go . . .

I once knew a woman who loved her husband so much that she could not bear to let him go. When Marilyn swore that she would be true to him in sickness and health, she meant it. But that isn't always such a good thing. For when her husband grew ill, she kept

him pinned to life in the hospital when he would have been much happier in the grave. Perhaps in a different story she would have kept him from the grave as a form of punishment, but not in this story, because that would be ironic, and Martha loved him without irony. As he lay there while some machines breathed for him, others circulated his blood, and still others carried away his wastes, she would look at him, at the forest of tubes binding him to an unfulfillable promise, and weep.

"Don't go," she would whisper, repeating it like a mantra, though one with infinite variation. "You can't go. Not yet. You mustn't go."

But eventually, he went.

Luckily for her, his death came on a day when the dead were no longer dying. When all life signs ceased, the nurses scurried in to the alarms and buzzers they had expected long before. There was nothing more that they could do, and they, at least, having long since lost patience with Marilyn anyway, were glad of it. The most important lesson to be learned in this place was letting go, and they wished that she had not been such a slow student. As a doctor came in to verify what the nurses already knew, and murmured the sympathetic words he had been trained to utter about her loss (so how sympathetic could they have been anyway?), the woman's husband reached out suddenly, grabbed a nurse by the wrist, and ripped her arm out of its socket. The blood splattered the wife across her folded arms, sore from hugging herself as she wept. She screamed, not taking her eyes from her husband as the remaining nurses joined the doctor in wrapping restraints about the man. Once they were done and he was attached to the bed, they all fled the room, carrying the injured nurse with them, leaving Marilyn alone.

As the man (or what was once a man; I have no true word for him, as our terminology has not yet advanced as much as our species; "zombie" seems so fraught with baggage) struggled impotently and snapped at flesh that was out of reach, Marilyn thought that she heard her husband call her name. Buried in his grunts, or so she thought, were sounds she knew so well, murmurs, endearments, the echoes of living words past, and so she stepped closer, stunned to find herself in such a bizarre situation. She had heard from the small TV bolted to one corner of the ceiling that they listened to as she waited for him to wake, that scenes like this were playing themselves out all across the country. Across the world. (Well, not in every corner of the world, as we have already discussed. Somewhere, there will always be that man, happily oblivious, and that stick.) But she never expected to have someone she knew drawn into such a predicament, and especially not herself. Death is what happened to other people. Careless people.

She tilted her head and closed her eyes to listen more intently, and something she heard made her certain. She swore that she *could* make out her name.

And so she moved even closer to him, erasing that final space between them, and let his teeth rip into her flesh, so that she, too, could join him in the only afterlife that people from then on would ever know.

No, that's not right. No one likes reading about people who voluntarily turn themselves into victims. We want to see people who take action, who make choices, who triumph over adversity instead of surrendering to it. So. How about this . . .

I once knew a woman who *hated* her husband so much that she could not bear to let him go. He was rich, and so tried his best to pay Catherine to leave, but he could never seem to name her price, as she had no price. (Something he found hard to believe, since as I said, he was rich.) And so he turned instead to trying to simply leave her, but none of his escape plans worked. She kept reeling him back in, with the orchestrated disapproval of their friends, the withholding of time with his children, or, at its most drastic, with threats of libels plausible enough that she knew they would stick. Many were the times he flew to the opposite coast in the morning only to be persuaded to return in the evening. She stayed on the grounds of their estate and made sure that he stayed there with her.

Once the zombies came (because, yes, I give up, what else am I supposed to call them?), her job became that much easier. He no longer wanted to travel into the city (which had quickly descended into chaos), and so did his job from his home office, ordering about with phone calls, e-mails and faxes others who did not have the luxury of his moneyed sort of refuge. As he worked, he would keep an eye on the perimeter of their estate via security cameras, making sure that the outside world did not invade. Catherine had her own security cameras, ones her husband did not know about, and she would check on him often during the day to make sure he had not fled.

This went on until the weight of the outside world and the weight of her husband's inner world grew so great that he could take it no longer. One day, she came upon him slumped in the bath in a room devoid of both his cameras and hers. The water was tinged with red, the cuts on his wrists were lengthwise. In that moment, as he hesitated between life and new life, she hugged him and wrenched him from the water. Not caring that he was covering her with both suds and blood, she dragged him to their safe room. It had been installed to protect them from those who would take their wealth and their lives by force, and now it would protect her from the invisible force that would dare to take her husband.

She knew what was going to happen next, and so she moved quickly.

She set him folded on the far side of the safe room, his legs stretched out on the floor, his back against one of the reinforced walls. She did not know why she took such care as she laid him there. She could have tossed him the length of

the room and not caused him any damage. What was to come would come regardless.

She retreated outside, watching him, waiting for him to reanimate. When she saw her husband begin to twitch, she slammed shut the door to the safe room and locked it. She was glad that her husband was back, little caring in what state he was back.

She sat on the king-sized bed, and listened to him slam against the walls of his prison. He would try to break free, continuously, never tiring, and so at last, she would know forever where he was.

That was a bit closer, perhaps, but still . . .

No, that one wasn't right, either. So far, with each of these stories, I'm making it all sound too pat.

I really should stop trying to make sense of it. After all, part of the truth of zombies (and by zombies I mean more than just the raw reality of each individual one of them, I mean the concept, the very fact that they exist) is that there is no sense to them. No one expects a hurricane to make sense, or an earthquake to have a point. And I've learned that about zombies by now, too. But it turns out to be just like the way people look up at the passing clouds and without even trying find a seahorse, a cow, or even Abe Lincoln. I can't seem to stop. That is what I do. It just happens.

It's a compulsion, I guess. I look at life, messy, chaotic, preposterous life, dismantle its unanswered mysteries and incongruous facts, rearrange them until there is a beauty not supplied by random events, and put them back together again so that all the pieces fit. I transform nonsense into serendipity. That's a man up there in that moon, damn it, no matter what I'm told about an accidental pattern of asteroids. And I'm supposed to behave differently in response to *this* latest upheaval?

So I find myself telling myself these stories, not consciously choosing to start them and seemingly not able to consciously choose to stop. Maybe that's my way of going into shock. But what I saw when I first stepped from the safety of the vault told me that this pretense of attempting to make sense of how I live now, how we all live now, is in itself senseless.

When I finally opened the vault door, the first thing I noticed was the silence. I was amazed by how quiet it had become. No more guttural raging from the undead; no further death throes from the living. As I moved slowly down the hallways, though, I found evidence of each. Red splashes darkened the walls; stray bones littered the floors. But there were no zombies, and no humans. I could easily put together the story of what had happened during my hermitage from the disgusting detritus alone, but I struggled not to. What I had seen with my own eyes had been horrible enough; I didn't want to add my imagination to the mix. And besides, I was too hungry to do so. That and only that was what had overcome my fear enough to bring me out of the vault. I would not have

moved had not my body's command been, "Move or die."

I made my way as slowly as my hunger would allow to the machines I had so often eaten from while researching my previous books. I knew the taste of stale moon pies far too well. My honesty made me put money in the machine rather than break open the glass case, but I felt silly for it. Was there still a world out there that cared?

After I had eaten two bags of pretzels and a box of raisinets, and downed two cans of orange soda, I could think straight again. Only then did it come to me that I should secure the library's front door, because based on the signs around which I had tiptoed, there had been no one left alive with the luck to have done it before. Except for me, everyone who had been in the library when the attack began had died.

I moved slowly and silently toward the front of the building, and strangely, a part of me felt just as badly for the fallen books that had been knocked to the floor in struggles as another part of me did when gazing at what must have been the sites of fallen people. Each time, I was embarrassed for feeling that way, but . . . I'm a writer. That's just one more action I can't control.

I passed the bank of computers at which I had often sat to check my e-mail, and saw that the screensavers still danced. I couldn't resist. I slapped the spacebar and punched in my password. Amid the spam was a note from my agent, wondering if I still lived. I replied to him that I did, and since three days had passed since he'd sent his message, I asked him the same question. I started browsing through my favorite blogs, discovering that no part of the world had escaped this plague, when I suddenly remembered—the front gate. There's be enough time for exploration on the Internet later.

As I swung shut the wrought-iron gates at the library's main entrance, I worried that I was being premature by not yet having checked every inch of the building. Was I alone in here?

Was I locking death out? Or locking it inside, the better for it to catch me?

I had to take that chance, unless I wanted to spend my days living inside a locked vault until those outside sorted this all out and we all got back to normal.

As I looked down at the base of the steps on the milling undead, it was as if they could sense me, as if they felt that by merely continuing to live that I was taunting them. They careened off each other as they gathered into clumps. It was unnerving to study them that way, knowing that they were studying me. I moved back from the gates in the hope that I would be less noticeable. It seemed to work. They wandered off again, listless zombies once more; from this height, they might as well have been commuters on their way to work. Only their job was eating the actual commuters, not that this city had any left. There were none of the living left, at least not on the streets that surrounded the library, that much was clear. All of the action was past.

I could not escape, though, the signs of actions past. I had tried before to avoid the implications of such signs, but would the world ever be rid of them? Dark stains everywhere, as random as oil slicks, told me what had happened out there, what I had thankfully missed while inside the vault. Automobiles appeared to have been flung randomly across the landscape outside, one flipped onto its back on the bottom steps of the library, others piled up against each other as far into the distance as I could see. An armored car lay on its side amid the chaos. I could picture the drivers dodging both living and dead, each terrified that he or she would migrate from being one to being the other, losing control first of their vehicles and finally their lives.

I didn't want to keep reliving that, so I looked again at the armored car. It was filled with money, I imagined, which my last royalty statements told me I needed more of. I could probably go out there if I was crazy enough to risk it and grab all the cash I could carry. But what good would that do me now? We had evolved overnight into a world beyond money. A new economy ruled the world, and it was one based on meat. As I stared at the armored car and thought wistfully of a past and future no longer within my reach, I thought I could see something move through a small, narrow window in the vehicle's side. I studied that slot, and though there was no more movement, I could tell that, yes, as I was looking, someone was looking back. I risked stepping closer to the gates again, but unfortunately, at that distance I could not read any expression there. I could barely make out any features at all, an eye, a nose; just enough to tell me that I was not alone.

Then I saw a hand, its curled fingers beckoning me forward.

I was not the last man in the world after all, not some Robinson Crusoe stranded after the rise of the zombies.

Or maybe, come to think of it, I was, and as the tale promised, I'd just found my Friday.

The stories come more slowly now. I know, I know, I promised you that they wouldn't come at all any longer. But if you out there were in here with me, were at my side, you'd see that there is good reason for them to continue.

And besides, maybe *this* will be the story worth telling.

(Or maybe, just maybe, I will tell them until I finally admit that there might no longer be any stories worth telling.)

So . . .

There once was a woman—I won't give her a name, I won't bother giving any of them names any longer, for after all, aren't they all just archetypes? Aren't they really just you and me?—who had tried and tried (and tried and tried) to have a child, but no matter what she and her husband and the doctors and the insurance companies and the midwives (and the poten-

tial grandmothers) did, she kept miscarrying. But somehow, even as her husband suggested, at first gently and then more insistently, that they consider adoption, she avoided the choice he was pushing upon her, and she also avoided despair. She knew that she would eventually have a child, a child of her own, and so she was able to shut out all the voices that yammered around her. And she almost proved those voices wrong, too, by carrying a fetus nearly to term.

So close . . .

But then it died, too, just like all of the others. She could sense the motionlessness inside, the potential that had become merely a weight. She felt the absence in a way she had never known before one could feel an absence. She had always been honest with her husband before. As a couple, they prided themselves on their honesty. But this time she could not bear to tell him the truth. She knew what would happen next, what the doctors would insist, and she didn't want to endure again what she'd endured so many times already. So she prayed, just as, for the first time in her live since she had been a child, she had been praying for a child of her own. And then, just before the next day's already scheduled prenatal appointment, which she had thought she would have to break so as not to reveal what had occurred, she felt movement within.

But the movement felt more violent than any kicking the baby had done before, prior to what she convinced herself was only a brief nap. She could feel things ripping and tearing inside, and her spotting became bleeding, enough to frighten her. She went alone to the doctor, not wanting to have to be forced to tell her husband what was going on, and when the doctor gave her a sonogram, he saw no heartbeat. He was baffled, and did not know what to tell her. Nothing had prepared him for this. How could there be movement with no heartbeat?

And then, perhaps in response to the sonogram's invasion, the movements increased.

The woman clutched her stomach and screamed, and as the doctor rushed to his wall of supplies to find a way to relieve her agony, the baby chewed its way out of its mother's womb and poked its head through the skin of her stomach. The doctor, even in the midst of the insanity of the event, reacted reflexively, reaching for the child, instinctively wanting to see that, whatever else was incomprehensible about this moment, it was healthy, not able to see the dead skin hidden by the blanket of blood. The child snapped at him as it wriggled free from its dying mother, and the doctor backed away hurriedly, tripping over his own feet, and then fled the room.

Or perhaps he should only attempt to flee. Perhaps after he loses his balance, instead of righting himself and continuing on, he should fall to the floor, and the child, the thing, should fall from the mother, now dead atop the examining table, and begin to feast

upon the doctor. Perhaps that would make more dramatic sense.

However the scene ends, we should keep in mind that it is a scene which with many variations played itself out around the world that day, as the fruits of failed pregnancies suddenly resulted not in dead babies, but in undead ones. But neither this mother nor this doctor could know that. But even if they had known, what other choices would they have made? There was barely escape from the plague without; how could there be escape from the plague within?

So let's just say that this particular baby struggled its way free from its mother's guts, and slid off the examining table, whether onto the warm doctor or onto the cold linoleum to be decided later. What will happen next would remain the same regardless.

It crawled out of the examining room into an office which by then had been emptied by the (bloodied or unbloodied) doctor's screaming. It pulled and wriggled its way down the street, unable to move in any way other than that of a real baby. Perhaps someday, if it survived, it would learn to walk, though physically it would never have more than a newborn's form, but for now, it crawled, making slow progress. People on the street gave it a wide berth, the trail of blood that it left behind itself clear warning of its intent, and though it grew frustrated, that frustration could not propel it quickly enough to overtake any of them.

But then a dog came over, sniffing, curious, unafraid, and close enough for the zombie child to grab hold of its front paws. It yanked at them roughly, breaking the dog's front legs. As the animal squealed and struggled vainly to retreat, the baby pulled itself forward along the length of the dog's trembling body to reach and snap the back legs as well. The baby had no teeth as yet, and so could not chew its way into the animal's belly as its tiny brain desired, so it had to punch its way in with small but strong fists and suck on the red, raw meat it had exposed.

As the child feasted, it felt itself pulled away from its orgy of blood, and before it could react to this affront, tossed through the air. It bounced off the back wall of a small cage, and as it attempted to reorient itself and go on the attack once more, the door slammed shut.

The woman whose dog had just been killed had a cage in which she would transport her dog to the park each day in the back of her van, and the zombie baby found itself trapped within. It beat blindly at the sides of the cage, but the metal was too strong for it to bend.

The woman smiled as she drove it back to her home. The reason she had a dog, she always knew, was because she could not have a child, and now, most unexpectedly, she *had* a child. She saw it as a gift from God. She did not care that it was dead, or that she would obviously have to be very, very careful or she would end up dead herself. She would love it for the rest of her life, even after the world came through the other side of this plague. She would tell

no one of it, so that when all the other zombies were rounded up and destroyed, her baby would remain safe. She would love it and care for it as long as she lived.

But she would never let it out of its cage.

Well . . . maybe that *won't* turn out to be one of the stories worth telling. Right now, in the midst of it all, it seems somewhat pointless to even bother creating stories, but I know that someday the world will want to make sense of what we went through together, and someone will have to step forward to do that. That someone might as well be me. So I at least have to try.

One thing I've been realizing, as my subconscious mind weaves life into art (well, let others decide later if there's any art there) is that all zombie stories are true. Also, no zombie stories are true. Because, you see, there are no zombie *stories* until I write them. The universe has no opinion of us. No matter how much we want to pretend, real life does not contain the quality of story. No arcs, no morals, no meaning. Life is what we make of it.

And I was finally, after a lifetime of typing, in a position to make something of it.

It had been a week since I had taken refuge in this place. Undoubtedly, whoever was inside the armored car had to have been there nearly as long, or he would not still be alive. However long the person had been trapped, he—or she, I shouldn't forget there was a chance that it could be a she—surely needed food by now. And it was up to me to help.

I rushed back to the candy machine that I had long since cracked open, having abandoned the comforting illusion of order that dropping change in the slot had earlier brought me, and filled my pockets with pretzels, beef jerky, soda, and whatever else could fit. The cans, cold through the cloth of my jacket, reminded me that the city's electricity still worked, which had to be a good sign, right? Somewhere out there the wheels of industry kept turning, and human beings had to be the ones turning them. Or so I hoped. I'm afraid I didn't understand enough about technology to know for sure. I'm not that kind of writer. I'd research that after what I told myself I had to do, if there was an after.

I ran down to the ground floor and paused at the far end of the hallway that led to the main entrance, back enough from the gates so that though I could make out the foot traffic, I could not be easily seen. I watched as the zombies moved in their random patterns and waited for the street ahead to clear. There would come a moment, I was sure, in which nothing stood between me and the armored car, and no one hovered close enough to catch me even if I was noticed.

And then, trying not to think too much about it, I ran. It was not a pretty thing, as I am a writer, not a runner. Those two roles cohabit rarely, and certainly not in me. I am ashamed to say that it was not courage that propelled

me clumsily on. It was loneliness that had overcome my fear, not altruism.

When I was closer to the armored car than I was to the library's front door, I suddenly thought—what if that hadn't been a living person I had seen staring back at me through that narrow window? What if the guard had died in the crash and was now himself a zombie, and the face was that of something struggling to get out and unable to figure out how . . . and hungry?

It was too late to dwell on that for more than an instant, because out of the corner of an eye, I could see a shuffling form. As I ran more quickly, soda sloshing, the thick back door of the armored car was raised in front of me, and I dove in. The door slammed shut behind me and I turned my head quickly to see that, yes, thankfully, I was visiting someone still alive. The man in the stained guard uniform locking the door looked far the worse for wear than I did, but he was still a man. The air hung heavy with sweat, but after someone has lived in the back of a small truck for a week, I guess I was lucky I could stand it at all.

I lay there, breathing heavily, feeling drained as much from the tension as the exertion, and did not protest as the guard patted me down. I knew what he was looking for, and was just thankful at this juncture that he was eating my food instead of attempting to eat me. He snapped a huge chocolate chip cookie in half and shoved both pieces in his mouth, then popped a soda, which exploded across his face thanks to my mad dash. But he wasn't angry, as he surely would have been back in the old days of only a week before. He just laughed, and took a long pull from the can.

"Thanks," he said, wiping the crumbs and foam from his face. "I don't think a soda has ever tasted this good. And as you might guess, I haven't had many reasons to laugh in a while."

I nodded and forced a smile. I was glad to see him, to know that I wasn't alone, but I wasn't happy about the fact that I'd had to come to him, rather than the reverse, to do it.

"Why are you still here?" I said, a little too terse, considering what should be joyful circumstances. "Once you knew I was inside, why didn't you make a break for the library? That place is like a fortress."

He swiveled clumsily about and showed me his right foot, the ankle of which twisted at an ugly angle.

"I'd never have made it with this," he said. "Once we flipped, and I felt the snap, I knew that it was all over for me."

"But you have to try, Barry," I said. He started when I called him by name, so I pointed at his ID badge, still hanging from his chest pocket. "I didn't want to feel responsible for you starving out here, so I brought food, but it's too risky to do more than once. You can't expect me to continue supplying you. And you can't last forever in here alone."

"I didn't plan on lasting forever." He shrugged. The bags under his eyes shrugged with him. "Would have been nice, though. But better starved to

death than eaten to death. I'll admit I expected to end up with a bigger coffin. But this one will have to do."

"No," I said suddenly and firmly, surprised at myself even as I blurted it out. "I'm not going to let that happen. We ought to be able to get you up those steps and into the library if we work together. I can distract them. They don't move that fast."

"Faster than me," he said wearily.

His expression was a defeated one, but I knew better than to accept it as irreversible. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that people want to live.

"We've got to try," I said. "You don't want me to have come this far for nothing. I ought to at least get a chance to save your life."

He laughed, which I considered progress. I peered out the small window in the rear door, back up the steps of the library to safety. The front gates looked infinitely far away. I was stunned that I had survived the first leg of the journey. But I knew that regardless of how treacherous it seemed, I was going back. If I was going to die, it was going to be in that library, or at the very least trying to get back to that library, and not in the rear of an armored car. Barry might have been willing to settle for a coffin of that size, but mine had to be a little larger.

And contain the complete works of Shakespeare besides.

Barry had not answered, but it was as if we had made a silent decision. We watched and waited, too weary for small talk (which we both hoped and pretended that there would be time for later), too weary for anything but studying the street, praying for a moment when it would be completely clear, and allow Barry time to hobble to safety. But unlike earlier that day, no such moment came. Each time the random patterns of the shuffling undead had the streets almost emptied, there would always be one lone zombie lingering under a stop light as if waiting for it to change. I didn't really think it could be doing that, responding to the world that used to be, no, not in real life, only in stories maybe, but still, there it was. The lights did not function, and so it stared up at the pole.

Until I grew tired of waiting.

"I'm going to distract him," I whispered.

The guard ordered me not to in one of those voices guards have and grabbed at my arm, but I leapt through the door anyway, and was back on the street before he could do anything about it. Instead of running immediately toward the steps leading up to the door of the library as any sane person would have done, I ran at the light-distracted zombie, prayed for it to notice me before I got too close, then veered away at the last possible instant I knew I could still outrun it. It was pulled along in my wake by its undead desire.

"Now," I shouted back at Barry over my shoulder. "This is your chance. Take it!"

I watched as he tumbled out from the safety of his truck and began hopping,

but I could not spare him any more of my attention after that. A second zombie, perhaps sensing my presence on that street as I imagined only a zombie could (or was that truly only a power of my imagination?), had come around a corner, and now I had to distract two of them. Luckily, even though my lack of anything resembling an athletic past slowed me down, death kept the zombies even slower. As I ran, it seemed to me that they must only catch their prey by surprise, and with persistence, for they did not have speed on their side. I lured them away from the path Barry had to be taking, but when I saw a third zombie appear, I knew that I could tempt fate no longer. There were getting to be too many trajectories for me to calculate to stay alive. I swooped down on the struggling guard, who had just reached the bottom of the steps, and grabbed him by the shoulders, nearly knocking him down.

As I shouted at him to move, I don't think I used any actual words.

We ran a desperate three-legged race together, dodging the undead who slowly began to follow us as I pulled him up step by step, agonizingly slow ourselves. As we neared the door, I could hear the snapping of teeth behind us, and knew that Barry had slowed me down too much. I dove in, pushing him ahead of me, and from my knees slammed the gates shut behind us. Gasping, I stood, looking in awe at the dead flesh that obscured my vision of anything beyond. They glared at us, but we were protected from them. Once we moved more deeply inside the building, they would forget about us, as they had forgotten about all else, and drift away.

We were safe.

We laughed, and there was an hysterical tinge to our laughter, as I imagined there would always be in circumstances where death seemed so close, and yet was repulsed.

And then a zombie who must have snuck through the door while I'd been outside rescuing and doing my supposedly distracting dance reached out from within the library and, with a sickening groan, completely ripped off Barry's injured leg.

Now here's a story that I think I still deserve to tell. I don't know that there are many more like that, stories that I have actually earned. And besides, I'm doing a pretty good job of proving that there isn't much else that I'm good for.

A writer (again, no names please), no longer having access to a human audience, and unable to stop writing, begins to write stories suitable only for the undead. He cannot write the love stories he was used to writing, because the zombies know nothing of love. He can no longer write stories in which the motivations are based on greed, because zombies know nothing of money. All that is left to him is to write stories of action and adventure (well, boring and repetitive action and adventure), because zombies know of that, in their own special but limited way. Since the

zombies know of only one thing, all the stories sound the same, but this writer, he figures that it doesn't matter, because if zombies have one trait, it is patience.

My agent, on the other hand, tells me that my readers do *not* have patience, and certainly have no desire to read of writers. The only people who want to read of writers, or so he tells me, are other writers. But what does he know? Anyway, at this time, I probably have no agent. And I say this not the way a beginning writer in search of an agent does. I say this because my agent has probably been eaten.

Which some might say isn't a bad end for an agent.

But since he is dead and my fictional writer's readers are also dead, we might as well just move on.

The stories this writer writes all follow the same pattern, as zombies are easily entertained. They begin with the sense that there is walking meat nearby. And then it is spotted. And then it is chased.

And then the walking meat is no longer walking, for the living is inside the dead.

The writer types out many variations of this outline, because that is all that he knows how to do, and when there are no more stories to tell, he's going to continue to tell them anyway. Some of his tales are set on city streets. Some are on country roads. Still others take place in zoos, in shopping malls and schools and airplanes. But whatever the setting, at their heart, they are all the same.

Shuffle.

Shamble.

Shuffle a little more quickly.

Run. (Well, as zombies run anyway.)

Run, run, run.

Eat!

Eventually, this writer, who is obviously not very self-aware, or he would have given up long ago—or if not long ago, at least once his audience had deserted him—realizes that he has written hundreds of such stories. But now that the reams of paper are stacked high next to his manual typewriter (because he refused to let the fall of civilization keep him from his appointed rounds), he had no idea what to do with them. There were no zombie magazines in which to publish them, no zombie bookstores in which they could be sold.

At least, not yet, he thinks.

And so he decides he must go out into the street, the street which he had avoided for so long, and declaim his stories. He expected that this would be the end of him, and he was ready for it. After all, a lion tamer may stick his head into a lion's mouth for a brief moment, but let him attempt to read "Hamlet" while so inserted and all will be lost. But he had been too alone for too long, and without an audience even longer. Whatever was to happen had to be better than what had happened so far.

But when he actually begins his readings, out in the middle of an intersection that hadn't known a car for years, he was pleasantly surprised. Zombies gathered and approached him, but they only came to a certain point, and then came no further. As he read, they stood

about him in a circle and seemed to listen. (Well, he could pretend that about those that had ears, at least.) So he did not stop reading, even as he grew hoarse. He felt fulfilled. He believed that he had at last found the one, true audience he had been seeking his entire life.

But then he realizes that he is getting to the end of the stories that he has brought along with him, and encased in a circle of the dead, as it were, there was no opening in the crowd for him to get back to the additional manuscripts that remained in his hiding place back inside. So when he gets to the end of the last story in his hands, he begins all over again.

The zombies begin to growl. They may like the repetitiveness of theme, but they do not like the repetition of actual stories. He tries to back away, but there is nothing behind him but more of the undead. They move forward, and their circle closes tightly around him until it is difficult for him to breathe from the weight of them. And as they start to tear him to quivering shreds, he has just enough time to think, "Everyone's a critic—"

—before he has no more time in which to think.

But no. That's not right either.

Because even though the ending is horrifying, and the writer's fate undeserved (though I can think of a few publishers who might wish that all writers ended up that way), there's still a moral to the telling of the tale. Zombies are a force of nature, and forces of nature do not come equipped with morals. Forces of nature do not come packaged with a purpose, a message, or a reason. They just *are*. Which is why the guard was suddenly dead, destroyed just when we thought we'd gotten back to safety.

Or maybe . . . maybe the one thing that forces of nature can share with fiction is that they often bring along with them a sense of *irony*.

We would have heard the zombie that had slipped in during my trip outside coming toward us if we had not been laughing so loudly after our return to the supposed protection of the library. Perhaps a force of nature cannot allow such joy to continue without a response. We were hysterical with relief, slapping each other on our backs as we extricated ourselves from our heap on the floor, and so I didn't even realize that anything unplanned was happening until the guard's laughter turned to a howl of pain.

I sprung away from him to see that Barry's right leg was no longer his. It was in the zombie's hands, dripping blood. The guard kept screaming while clawing at his spurting leg, which spilled more blood than a body should be able to lose and still have the screaming continue. There was nothing I could do for him, no way to save him. Even if I was able to tie off the leg, to stop the bleeding, he would be one of them soon, and after *my* leg. I knew what I had to do. I hoped that he was too dazed from loss of blood to realize what was coming.

I helped him stand on his remaining

foot. His moaning was by then barely audible, and he was nearly unconscious, which made what I was about to do easier.

I opened the gate that protected us from the few zombies still milling about at the top of the stairs, and pushed him into the midst of them. For a brief moment, he surged with more energy. He mustered a scream, but then the undead began to tear him apart, and the screaming stopped.

While they were distracted in their feeding, I was able to step back from the door without fear that any of them would enter. But still, I kept my eye on them at all times as I circled around the zombie inside that had stolen our rescue from us. It was intent on its snack, chewing on the leg that had broken in the first place to start the chain of events that led us to this horrible event. So it didn't notice me at all as I rushed at it from behind and shoved it out to join his fellows. As I slammed the gate again, this time hopefully not to be opened again until the Earth shifted on its axis once more, I could see that it showed no sign of even having noticed that anything had happened. He just continued attacking the leg of the man I had gotten killed.

See, in a story, this would never have turned out that way. In a story, which has to make sense, which had to provide rewards for its journey, or else we wouldn't call it "story," Barry would have lived, but life does not often promise such rewards, and when it does, rarely delivers. In a story, the two of us could have struggled to make a life for ourselves here until the world woke from this zombie dream and brought rescue, or until we found a way to make contact with the enclave of civilization that I'd know—well, at least in a story that I'd know and hope—would be out there. Fiction would have given us both a better end.

Unfortunately, I am a better writer than God chooses to be.

For it does not seem as if either rescue or solace will be found. I no longer even think it possible.

No one answers the e-mails I send out on the intermittent days I am even able to send them. No one posts updates to the Web sites I used to visit. In fact, day by day, sites that I had previously been able to visit are gone. I have grown so used to error messages that life itself seems an error message.

With each part of the Web that vanishes, I imagine that a part of the real world has gone as well. When it all goes, I will be alone.

Well, not entirely alone. I will still have my friends. Shakespeare is here. And Frost. And Faulkner and Austen and Carver and Proust. All telling me of the worlds in which they lived. Worlds that continued to exist only because I am still here to read about them. I've always known that fact, and the lesson it taught me is that *my* world will not continue to exist unless someone is there to read about it.

That is why I have been creating these stories. That's why I've always created stories. But I can't do it any

longer. I see that I have lived too long, have lived through the time of my usefulness out to the time beyond stories. I could keep trying to tell them, but what would be the point of that? It's not worth remaining in a world without readers, and I doubt that you still exist.

My world can survive *my* death. But it cannot survive *yours*.

Art for art's sake was never what I was about. Art alone was never enough.

So I'm going to stop writing.

And I'm going to start praying.

Prayer.

I've tried it.

And it just isn't working for me.

But it does plant the seed for one last story.

I give you my word. And this time, you can *believe* my promise.

After the world went to Hell, a priest who had been traveling hurried back to his flock so that they could still make it into Heaven.

He didn't make it home alive, the same way most of the world didn't make it home alive as the disease began to spread. But he made it home.

Newly dead (the reason does not matter), he walked through the night, a stranger to exhaustion, shuffling along the highway toward his church as cars sped by (speeding more quickly when they saw him) filled with passengers in search of a freedom they would never find. By the time he entered his small town, having been on the move for the better part of a week, it was Sunday, and the members of his congregation had made their way uncertainly to their church. They knew what had been going on in the world, that it was the stuff of Revelations come at last, and since they knew that their priest had headed to New York for a conference, they assumed he was dead, and they did not expect to see him again. But they also knew that it was Sunday, and this was where they should be.

They were all sitting quietly in their pews, wondering whether one of them should step forward and stumble through the service, when the priest himself stumbled in. No one spoke. No one fled as he assumed his usual place, even though it was clear what he had become. Because they had faith.

(Something which I do not have.)

He tried to lead them in prayer, though perhaps "tried" is not the best word, as it implies volition, and he was operating on habit and tropism and half-forgotten dream, but regardless, the words would not come, as neither his mouth nor his brain were suitable for speech any longer. So the parishioners prayed on their own, standing and sitting and singing and speaking and remaining silent as they had always done, for they knew well what God expected of them. Their priest growled before them, a deep rumble that some of them felt was not all that much different than what they had already been hearing for so many years.

When it became the proper time for the congregation to receive commun-

ion, the priest stretched out his hands, and with the fingers that remained to him, gestured them all forward. They did not hesitate. They filed toward him, not frightened by his yellow eyes, or the pallor of his skin, or the fact that beneath his shredded clothing his flesh was shredded as well. They felt themselves in the presence of a miracle, and one does not argue with a miracle. They only knew that it was the usual time of the week to be made one with God.

When his flock was lined up before him, the priest seemed to freeze. The momentum of his faith had gotten him this far, but that did not mean that he was capable of much in the way of independent action and thought. As he paused, he was vaguely aware that something more active was expected of him, but the fog refused to lift so that he could see what that something was. After death, if one goes through the motions of life, it can only be by traversing the ruts one had chosen in life. He sensed somehow that he was expected to feed them, but he had not prepared. He had no consecrated wafers with which to proceed, no consecrated wine with which to wash away sins.

So he fed them of his flesh and quenched them with his blood.

He pulled open the tatters of his shirt and tore mouth-sized gobbets from his chest. One by one, he dropped them on waiting tongues, mumbling incoherently each time he did so. Then each of his congregants went back to his or her life, and as they had been promised, knew life eternal.

And as for the priest, he remained in his sanctuary, and fed the dwindling members of his flock each Sunday, until no flesh remained with which he could do so. But by that time, it didn't matter, as there were none left who required salvation.

And there you have it—the last tale I'm ever going to tell.

The last story...

I never thought I'd ever consider a story and judge it to be the last. I thought I'd die in the middle of telling a tale. But now... why bother? The telling of tales is through. And I, too, am almost through. Let it be the last story, and let it be told by the last man.

The candy machines are empty now, and I've resorted to licking the empty wrappings that I'd previously abandoned. All that's left in the soda machine are a few cans of grape. I've long ago gone through the desks of the missing (why can't I think dead?) workers and found every last candy bar and cracker. Electricity is random, and water has slowed to a trickle, which means that the world beyond this one is sending signals to me that it is running down. Entropy is rising. Soon I will be out of both food and water, and my only choices will be...

Do I die because I no longer have anything left to eat?

Or because I let myself be eaten?

There seems to be little difference between the two. Whether I choose death by action or death by inaction, I will have still chosen death. I have been backed into a corner. I guess I should consider that is a good thing, because it means that I will not be a victim in my own death. I will be a participant.

When I go (which will not be long, or else my choice will be taken from me), will I be the last? Isolated as I am, I can't tell. I'll never know. I guess that each of us, wherever we are, will appear to be the last to ourselves. And if we appear to be the last, then we are the last.

But if by some miracle, I am not the last man telling the last story, if there are others who someday read these words, who have managed to restore a civilization to this planet currently hovering between life and death, think of me from time to time as you go about your day. Think of us. I lived in a time of no hope, feeling there was no life outside my own, and with no new life to follow.

I wish that you could know this time, as I have known the times before my own. I wish that I could trust that you would be there to someday read these words, even if you are not human, even if you must be a visitor who travels to our world a million years from now to discover what exists on the third planet from the sun, and all you find is the shuffling undead, the same ones I have known, still hunting, still searching, much like we were, only eternal. Will you be able to figure out who we once were, or will you merely sit in awe and wonder at how such shambling creatures could have built this world and then seemingly forgotten how they brought it into existence? If you come here, to this building, to this vault, to these pages, you will know. It is important that you know.

In any case, I do not think you will be coming, not from this world or any other. I may be imaginative, I may be a dreamer, but I am unable to live in either imagination or dream.

And so I will be gone soon. With my strength fading, and with your future existence to read these words in doubt, I do not know why I struggle to write them.

Well . . . maybe I do.

I *can't* stop writing.

Well . . . I can.

It will be when I stop living.

And with strength finally fading . . . it is time for me to do both.

I cannot write. I can barely think. I can only choose.

So goodbye.

In case you surprise me, and come to read these words, let's leave it like this:

Did I starve? Was I eaten? As long as I do not write the words, I did neither, and continue to exist, in the eternal present, forever alive, as immortal as the undead. I can be with you still.

Whoever you are, whenever you are, as long as you are, *if* you are . . . keep me alive.

So perhaps I was wrong.

Perhaps art alone, art for art's sake, *can* be enough. It feels enough now, as I make my choice.

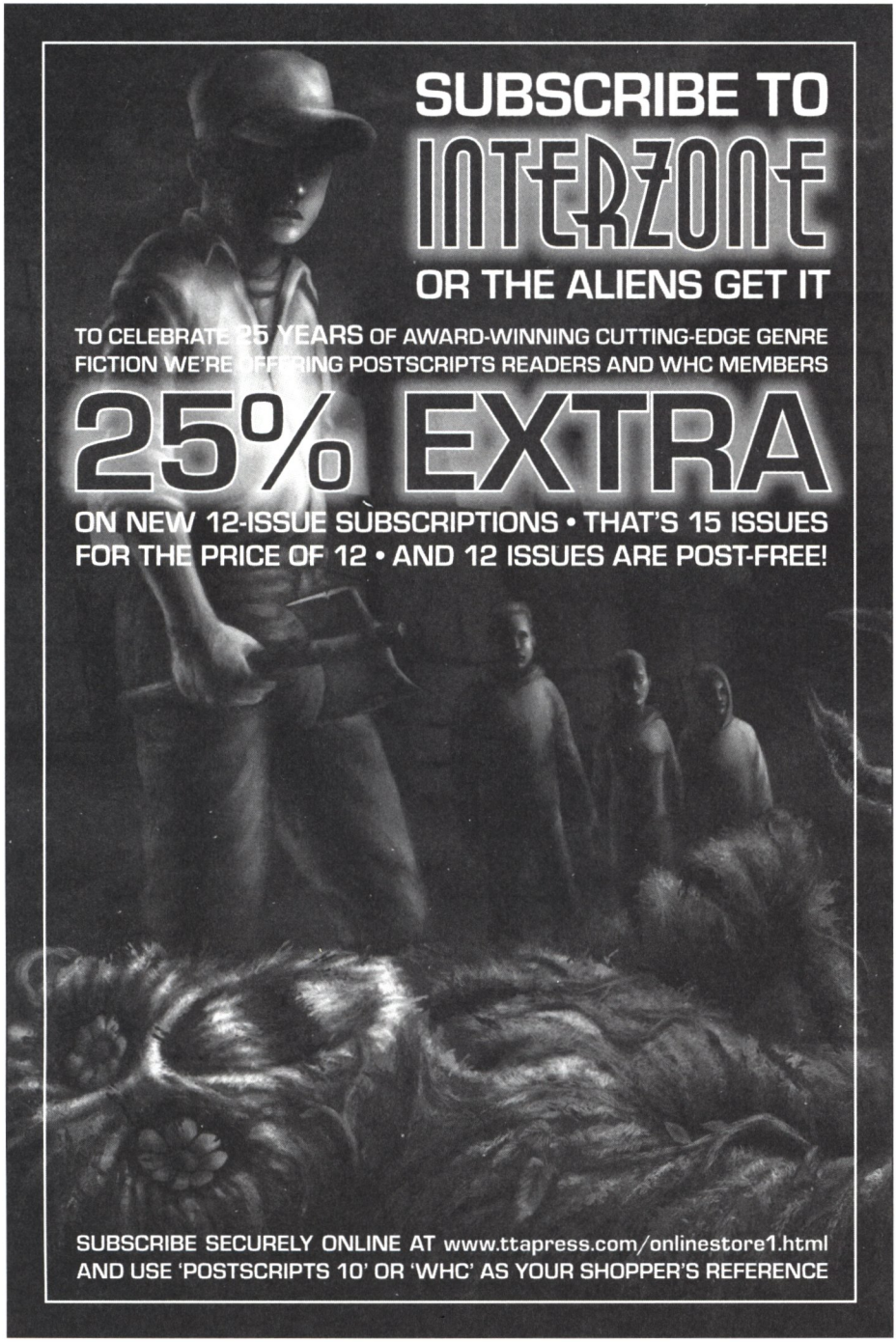
Meanwhile, our man with a stick and plot of land, who toiled on the other side of the globe and slept under different stars (remember him, the one who knew nothing of our roaring earthquakes, rising floods, or falling towers?), wakes before dawn from troubling dreams.

While he'd slept, the strange visions had made sense to him, but once he was awake, it all slipped away. When he rose from his straw mat and woke his son and tried to tell the boy what he had seen, because dreams were meaningful to his people, he remembered nothing of libraries or zombies or the taste of grape soda. All that came to him was the uncomfortable feeling of having been in the heart of a big city, which to him was frightening enough.

He had heard of such places, but knew of no one who had ever visited one, and he was glad that he instead had been born here, with his patch of earth and the mountains that surrounded it, with his stick and a son whom he needed to teach how to survive with little more than that.

But that was enough. Why would anyone require more? A wife for him and a mother for the boy, perhaps . . . but more? Those would be riches he did not need.

Tomorrow, in fact, if asked to remember his dream of the previous morning, *this* morning, he would answer, "What dream? I remember no dream." And, though some might choose to judge him and his way of life, he is at peace with the universe as he knew it, and he will go on as before, content, fulfilled, and utterly and happily oblivious to the fact that half a world away, almost the last man on Earth believed that he had finished telling almost the last stories. ⊠


SUBSCRIBE TO
INTERZONE
OR THE ALIENS GET IT
TO CELEBRATE 25 YEARS OF AWARD-WINNING CUTTING-EDGE GENRE FICTION WE'RE OFFERING POSTSCRIPTS READERS AND WHC MEMBERS
25% EXTRA
ON NEW 12-ISSUE SUBSCRIPTIONS • THAT'S 15 ISSUES FOR THE PRICE OF 12 • AND 12 ISSUES ARE POST-FREE!
SUBSCRIBE SECURELY ONLINE AT www.ttapress.com/onlinestore1.html
AND USE 'POSTSCRIPTS 10' OR 'WHC' AS YOUR SHOPPER'S REFERENCE

POSTSCRIPTS

AUTUMN 2007

NUMBER 12

ISBN 978-1-906301-09-5

9 781906 301095

AUTUMN 2007
NUMBER 12
PAPBERBACK £6/$12
SIGNED HARDCOVER £25/$50