

Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

Quentin S. Crisp
Paul Di Filippo
Hal Duncan
Christopher Fowler
Robert T. Jeschonek
Marly Youmans
and others

WINTER 2007
NUMBER 13

PAPERBACK £6/\$12
SIGNED HARDCOVER £25/\$50

ISBN 978-1-906301-18-7



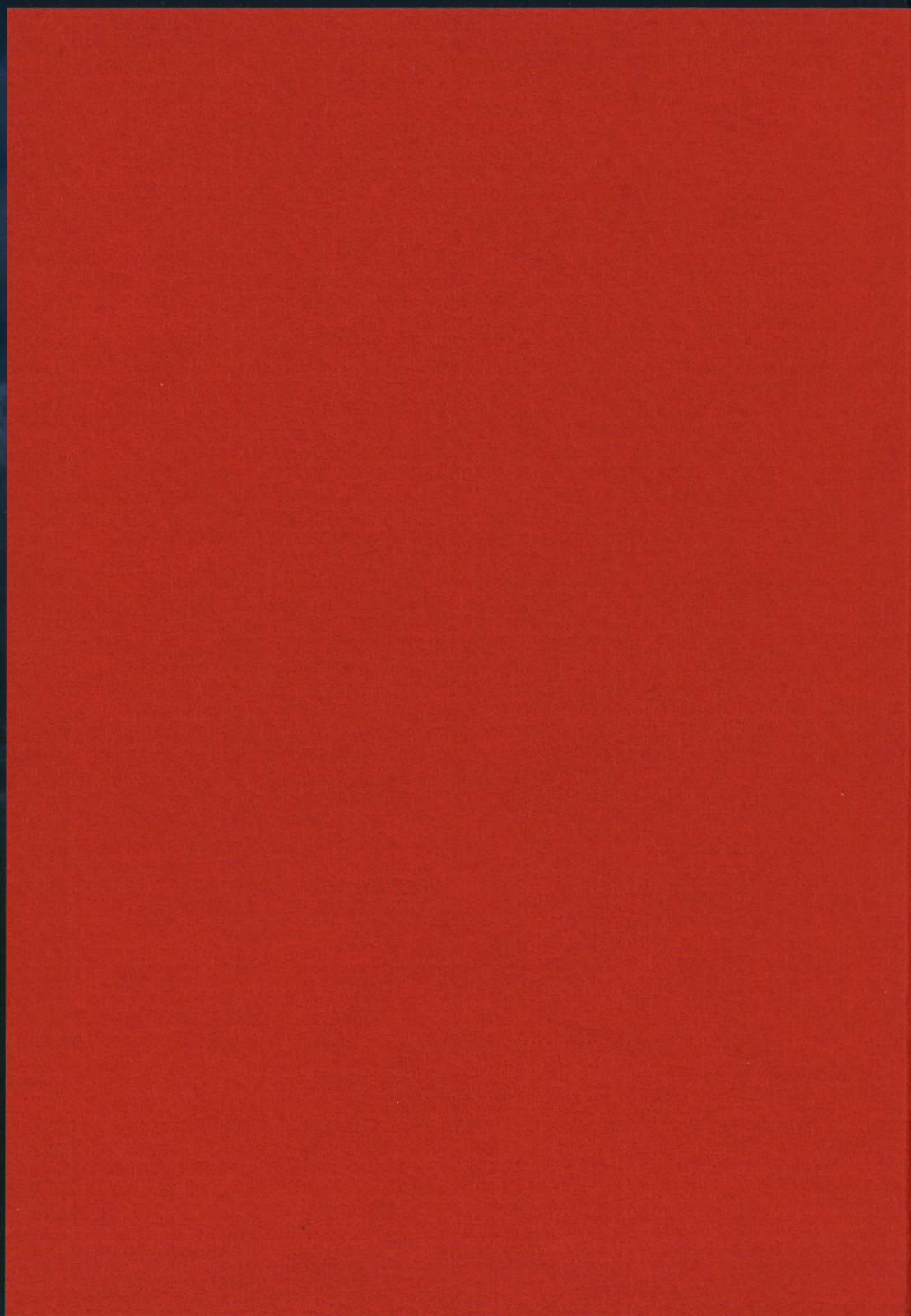
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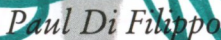
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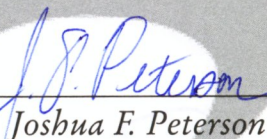
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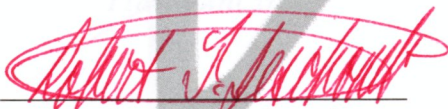
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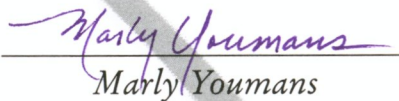
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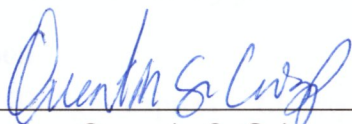
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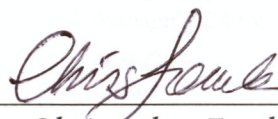
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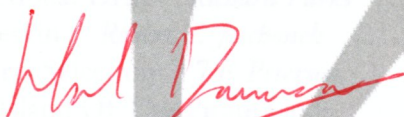
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Quentin S. Crisp



Christopher Fowler



Hal Duncan



Graham Joyce

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HARDCOVERS SIGNED BY THE AUTHORS.

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Cover art by *Les Edwards*.

Interior illustrations by *Ben Baldwin* (pages 34 & 76),
and *Duncan Long* (page 127).

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.*)

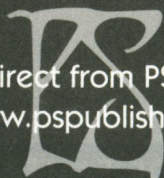
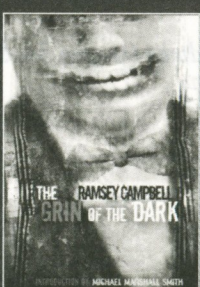
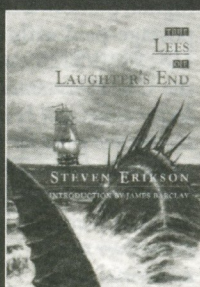
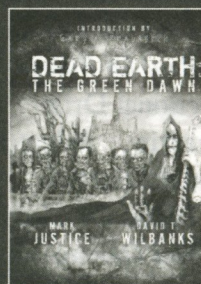
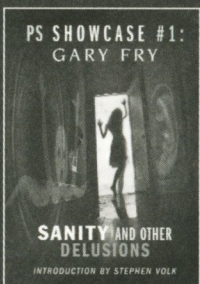
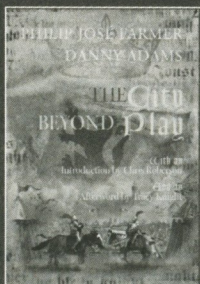
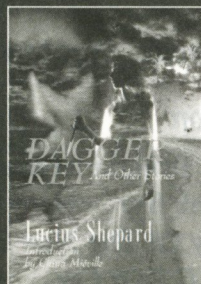
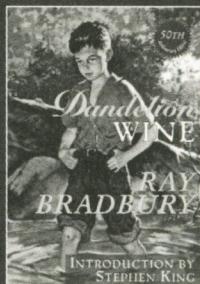
Printed in the UK
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THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

PS PUBLISHING

YOUR PASSPORT TO STRANGE PLACES



Available direct from PS Publishing
<http://www.pspublishing.co.uk/>

Graham Joyce is not known for shying away from speaking his mind (see below). He has just delivered his new (and as yet untitled) novel to Gollancz. Meanwhile, Graham's new YA book, *Three Ways To Snog An Alien*, will be published by Faber next summer.

Editorial

Graham Joyce

Reading is to be encouraged, trumpets the government, and a fresh campaign in schools has earned extensive publicity and the easy support of all parties. How can anyone be against reading? The number of children emerging from primary school unable to read is shameful and a series of initiatives has been launched across the country. Take Hampshire, that useful example: using the book-crossing idea, library authorities have deposited one hundred copies of a classic novel in surprising places (park benches, phone boxes, train carriages etc) so that they may be found and enjoyed by people who might not normally be seen dead doing this filthy reading thing. The chosen novel? Jane Austen's *Persuasion*.

Duh?

I mean, the absolute fuckwittedness of this idea. You'd have to go a long way to beat that for stupidity. Any non-reader finding this book on a train and encountering the splendidly convoluted and mannered—some would say prissy—eighteenth century language would likely hurl it out of the window. When during the French Revolution Marie Antoinette heard that the starving peasants had no bread and advised them to eat cake, she wasn't taking the piss. She was just hopelessly and quaintly out of touch.

I have no argument with wanting to promote Jane Austen. Why, as a writer, I sometimes don my frock-coat and my pince-nez and after a late and leisurely breakfast I might stroll the grounds with my nose pressed against the leaves of a first edition, savouring the sublime prose. But a reluctant reader ain't gonna.

For heaven's sake, why Jane Austen? Why *Persuasion*, which is not even her most accessible novel? Why not something with half a chance of pulling in someone for whom the reading habit does not come naturally but who might read with a hope of being entertained and diverted? Why not a Steven King? A Tolkien? A Neil Gaiman *Sandman* comic? Something fun and hip and happening with words. Alas no fear of that. Our semi-literate hoodie on the park bench is to be regaled instead with the mysterious and higher instructive purposes of *great literature*.

Because I've long been puzzled about why elements of style (which is surface)

have long since been held to encode superior literary value than narrative (which is content) I've made a bit of a study trying to discern these higher purposes. For quite a while I set myself the task each year of reading the short-listed novels for the Booker Award, on the basis of "keeping up". Keeping up with trends, innovations, exciting developments and thrilling new voices, that is. Well, after a decade of this tedious enterprise I concluded that I hadn't found many of those things in the short-lists so I gave up. I did try to "keep up" with the annual winner on exactly the same basis. In that I get excited by fine writing and a fresh voice, I'm no different than any writer. But ultimately, after John Banville's *The Sea*, I also absconded on the winners. I figured I already had enough ponderous adjectives in my own modest store, cheers, fanx, ta. I also figured that a model of creeping narcolepsy wasn't good for me, and that if it was fresh writing I wanted then I should look elsewhere.

That prize, like all awards, is supposed to encourage reading. But the self-nominating grey eminences governing the Booker, a prize largely considered to be the most worthy award in the English speaking world, choose its judges according to the same mysterious, unfathomable and elitist criteria that lead to dainty and unintelligent ideas such as leaving copies of *Persuasion* on a park bench in a rainy climate. We don't know who *chooses* the judges, but we do at least get to know who the judges are. Pictures appear in the broadsheets and every year the judges come to look more like they were selected not to preside over a literary award but to judge the Jam and Chutney section of the Women's Institute annual fête. They certainly don't look equipped with the luminous brief of turning anyone on to books. You see their pinched, literary-caste faces and you want to run screaming. Those people are nothing to do with me, you want to say. Ugh! Get away, you stinky arbiters of chutney and jam.

And are the chutney coterie given criteria to guide their deliberations? As far as I can discern, the strict rule is that the winning book must fall under the category of social realism unless paragraph nine, sub-clause 4(b) the reader is of Commonwealth origin. Rule 14 states that bowel-loosening adjectival superabundance is to be highly rated. Rule 15 that anything with high narrative value is considered neither jam nor chutney and is instantly ruled ineligible.

I'm not sure where these rules are written down but I'm certain of their extraordinary power in discouraging potential readers. I believe that if people are uneducated it's usually through no fault of their own. So let's give the benefit of the doubt to your intelligent hoodie who decides to go in for a lifestyle change. He's seen the light, he's going to read. He picks up say Alan Hollinghurst's Booker prizewinner *The Line Of Beauty*. Now, even though this is meant to be a Henry James pastiche, Hollinghurst hasn't a clue how to plot his three distinct narrative strands, and the things don't plait. Instead of a story, the protagonist treats us to

endless musings and a lot of aesthetic pretentiousness about music, painting and furniture. Worse, we're meant to forgive the glacial pace of the writing because the prose is pleasant. We're told Hollinghurst is a great stylist (disputable: I lost patience with the times I read the tedious qualifiers "seems" and "as if"). But it doesn't matter, because style, apparently, not narrative, is what maketh fine literature.

Brother: chuck the book and keep the hood. They don't really want you.

I'm serious. You see, I know what they secretly want. They being the free purveyors of *Persuasion* on the park bench; they being the shadowy Booker eminences. They want clear, class lines drawn around literature; they want to demark the sacred from the profane; and it is their will that only those who bend the knee may approach the temple. I don't know who *they* are and how *they* got this power, but we should work hard to take it away from them, before they do more damage and stop more people from reading.

Fay Weldon once remarked that she would never win the Booker Prize because her books contained levity. And there you have it. The war declared by gravity on levity. There must be nothing to laugh at. You may wince and sneer and make an ironic snuffle, *a la* Hollinghurst, but most of all you must be earnest, pompous and take yourself really rather seriously. Oh, and that pretty much dispatches all genre, because there is an inherent lack of earnestness in the proposition of genre in the first place; a wry knowingness that invites you to be party to a kind of joke. Genre is like saying: there was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman . . .

No I'm not arguing that genre writing should be taken more seriously. I've said before that anyone who parts with their hard-earned for the cover price of a book is taking it quite as seriously as anyone could want. I'm arguing that we should take this other stuff *less* seriously, and wake up to the damage caused by a vicious, snobbish and spiteful cultural elitism which is all the while pretending to be democratic and genteel.



Coming Soon In Postscripts

In our Issue 14, Spring 2008, some notable stories to look forward to: "Flecks from the Isle of Chrome", a brilliant, offbeat novella triptych by Rhys Hughes; "Blackbird", Robert Reed's cunning account of alien messages flooding down from the skies; "Island Tales", Jeff VanderMeer's intricate legends of the Pacific; and "The World Without Sleep", a ghostly urban dreamwalk by Sarah Monette, one of the hottest new writers in fantasy. And in Issue 15 (Summer 2008), look for a double-sized line-up of SF by many top writers, to mark Worldcon . . .

Of this existentially fraught tale Christopher Fowler says, "Funfairs are meant to excite, but they always left me with a sense of impatience and regret, feelings of lost opportunity and unfulfilled promise, which is where this story comes in. We idealise the concept of shared pleasure, and while a carnival is the perfect vehicle for enjoyment it also inspires darker thoughts. The influence here is obviously Ray Bradbury, a childhood hero whose best tales can drag me, humbled, to my knees. This is part of an ongoing series of stories aimed at capturing different heightened emotional states. The first batch of twenty one new tales is entitled Old Devil Moon and due out this Christmas. I'm not allowed to use the word 'experimental' as I'm told this puts readers off, but . . . you know."

The Twilight Express

Christopher Fowler

The funfair blew in one hot, windy night in early July, while everyone's doors and windows were sealed against the invading desert dust. Billy Fleet knew it was coming when he heard the distorted sound of a calliope drifted faintly on the breeze, but he didn't think then that it might hold the answer to his problem.

He leaned on his bedroom sill, watching the faint amber light move across the horizon of trees, beneath a velvet night filled with winking stars. The country dark was flushing with their arrival. On another night he might have climbed the trellis in his peejays and sat on the green grit of the tarpaper roof to watch the carnival procession, but tonight he had too much on his mind. The fair had travelled from Illinois to Arizona, and somehow made the detour here. There were a few dates yet that weren't played out, small towns with bored kids and fathers jingling chump change, but soon the

carnies would be looking to put down roots before the dying summer cooled the hot sidewalks and families grew more concerned with laying in stores for winter than wasting good money on gimcrack sideshows and freak tents.

Billy turned restlessly under his sheets, wondering what it would take to clear his troubles, and the more he thought, the more desperate he became. His mother would cry, his father would beat him, and then a subtler meanness would settle over his life as friends and teachers pulled away, shamed by his inability to do what was right. It was a town that put great store by self-discipline.

But it wasn't cowardice that would prevent him from pleasing them, it was preservation. He wasn't about to throw his life away just because Susannah's period was late. No matter how hard she pushed, he wouldn't marry her. Hell, he wasn't sure he even liked her much, and would never have gone up

to Scouts' Point if she hadn't complained that all the other girls had been taken there. The entire bluff was crowded with creaking cars, and though the scent of rampant sex excited him, it all felt so tawdry, so predictably small town. He had no intention of staying in Cooper Creek for a day longer than he had to, for each passing moment brought him closer to stopping forever, just as his father had done, and boy, the family had never heard the end of that.

He couldn't just up and leave without money, qualifications, some place to go, and with just three weeks left before his graduation, it was a matter of pride to stay. He imagined the door to a good out-of-state college swinging open, taking him to a bright new future. But by the time summer break was over Susannah's belly would be round as a basketball, and the trap would have closed about him. He knew how the girls in the coffee shop talked, as if finding the right boy and pinning him down was the only thing that mattered. Mr Sanders, his biology teacher, had told him that after babies were born, the male stopped developing because his role in the procreation cycle was over. It wasn't right that a girl who came from such a dirt-dumb family as Susannah should be able to offer him a little dip in the honey-pot and then chain him here through the best years of his life, in some edge-of-town clapboard house with a baby-room, where the smell of damp diapers would cling to his clothes and his loveless nights would be filled

with dreams of what might have been.

There had to be another solution, but it didn't present itself until he went out to the field where the Elysium fun-fair was pitching up in the pale gold mist of the autumn morning, and watched as the roustabouts raised their rides, bolting together boards and pounding struts into the cool earth. There was a shop-soiled air about the Elysium, of too many tours without fresh paint, of waived safety permits and back-pocket accounting. The skills and barkers had not yet arrived, but Billy could tell that they, too, would be fighting for one more season before calling it a day and splitting up to go their separate ways. Funfairs rarely stopped at Cooper Creek; there wasn't enough fast money to be made here, and although the local folks were kind enough to passing strangers, they didn't care to mix together.

Billy sat on the back of the bench and watched as the gears and tracks were laid behind the flats. He saw missing teeth and caked oil, mended brake-bars and makeshift canopies, iron rods bound with wire over rope, and wondered how many accidents had forced the Elysium to skip town in the dead of night. That was the moment he realised he would be able to kill Susannah's baby.

He saw the question as simply one of survival. He had something to offer the world, and the only obstacle that waited in his path was a wide-eyed schoolgirl. As the yellowing leaves tumbled above

his head, Billy felt the first chill decision of adulthood.

The funfair ran its cycle through Labor Day, but only passed by Cooper Creek for a week. He felt sure that convincing Susannah to come with him would be easy, but before that evening he needed to find a way inside the ghost train. He had watched the canvas flaps of hellfire and damnation being put together to form a righteous journey, devil snakes and playing cards lining the tunnel through which the cars would roll. Now he needed to befriend the woman who was helping her old man set up the ticket booth, the one the roustabouts called Molly. He knew how to use seventeen years of healthy boyhood on a thirty five year-old overweight woman. Girls flirt with attractive men, but boys flirt with anyone.

When he approached her, she was bending over a broken step, and all he could see was the wide field of blue cornflowers that covered her dress. He stood politely until she rose, hands on hips, a vast acreage of sun-weather cleavage smiling at him. Her small grey eyes no longer trusted anything they saw, but softened on his face.

“Help you, boy?”

“Ma’am, my name’s Billy Fleet, and I’m raising money for my college education by trying to find summer work. I know how to fix electrics, and it seems to me you need someone to work the ghost train, ’cause you got some shorts sparking out in there, and I ain’t seen no-one go in to repair ’em.”

“What are you, town watchdog? Got nothing better to do than spy on folks trying to earn a decent living?” Molly’s bead-eyes shrank further.

“No Ma’am. I meant no disrespect, I just see you setting up from my bedroom window and know you’re shy a man or two. This town’s real particular about health and safety, and I figure I can save you a heap of trouble for a few bucks.”

The woman folded fat arms across her considerable bosom and rocked back to study him. “I don’t take kindly to blackmail, Billy boy.” Her eyes were as old as Cleopatra’s, and studied him without judgement. “Fairs don’t take on college boys. It don’t pay to be too smart around here.”

“Maybe so, but in this town a fair is a place where a guy gets a rosette for keeping a pig. This is a real *carnival*. It’s special.”

“Ain’t no big secret to it. You take a little, give a little back, that’s all.” She saw the need in his eyes and was silent for a moment. “Hell, if the town is so dog-dead you got to watch us set up from your bedroom at nights maybe we can work something out. Let me go talk to Papa Jack.”

That was how Billy got the job on the Twilight Express.

The night the fair opened, white lights punched holes into the blue air, and the smell of sage and dust was replaced with the tang of rolling hotdogs. Susannah had planned to go with her girlfriends, to shriek and flirt on the opalescent Tilt-A-Whirl, holding down

their skirts and tossing back their hair with arms straightened to the bar, bucking and spinning across the night. She agreed with just a nod when Billy insisted on taking her, and he wondered whether she would really be fussed if he just took off, but he couldn't do that. He couldn't bear the thought of people bad-mouthing him, even though he wouldn't be there to hear it. So he took Susannah to the fair.

He couldn't bring himself to place his arm around her waist, because the baby might sense his presence and somehow make him change his mind. Babies did that; they turned tough men into dishrags, and he wasn't about to let that happen. She wore a red dress covered in yellow daisies like tiny bursts of sunlight, and laughed at everything. He couldn't see what was funny. She was happily robbing him of his life and didn't even notice, pointing to the fat lady and the stilt-walkers, feeding her glossy red mouth with pink floss as if she was eating sunset clouds.

He thought she would want to talk about the baby and what it meant to them, but she seemed happy to take the subject for granted, as if she couldn't care whether there was something growing inside her or not.

At the entrance of the ghost train, Molly watched impassively as he passed her without acknowledgment. Susannah balked and tried to turn aside when she reached the steps to the car. "No, Billy, don't make me go. It's dark in there. Let's take the rope-walk instead."

"Don't make a big deal of it, Susan-

nah, the ghost train's a few devils and skeletons is all." He had stood inside the ride beside the flickering tissue-inferno, breathing in the coppery electric air, watching the cars bump over soldered tracks that should have been scrapped years ago, lines that could throw a rider like a bronco.

She saw the pressure in his eyes and gave in meekly, took her ticket and bowed her head as she passed through the turnstile, as if she was entering church. The car was tight for two adults; he was forced to place his arm around her shoulder. Her hair tickled his forearm. She smelled as fresh-cut as a harvest field. With a sudden lurch, the car sparked into life and a siren sounded as they banged through the doors into musty darkness.

He knew what was coming. After a few cheap scares of drifting knotted string and jiggling rubber spiders, the car would switch back on itself and tilt down a swirling red tunnel marked Damnation Alley, but just before it dropped into the fires of hell it would swing again, away to the safer sights of comically dancing wooden skeletons. The track was bad at the switch; a person could tip out on the line as easy as pie. The next car would be right behind, and those suckers were heavy. Papa Jack had fallen into a bourbon bottle a couple of nights back, and told him about a boy who had bust his neck when the cars had stalled in Riverton Fields, Wichita, a few seasons back. The Elysium had hightailed it out of town before their Sheriff could return

from his fishing trip, had even changed its name for a couple of years. A second accident would get folks nodding and clucking about how they suspected trouble from the carnie folk all along. He would make sure Susannah didn't get bruised up, he wouldn't want that, but she had to take a spill, and land good and hard on her stomach.

As the car hit its first horseshoe she gripped his knee, and he sensed her looking up at him. He caught the glint of her eyes in the flashbulbs, big blue pupils, daybreak innocent. They tilted into the spiralling tunnel and she squeaked in alarm, gripping tighter, as close now as when they had loved. The moment arrived as they reached the switch. The car lurched and juddered. All he had to do was push, but she was still holding tightly onto him. In an effort to break her grip, he stood up sharply.

"Billy— what—"

The car twisted and he tipped out, landing on his back in the revolving tunnel. Susannah's hands reached out toward him, her fingers splayed wide, then her car rounded a black-painted peak and was gone. The cylinder turned him over once, twice, dropping him down into the uplit paper fires of damnation, scuffing his elbows and knees on the greased tracks.

And then there was nothing beneath his limbs.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself in the fierce green fields behind the house. Judging by the smell of fresh grass in the morning air, it was

late spring, but he was wearing the same clothes. The sun was hot on his face, his bare arms. The voice spoke softly behind him. He could only just hear it over the sound of the crickets and the rustling grass.

"Oh Billy, what a beautiful day. If only it was always like this. I remember, I remember . . ." She was lying in the tall grass near the tree, running a curving green stem across her throat, her lips. Her print dress had hiked around her bare pale thighs. She stared into the cloudless sky as though seeing beyond into space.

"What have you done with the baby, Susannah?"

"I don't know," she replied slowly. "It must be around here somewhere. Look how clear the sky is. It feels like you could see forever."

The day was so alive that it shook with the beat of his heart, the air taut and trembling with sunlit energy. It was hard to concentrate on anything else. "We have to find the baby," he told her, fighting to develop the thought. "We went to all that trouble."

He looked up at the sun and allowed the dazzling yellow light to fill his vision. When he closed his eyes, tiny translucent creatures wriggled across the pink lids, as mindless and driven as spermatozoa.

"I forget what I did with it, Billy. You know how I forget things. Will you make me a daisy chain? Nobody ever made me a daisy chain. Nobody ever noticed me until you."

"Let's find the baby first, Susannah."

“I think perhaps it was out in the field. Yes, I’m sure I saw it there.” She raised a lazy arm and pointed back, over her head. Her hair was spread around her head in a corn-coloured halo. She smiled sleepily and shut her eyes. The lids were sheened like dragonfly wings. “I can see the stars today, even with my eyes closed. We should never leave this place. Never, ever leave. Look how strong we are together. Why, we can do anything. You see that, don’t you? You see that . . .” Her voice drifted off.

Her watched her fall asleep. She looked a little older now. Her cheekbones had appeared, shaping her face to a heart. She had lost some puppy fat. Light shimmered on her cheeks, wafted and turned by the tiny shields of leaves above. “I have to go and look, Susannah,” he told her. “There are bugs everywhere.”

“You just have to say the name,” she murmured. “Just say the name.” But her voice was lost beneath the buzzing of crickets, the shifting of grass, the tremulous morning heat.

He rose and walked deep into the field, until he came to a small clearing in the grass. Lowering himself onto his haunches, he studied the ant nest, watching the shiny black mass undulating around a raised ellipse in the brown earth. The carapaces of the insects were darkly iridescent, tiny night-prisms that bustled on thousands of pin-legs, battling each other with antennae like blind men’s canes. He shaped his hands into spades and dug them into the squirming mass of segmented bodies, feeling them

tickle over his hands and wrists, running up his arms. They nipped at his skin with their pincers, but were too small to hurt. Digging deeper until his fingertips met under the earth, he felt the fat thoraxes roll warmly over his skin. Carefully he raised the mound, shaking it free of insects. A baby’s face appeared, fat and gurgly, unconcerned by the bugs that ran across his wide blue eyes, in and out of the pouted lips. Raising the child high toward the fiery summer globe, he watched as the last of the ants fell away, revealing his smiling, beautiful son.

“Tyler,” he said, “Tyler Fleet.”

And he set off back toward his sleeping wife.

“Billy. Billy, you come back.” Her lank hair hung over his face, tickling. Her plucked eyebrows were arched in a circumflex of concern. She had been crying.

“What’s your problem?” he asked slowly, feeling the words in his mouth. He was lying on the cool dry dirt in front of the ghost train ride. A few passers-by had stopped to watch.

“You fell out of the carriage is what’s the problem,” she said, touching his cheek with her fingers. “You cut your forehead. Oh, Billy.”

“I’m fine. Was just a slip is all.” He raised himself on one elbow. “No need to get so worked up.” He rubbed the goose-bumps from his arms.

“I was so frightened in there, I thought I’d lost you, I panicked,” she told him. “Look.” She held up her palm and showed him the crimson dot. “It’s

my blood, not yours. I started late, that's all. I'm not pregnant, Billy. I'm so sorry."

He realised why she had been so unconcerned at the fair. She had been happy to place her trust in him unquestioningly. It had never crossed her mind that things might not work out. He studied her face as if seeing her for the first time. "I'm so sorry," she said again, searching his eyes in trepidation.

"Don't worry," he told her, pulling himself up and dusting down his jeans. "Maybe we can make another one." He offered his arm. "Give me your hand." He sealed his fingers gently over the crimson dot. She pulled him to his feet, surprisingly strong.

Molly looked up as he passed the ticket booth to the Twilight Express. There was no way of knowing what she was thinking, or if she was thinking anything at all. "Hey Billy, Papa Jack wants you to work with him tomorrow night," she told him. "You gonna need to put that money by. The baby'll be back, and maybe next time you'll be ready for him."

Then she went back to counting the change from the tickets.

The moon above the Elysium funfair shone with the colours of the sideshow, red and blue glass against butter yellow, as the calliope played on, turning wishes into starlight.

The Twilight Express was gone. It had been replaced by the Queen Of The South, a Mississippi riverboat ride

where passengers seated themselves on cream-coloured benches and watched as their paddle steamer slipped upriver, not past the real southland of jute factories and boatyards and low-cost housing, but an imagined antebellum fantasy of filigreed plantation houses glimpsed through Spanish moss. The candy-coloured deck looked out on pastel hardboard flats and painted linen skies that creaked past on a continuous roll as birds twittered on the tape loop.

Molly was still here at the Elysium, working the riverboat ride now. She watched him approach without pleasure or sorrow shaping her face. He supposed carnie folk saw too much to care one way or the other. To her, he was just another small-town hick.

"So you didn't leave," she said, sweeping coins from her counter without looking up.

"Did I say I was going?" he asked defensively.

"Didn't have to." She stacked dimes to the width of her hand, calculating the value, then swept them into a bag. "You should bring your wife here."

"You don't know I married her," he said, kicking at the dry dirt in annoyance.

"Don't I, though." Her expression never changed.

He left her counting the gate, and resolved not to bring Susannah to the Elysium. But he did, that Friday night.

He breathed in the smell of hot caramel, sawdust and sugar-floss, fired a rifle at pocked metal soldiers and hooked a yellow duck for Tyler, but

wouldn't go near Molly's ride. "I don't need to go on that," he told his wife, watching as she held their baby to her breast. "Not after last time."

Susannah jiggled the baby and stood looking up at the painted riverbank. "That was more than three years ago, Billy. The Twilight Express is gone. It's not a ghost train anymore. No-one's gonna fall out of the car." She smiled at him bravely, as if it was all that could protect her from his simmering impatience.

Billy still wasn't sure what had happened that time. The accident had changed something between them. All he remembered was that she had freed him and he had elected to stay, but part of him remained regretful. He loved his boy, but the smell of the infant had lingered too long on his skin, reminding him of his responsibilities, removing any pretence of freedom. There was never time to be alone and think things through.

He worked in his uncle's feed store now, and made a decent living, but it wasn't what he had imagined for himself. Sometimes strangers passed through the local bar and talked of harsh cities they'd seen, strange lands they'd visited, and he wanted to beg them; *let me come with you*.

He loved his son, but knew there could have been a better life. The carnival had changed all that. It took a little and gave a little back, that's what Molly had once told him.

"Come with me," said Susannah. "We're a team. We do things together."

"You two are the team. Go have fun," he said, placing a hand firmly in the small of her back, propelling her toward the steps of the Queen Of The South, its minstrel music piped through speakers set on either side of the great painted boat that seemed to move forward but never travelled anywhere. "Show Tyler the Mississippi. I'll be here when you get off."

Susannah passed reluctantly through the turnstile, balancing the boy on her hip. From within the ticket booth, Molly caught his eye for the briefest of moments, and he read something strange in her expression. His wife looked back, the dying daylight shining in her eyes. Her glance pierced his heart. She gave a brief nervous smile and stepped inside the boat. He wanted to run forward and snatch her back before she could take her seat, to tell her he knew what he had and it was real good, but even as he thought this he wondered what else he might be missing, and then the banjo music had started, the plyboard trees were shunting past, and the steamer was gradually lost from view.

The ride was long. He grew bored with waiting and tried to knock a coconut from its shy, even though he knew it was probably nailed in place. When he returned to the ride it had already emptied out, but there was no sign of his young family. He asked Molly where they had gone, but she denied ever having seen them. None of the barkers would be drawn on the subject. He vaulted into the back of the

riverboat ride, clambering through the dusty sunlit diorama, trying to see how they might have escaped through the pasteboard flats, but was pulled out by Papa Jack.

Billy yelled and stamped and made a fuss, finally called the Sheriff, but everyone agreed that Susannah had gone, taking their child with her. People looked at him warily and backed away.

The heatwave broke on the day the Elysium carnival trundled out of town. As rain darkened the bald dirt-patch where the tents had stood, Billy watched the trucks drive off, and knew that he had failed the test.

The lilting sound of the calliope stole away his dreams and faded slowly with them, leaving him under clouded skies, filled with bitter remorse. Twilight died down to a starless night, and there was nothing left inside it now, just the empty, aching loss of what he might have had, who he might have been, and the terrible understanding that he had been looking too far away for the answer to his prayers.

Somewhere in another town, another state, the Twilight Express showed the way between stations for those passengers who were strong enough to stay on the ride.

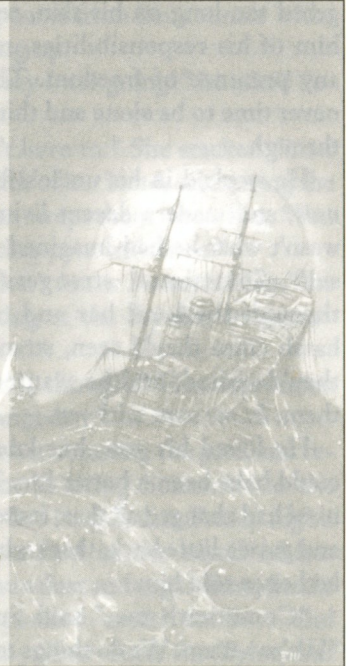


Coming Soon from PS

Hello Summer, Goodbye and I Remember Pallahaxi

Michael Coney, who died in 2005, established himself in the mid-1970s as one of the leading British science-fiction writers of his day, with a string of novels distinctive for their combination of light readability on the surface and much darker inner depths. *Hello Summer, Goodbye*, which first appeared in 1975, is set on a planet whose elliptical orbit creates intense summers and long, cold winters. It tells of the love between Drove and the girl Pallahaxi-Browneyes, whose affair is set against civil war and the dread approach of winter. It's a brilliant depiction of an alien world, with bizarre tidal effects and even stranger native creatures.

I Remember Pallahaxi is the previously unpublished sequel. Set hundreds of years after the events recounted in *Hello, I Remember Pallahaxi* is a mystery: a murder story on one level, and on another level a mystery about the origins of the native aliens. It's also a critique of colonialism—for the human race has arrived on the alien homeworld, with fatal consequences. As lyrical and lovingly envisioned as *Hello Summer, Goodbye*, *I Remember Pallahaxi* not only continues but expands the story of life on a far-flung world where many things are familiar, but others are totally bizarre . . .



Marly Youmans says, “Perhaps the magical island of St. John’s should take credit or blame for ‘Drunk Bay,’ because the story already seems to me like a landscape from dreams, rather than a tale I told. The thing is as dark as the history of slavery on the sugar plantations, and as brightly-colored as a packet of souvenir postcards. The instant my feet crossed the threshold between the Saltpond path and Drunk Bay, I felt the tug of a story on the line that runs down into the unknown.”

Marly’s most recent novel is *The Wolf Pit* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), which won *The Michael Shaara Award*. Her latest fantasy for young adults, set in the Southern Appalachians, is *Ingledove* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), and her first book of poetry was *Claire* (Louisiana State University, 2003). Forthcoming is a limited edition novella, *Val/Orson* (PS Publishing, 2008), as well as poems and stories in magazines and anthologies, including *Argosy Quarterly*, *The Beastly Bride* (Viking), and others.

Drunk Bay

Marly Youmans

Tamarind . . .

The girl who had been christened *Tamarind*—named after a tree that shaded the room where she had been conceived—gave a stretch of pleasure, and a man with rope and machete shifted to watch her from the tip-top of a ladder leaning against a palm. She passed his truck and peered into the bed, heaped with bunches of green coconuts. Glancing up, she saw him turn back to the harvest, his long dreadlocks swinging to one side as he severed a stem of coconuts. She snapped a picture of him with her new camera and walked on.

The day, sparkling with sun, was merely a usual sort of day on the island where the girl called Tamarind had once been only an infinitesimal egg. Her parents had stood under the

bougainvillea that climbed above the French doors, gazing out at tamarind and hibiscus and an abalone bay with mother-of-pearl chips that meant sails, and her mother had said, “If it’s a girl, let’s name her *Tamarind*.” Her father had been amused by his wife’s certainty of conception.

But I was sure, she told the little girl, when she was old enough to tell. “I felt a wave of joy, and that was because of you.”

And now, at last, they had brought her to St. John’s, along with her younger brother, Steve, who had been made at home, in ordinary time and not in paradise.

She had the afternoon to wander; her father would be attending classes in the resort’s conference rooms until 5:00, and her mother had driven Steve to a snorkeling lesson at Cinnamon. It was her first whole day on the island.

The evening before, they had taken the Ouestin ferry from St. Thomas, the long undulating line of the islands deep blue in first dark, with lights coming on. Never had she seen lamps look so much like stars, and as the ferry rocked forward, the real stars came out and were reflected in fragments by the waves. *This is where I began*, she thought, *in this magical place*. Her parents hadn't worried about leaving her for the afternoon; this was, after all, where she belonged. And the Ouestin was as safe as safe could be; the resort was a private world, with shops and restaurants and places to rent a little boat and explore the bay. All she had to do was give the number of her room and her last name; she could buy or rent whatever she liked. Already she had eaten conch fritters with a coconut soda and, finding last summer's suit too tight, had charged a bathing suit printed with leaves and pale red hibiscus blossoms, with a brief skirt for a cover-up.

"Perfect with your dark blue eyes," the owner of the shop had judged. Her fingers had fluttered against Tamarind's shining hair and glanced on her shoulder as the girl stared in the mirror. She was "beautiful, beautiful," the fashionably bleached and sun-dried woman had said. And it was true; Tamarind was as perfectly formed and morning fresh of skin as if she had just been made to please the eye, out in the Ouestin garden. Her mother's voice came back to her—"and every day, I felt another wave climbing up, and I loved you more and more until you were born. That was

like waves, too, but of pain. It felt like giving birth to the world. Your small round head felt enormous, banging to get out. I saw your soaked crown in a mirror that the nurse held. My body was open like the O of a scream. Then all at once you were sluiced into the light—"

Tamarind smiled and shook her head to refuse a ride from one of the Iguana taxis that pattered ceaselessly through the Ouestin lanes. The drivers of the open carts were men from the island, and their musical voices sounded sweet to her ear. She walked by the spot where she had earlier seen iguanas—four-legged ones, not taxis—munching on flowers; she passed the tennis courts and the gazebo and the pool with its islands of trees and waterfalls. On the sand, rows of white lounge chairs waved to her with their little red flags—no, it wasn't that but sunbathers signaling the nearby café for drinks. She slowed to watch the parrots, prying at nuts with their beaks and hard gray tongues, before drifting on. What would she do? So many possibilities . . .

A plump local woman in a Ouestin uniform was clipping round leaves from a sea grape hedge. Tamarind knew what they were—late the night before, the family had eaten at *Miss Lucy's*, on the far end of the island, under the sea grape trees. Twisted through the branches, white Christmas lights had glimmered on waves that washed onto sand only a few feet from their table. She had stuffed herself on flying fish and candied plantains that tasted of

lime and cloves, on okra fungi, pigeon peas and rice, and a bit of fiery mango that made her ask for a glass of milk. She had felt a little let down to find that the fungi was not fungi but only something like polenta with okra added, but she had loved eating under the big sea grape trees with their long bunches of unripe fruit . . . The woman's hand moved lazily, pressing the stems against her thumb with a knife until they came away and were added to a pile pinched between her other thumb and forefinger. The harvest had an oddly ceremonial look, especially since the islander's elaborate headdress of braids lent her a hint of royalty.

"What are you cutting them for?" the girl asked.

"For plates," the woman said; "To make the food pretty."

Tamarind wandered on, then wished that she had asked about the sea grapes—why had they sawed them into a hedge? There seemed to be a constant hacking of plants, as if their growth were so quick and luxuriant that one had to defend the planet from being drowned in a tidal wave of green. She had seen one of the workers shearing a mass of bright red bougainvillea with an electric trimmer. Afterward the papery blossoms sprinkled the pathway. It gave her a pang to see them scattered and wasted; at home the world was cold and dull and without flowers, and would be so for months to come.

When a toddler in a sun suit appliquéd with a jumping frog grasped at her leg, Tamarind squatted and handed

over a horned shell that she had picked up on the beach.

"I'm sorry," the mother said; "Is she bothering you?"

"No bother." Tamarind plucked a sprig of plumbago and tucked it behind the child's ear. "I like kids."

"Well, I guess they must like you, too." Very pregnant, the woman stood with her arms akimbo, feet splayed.

Tamarind could see the curve of a distended bellybutton through the fabric of the maternity swimsuit. The cloth was a shade of green that the makers of catalogues were calling *seafoam* this year.

"Is it a papaya or a mango?" Words popped out while she was thinking about the stem end of a fruit and the belly under the cloth.

"What—" The mother let out a single high note of laughter: *Ab!* "It must be a mango. Unless maybe it's a watermelon. That's what it feels like. But my husband wants a papaya."

The little girl stroked the florets with her fingertips.

"Mango!" The lily pads and pink flowers that topped her sandals shook when she stamped her feet.

"Don't you look pretty? Maybe I'll see you again some time. Okay?" Tamarind was smiling again, waving, her eyes moving from the plumbago in the fine blond hair to a man she had seen waiting tables. She wanted to know what he was saying, and as she came closer she could hear him coaxing the red and yellow parrot, reproaching it for not being more loving: "Why you

acting like you don't know your good friend Matthew, why you acting so ugly like this? Give me a kiss now, give me a kiss, come on—"

Carrying armfuls of bird-of-paradise and the blooms called *flamboyant*—clusters of orange and yellow and parrot red—a woman approached her on the path.

"Where are you going with those?"

"To decorate the ladies' rooms. Everything must be so beautiful, even the toilet." She raised her eyebrows, and the girl laughed.

Tamarind wanted to tell this islander with the dozens of braids and high cheekbones that she, too, was beautiful. But a shyness rose up, stopping her mouth, and she walked on. Anyway, it was all lovely here—ridiculously so.

She paused to retrieve a blossom lying in the grass. She stared at the whorl of lavender-pink, rose at the heart. How lovely it was—the perfection of the pinwheel, with its slight curl at one side of each petal.

"What is it?" Her voice was only a whisper.

"That's frangipani. *Plumeria*. The Buddhist temple flower."

She looked up, startled but ready to be pleased. The young man standing before her was handsome, remarkably so—as excessively good-looking as the whole island seemed to be. Blue-eyed, with fair hair and bronze skin, he had the kind of strong jaw and sharp-cut features that seemed to belong in the realm of movies. He was wearing a pair of the stylish black swim trunks with

scarlet piping that she had seen displayed in a shop window earlier in the morning.

"And that flower on your—on your very attractive little swimsuit—is *hibiscus schizopetalus*."

She blushed; was he laughing at her?

"How do you know?"

He came closer, examining the cloth until she blushed again.

"The petals, see? They're so deeply curved—why are you blushing?—and *schizopetalus* has those toothy leaves."

"What's this, then?" The girl pointed at a yellow blossom beside a splayed fan of palm.

"Oh, that's *hibiscus rosa-sinensis*. You can easily tell because the other one doesn't come in yellow, just a faded red. But *sinensis* can be red or pink or yellow or white. The branches on *schizopetalus* are more delicate, and the leaves are farther apart."

"How do you know all that? Are you a botany major?" She thought he must be a college boy.

"No, not at all." He was smiling at her again in a way that made her shiver right down to her toes, now curling secretly inside the green and red water shoes that matched her swimsuit. "I'm just a magpie—clever at picking up things. Here and there. You know, I've got a jeep from Honor's." One eyelid drooped, and he held up a hand to screen a glare of light bouncing off the bay. "Well, it's my Dad's rental, really. Everything's my Dad's, I guess." He grinned at her. "Want to ride over to Saltpond Bay and go snorkeling?"

Somehow she agreed. After catching a lift to her room in an Iguana taxi to collect her gear, she met him beside the parrot cages. She felt perfectly dressed for the island in the leafy skirt, with the hibiscus flowers on her bathing suit peeping through a gauzy blouse.

"Oh, good. I was afraid you'd scamper off and not come back," he said, but his look belied the words. He had known that she wouldn't be able to keep away.

Perhaps he was conceited, Tamarind thought, or simply confident. She was excited; she even felt that she had half a crush on him, just because he was so striking and seemed to know things—the Latin words for flowers, at least.

"What's your name? I forgot to ask."

He paused an instant, as if to make her anticipate the more. "Nicholas—Nicholas Mallin. Very ordinary, isn't it, compared to *Tamarind*?"

The wind lapped against her, and she gave a start; her skin had gone all gooseflesh. When she looked away from him, she could see a skein of drops falling toward the hills beside the bay.

"How did you do that?"

"What? Know your name?" He tapped her net sack, with the mask and snorkel and a Ouestin towel inside. "It's on the tag."

"Oh." So it was. She had forgotten: nothing strange, then.

As Nicholas rattled on about their destination, they cut across flower beds and lawns toward the tennis courts. A girl of six or seven wearing a pink tennis skirt and pink-and-white vest

and blouse was neatly returning the serves of a pro, who kept up a running commentary.

"Check the angle of your racket . . . Good, good. Now you're getting it. That's right, give me another just like that one, uh huh, come on, give it to me—whoa! that's a tad too hard—"

A henna-haired woman sat watching the girl with an even younger boy on her lap. She smacked his hand lightly when he grasped at her gold necklace.

The diminutive player kept on sending the balls over the net, looking like an advertisement for the best sort of children's clothing.

"Is that your daughter? She's a pretty little girl." Tamarind paused to watch the ball sail toward the pro.

The woman didn't answer, her eyes sweeping over the unfamiliar features without a change in expression and then returning to the two figures in a sea of balls.

At this, Nicholas laughed. "Volley and return," he said, nodding toward the bench.

This time the mother looked up at him, interest quickening. What was it that people were lured by, Tamarind wondered. Though dressed in an expensive new outfit from one of the Ouestin shops, she hadn't mattered. She was somehow not right. But Nicholas had registered with the woman; her gaze had fastened to his face—and hers betrayed a flush of interest.

"My friend thinks your daughter a *pretty little girl*." A trace of something—a jeer, perhaps—was in his voice.

“Yes, she’s—”

What the mother had been about to say was left unfinished, because Nicholas turned his back on her and walked off. At the narrow lot behind the courts, he began weaving through the rental cars.

“What are you doing?” Tamarind followed, watching with some alarm as he leaned into the front window of jeep after jeep.

“Oh, I just don’t remember which one my dad rented—but I know he left the keys inside.”

She trailed after him, clutching her bag and straw hat.

“But what if it’s somebody else’s? What if two people leave their keys behind?”

“My old man’s the only one who wouldn’t bother to pocket his keys—the only one trusting enough.” Nicholas groped at the ignition of a fire-engine red jeep peppered with dents. “There it is!” He held up a key with a small gold sunburst and an Honor’s tag dangling from it.

“You’re sure?” She felt uncertain. “Maybe we should ask at the office.”

“Nah. They always go out for lunch. Anyway, I remember the star.” One corner of his mouth quirked into a smile. “See, each jeep has a different key chain. This is mine. Get in, will you?” He tossed their bags—she noticed that there was nothing in his but a snorkel and mask—through the rear window.

Tamarind slid into the passenger seat; the jeep was new but already marred by dings and stains. The plastic

windows didn’t unzip properly, and Nicholas had to reach over her to help. When his arm brushed against hers, she noticed that he was absolutely odorless, while she reeked of coconut sun block. And though she would never have gone out without a cover-up, he was still bare-chested.

“Aren’t you afraid of burning?—you didn’t bring any lotion.”

“Hah. The sun worships me. I never burn.” Grappling with the gear shift, he reversed the car with a roar, barely grazing an Iguana taxi. He waved to the driver and shot toward the entrance. “These jeeps are nothing but motorized cans,” he shouted over the rumble of acceleration.

“My mother told me it could be dangerous not to wear sun lotion in the Virgin Islands—that the light’s stronger here than at home.” She grabbed onto the window frame, jouncing as they turned left toward the town of Cruz Bay.

“Oh, well, I’m sure you’d burn. Everybody does but me. And the natives, of course. You can’t scorch a man who’s already black, can you? All you can do is darken him up a bit.” He whistled a snatch of a tune, shifting gears as they climbed a hill.

“Look at that funny little church! Cinder blocks all trimmed in turquoise and pink.” She craned out the window to see what had been spray-painted onto the bus stop close by. Something about *JESUS* saving somebody from *RASTA*, with a big flowered cross and the date.

“They’re a superstitious lot.” Nicholas swept around a tourist jeep that hadn’t quite made it to the crest and was beginning to slide back on wet pavement.

So it had been raining on the hills. Tamarind peered out the rear window to see if the other car made it to safety, but their own dropped precipitously into a valley before she could tell.

“My father told me the islanders here are Moravians, that they’re really quite modest people. He says visitors have brought bad habits and change.”

“Oh yes, those vicious stateside tourists,” Nicholas said, flashing her a smile as the car dove into a gulf once more. “Is your old man a Moravian?”

Tamarind shook her head. “He’s a professor. That’s why he’s here—for a conference.”

Nicholas whooped. “So that’s what they call it! Can you imagine? A bunch of college teachers grinding away in a place like this! I suppose they scrape up a grant and come boondoggling for free. Is that it? They could’ve had a meeting in some cold, benighted spot.” He laughed heartily. “Tell your old man that next year’s conference is in Newark. See what he says.”

“I suppose you’re right. The school pays for his meals and hotel and the plane ticket.”

“What’s he studying?”

“I don’t know, really. But the conference is called *Powers, Principalities, and the Post-Postmodern Age*. It sounds—well, I don’t know what it sounds like.”

Tamarind clung to the door, catching

picture-postcard glimpses as Nicholas whirled her through Cruz Bay: a narrow, shop-jammed street swooping into the heart of the village where, head tilted back, Adam’s apple working, a man with a machete gulped from a green coconut; the tiny harbor with a ship packed with tourists, flags snapping; a fisherman, also with a machete, chopping a large black fish into chunks on a slab table in the sun; a cemetery above the town with white tombs stacked one on top of another; a heart-stopping catch of brilliant blue sea next to aloes scratched with names; pre-parade clusters of children, decked in shirts of peach or rose or lemon and gripping band instruments that caught the glare of sunshine and broke it into stars.

“Not a single place to park. Typical Cruz Bay. So he’s a theologian, is he? Your old man?”

“He teaches in the Philosophy and Religion department at the college. He’s just a professor.”

For some reason this made Nicholas laugh once more.

“Should’ve known,” he said. “Professors are hardly ever devout. Too bound by taboo. Let’s stop, shall we, and walk around?” He zoomed into a slot between open-air tourist buses.

“Not there! Not there!” A group of local men on benches began shouting.

“What do you mean, *taboo*? Look,” Tamarind said, touching his arm with a finger; “They say we can’t park here.”

“Oh, you know. All this politically correct stuff—can’t allow a thought that

might offend. The new liberalism. It amuses me. Mind you, I'm an equal opportunity mocker. I've got it in for the conservatives too." Nicholas hung half out of the window. "Where then?" he yelled to the bus drivers and the old men. "*Where?*"

"Anywhere but there! Anywhere but there!" they chorused.

He levered himself into the seat, his eyes narrowing, then shrugged. "Skip it. We'll go straight to the beach. But we need some—" He reached into the back and jerked a cooler from the floor.

"Would you look at that! My old man thinks of everything." Ignoring the shouts, feebler now, from the benches, he popped open the lid. "Plenty of lunch here," he said cheerfully. "There's pâtés—wonder what kind? That's spicy meat and vegetables fried in dough. Like a pierogi only with spices. Heart of palm salad. Pigeon peas. And here—that's seaweed salad." He held up a container with a ravel of vivid light green strands tucked inside. "Sodas. Tamarind soda on ice! Just what you need. Ginger beer. And some Jamaican Red Stripe."

"Won't he be angry?" She was uneasy, imagining what her own parents would say if she drove off with the family picnic.

"Nah, it'll be a good joke. He's used to me playing tricks on him. He'll figure it out. Anyway, he'll just order more lunch and rent another jeep if he wants one. There's plenty where this came from."

"Are you sure?"

Nicholas didn't answer; he reversed the jeep and blew a kiss to the old men, who jeered and flapped their hands at him in disgust.

"Shoo. I'm getting, I'm getting—but I'll be back. Just you wait and see." He swerved into the left lane, startling Tamarind. She would have to get used to riding on the 'wrong' side of the street. "And wouldn't you like it, you poor old geezers, to have a banged-up jeep full of gas and a pretty girl inside—"

The jeep clanked and backfired as they climbed the island highway, and Tamarind felt faintly worried: her mother had wanted to show her the sights, and here she was already seeing them. A quirk in the road hugged a cottage-sized boulder, looking like an immense pod crashed to earth from some unseen world-tree. Not long afterward she caught a glimpse of the turquoise and royal blue of the island waters, rimmed with white sand, shining far below the north shore drive, and then she forgot everything old and remembered only the man beside her and the sights of the afternoon.

"Ginger Thomas, oleander, ixora, al-lamanda," Nicholas cried over the noise of the engine, pointing to flowers in yards. "Look there," he said, slowing to let her pick out the strange green tower that was row after concentric row of bananas. "See that pod-like thing? See there? You can't miss it." It hung down, a big purple phallus. "That's the male flower. When it drops, the bananas are ready to be cut down."

“Not very attractive, is it?”

“Not everything has to be. Even in paradise. Some things are fascinating; there are lots of dangerous plants. The ones with milky sap, especially.”

Coasting along, he showed her papaya, kenip, and mango trees. She had imagined the fruits loading down the branches to the tips, as on an apple tree, and was half repulsed to see papayas bunched close to the bole. It reminded her of some pagan fertility goddess. Who was that? Nicholas might know but she wouldn't ask—a goddess with a cluster of many breasts.

“I ought to show you a sandbox. Then you'd have seen something alien. They're yellowish gray, with spiny bark. Some people call them *monkey-no-climb*.” He gestured toward the woods. “Did you see that dark mass in the trees? Termite mound.”

“Termites?” She gave a twitch of the shoulder. “Up in the air? I saw something—I thought it was a gall.”

“Nope. Termite mound. Anyway, the fruits on the sandbox tree have ridges, and a shape like a slightly flattened pumpkin. When dry, they explode.” He jerked the wheel away from a precipitous drop. “The seeds are sickle-shaped, and they act like shrapnel.”

“Why sandboxes?”

“From the days of quills, when sand was sprinkled onto a fresh page to blot the ink. Shake this kind of sandbox, though, and you might end up with a little scimitar buried in your eye.”

“I don't think I want to,” Tamarind said slowly, rubbing her arms. “Funny

kind of scabbard . . . *That's* not one of your favorite trees, is it?”

He darted her an amused glance. “No, I think manchineel would be my very favorite. Lovely yellow apples nestled in green leaves: Columbus's men were impressed with the powers of manchineel.”

“Powers,” she repeated. “We're back to that word again.”

“Not the same kind . . . So, is your father really interested in the powers and principalities?”

She considered and shook her head. “He was interested in the island. Not that he won't go to classes! The first was on the power of the media.”

“Power of the *media*? You'd think they'd have more respect for the powers than to haul out those hackneyed old warhorses. What tripe!” Nicholas swung the jeep onto a scald, big enough for three or four cars. “There's a view from the top. I'll lug the picnic.”

The footpath was grooved from rains. A ruinous tower, all that remained of a Danish sugar plantation, squatted at the head of the trail.

“How wonderful!” Tamarind was not so grown-up that she didn't think of fairy tales and long-abandoned castles.

Nicholas set down the cooler with a thump.

“This was the cane mill—come on, I'll show you a sight.” He held out his hand and she took it, and though she had felt uncertain and apart from him when he had talked about the monkey-no-climb tree, she felt a small spiraling thrill of attraction.

“Look up.” He led her through the arched door. “Right there.”

She glanced into a jagged aperture high above her head. Mortar and stones were dank and darkened by mold, but hanging in the gap were pristine panels of something pale—three, four of them.

“Oh!” she cried, “combs.” Now she could see a knot of bees collecting and burgeoning on the wall, while others jiggled in place near the opening. “And that’s a swarm! I’ve never seen such a thing.”

“Best be quiet and slow,” Nicholas said. “They might be Africanized bees, this far south.” He tugged her closer, as if he wanted to protect her, and Tamarind felt the urge to press her cheek against the burnished skin below his collarbone.

She didn’t; she hardly knew him.

“They can kill a child, can’t they?” Tamarind stepped back toward the light.

“More, if they’re angry. *That* would be a weird spectacle, wouldn’t it?” He followed her into the sun.

Only a few yards from the mill, she stumbled on the promised view. She stopped, staring down at white shore and island and dark patches under turquoise and blue that meant coral reef.

“That’s Trunk. Nice little package.” He kneeled, rooting in the cooler for a Red Stripe.

“I’ll say,” she murmured. She drank in the colors, wanting to save them for the drab months after her return. Fishing her camera from the net bag, she

captured the bay. Nicholas grabbed her wrist hard when she thought to take his picture.

“Hey,” he said, “don’t do that.”

She looked at him, startled. He was smiling, drawing her by the hand until he seemed about to kiss her. Just then some children spilled into the clearing, and a boy with a stick began jumping beside the tower. He ducked through the archway and began yelling *bees! bees! bees!*

“So maybe we’ll find out whether they’re Africanized or not.” Nicholas glanced up, winking at the bright sun.

“You wouldn’t let me—why not?”

“Sure, why not? Here, I’ll save his life while I’m at it.” He leaned forward. “Hey kid! You with the stick—come take our photo.”

Holding up a branch like a giant claw, the boy raced over. Siblings followed, one in diapers toddling forward with thumb corking his mouth.

“That your girlfriend?” Grinning, the kid seemed to sprout more teeth than could possibly fit inside his mouth. He was freely flecked; splotches streamed down his arms, collected on his knees, veiled his face.

“Sure. The lovely Princess Tamarind, that’s who she is. And I’m Prince of the Manchineels. I just met her, but she’s mine.”

“Huh. And I’m a king.” The boy revolved the camera in his hands, searching for buttons.

“King of Freckles, maybe,” Nicholas said.

This bit of witticism made the child

howl with pleasure, and Tamarind had to wait for him to calm down before she could show him what to do.

The royal couple stood with backs to Trunk Bay and to the white sailboats like crescent moons sown broadcast on the turquoise furrows. Nicholas slipped behind Tamarind, bending to wrap his arms around her waist. She could feel his body against hers, pressed close, and her own heart running to catch up with the surprise of it, while his, already knowing, beat steadily on.

“Lemme get another.” The kid took one, two, three, more—until Nicholas jerked the baseball cap over his eyes. “Hey, where am I?” he screeched, dancing in a circle, arms out in mock dismay.

“It’s awfully hot.” Tamarind fanned herself with the straw hat. Her cheeks were red. “I feel faint.”

“It’s the sun.” Nicholas took the hat and flapped it vigorously so that her hair flew back. A small, knowing smile had hooked a corner of his lips. “Just the sun,” he said, more softly.

“Wi-ill, Sa-am, and I-ris—” The names were drawled out, each ending on a rising note. After a silence, the voice floated up once more: “Answer me!”

“Better scat,” Nicholas advised the little ones, who stared without blinking for a few instants before scampering. “Here, kiddo.” He grabbed the cap from the boy and skimmed it toward the path. “Mama’s looking for you.”

Cheerful, he bowed from the waist before bounding off, dipping once to retrieve his cap.

“Thanks for the pictures,” Tamarind called. She took her hat and fastened it under her chin. The brim made her feel private, aloof from Nicholas.

“Hey,” he shouted. “Those were killer bees, you know.”

Will—or was it Sam?—shrieked with glee as he jumped onto the trail, out of sight.

“Oh!” Tamarind looked at the images stored on the camera. Nicholas was almost entirely obliterated, save for fragments of leg and arm. In several memorable failures, Tamarind’s face floated in a sea of fire.

“Strange.” Nicholas peered over her shoulder.

“I hope the camera’s all right.”

“It must be the glare. Or the kid’s a jinx. If you’re worried, we’ll stop by a shop later; how about that?”

She smiled, relieved. Everything would be fine.

He unpacked another Red Stripe for himself and a soda for her. Both ate with eagerness, as if they had gone on a taxing hike. Always adventurous when it came to food, Tamarind found the curried pâtés and the salads to her liking, the heart of palm crisp and cool. They didn’t chat; perhaps they had worn down the trigger for talk, or were simply tired by the effort of becoming acquainted.

The girl would have liked a nap, but felt it to be impossible. Strangers would be scaling the path. Africanized bees—if they *were* Africanized—boiled in a mass on the tower. The sun was fierce. And Nicholas: she scrutinized him from

the shadow of her brim. She knew nothing about him. It hadn't bothered her at the Ouestin, but now it did, a little.

He was gazing into Trunk Bay as he polished off the Red Stripe. Dots of sweat stood on his chest. It seemed that he was smiling faintly; or maybe his lips always had a slight upward curl. He appeared older than before, not in face or body but in an air, perhaps of weariness.

A child's voice piped from the woods.

"Let's go. Too many brats, too many bees." Nicholas checked the cooler. "Suppose I may as well take it along. There's a Red Stripe and a mango soda." He yawned. "That beer made me sleepy."

Tamarind couldn't read him. Was he really deciding whether or not to abandon what belonged to his father? That seemed odd. He was distant, though he had been so attentive earlier.

"Come on." He tossed the leftovers inside and shouldered the cooler.

As she picked a route along a fissure in the steep path, she kept glancing after Nicholas. He was jogging, letting out war cries as he jolted downward. *That would wake him up.* At the scald, he was waiting for her, the remains of lunch already stowed. When he beamed a grin, she felt relieved and was content to climb into her seat and let the shiny red jeep go zinging through the sunlight.

He whistled a ballad, "The Gypsy Rover." Perhaps the merry round of verses was making him careless—he kept weaving over the center line, and

now and then he had to wrench the wheel around a curve. After finishing with a flourish of trills, he spoke again. "You know where you are? We left the town of Cruz Bay, right? Then we passed Lind Point and Salomon Bay and Caneel Bay—after that we edged around Hawksnest and had a picnic between that bay and the next ones—Denis and Jumbie and Trunk. Trunk's the one with the island. The next big one is Cinnamon, but that's too crowded. Campgrounds. People. Nosy parker rangers."

"We might bump into my mom and Steve there." She wondered whether that might not be a good idea, though her mood was already shifting, and she felt a renewed glimmering of pleasure at being with Nicholas. Meanwhile the island was becoming two things at once; as they twisted along the coast, she could see on her left the dazzle of beach and sea, while on her right lay the forest, with its rich foliage and occasional termite nests that added notes of deeper darkness.

"Perish that thought! Your mother might disapprove of me, and the day would be over. We'll just keep on going. Except for a stop at the mer-toilet. Mural mermen and maids and a real live bathroom. At Maho we'll cut over to the town of Coral Bay—then hug the eastern bays until we curl to the west and reach Saltpond."

He laced his fingers with hers, dropping her hand abruptly as the jeep narrowly missed striking a wild goat.

"Look! Slow down!" She stared after

the ruins of another sugar mill, ferns sprouting from the walls. One of the wild island donkeys drifted in the murk like a ghost. Queer what a gaiety of stone was left—a nougat of colors and shapes in plasterwork. “So *that’s* where the ancestors of the people who work at the Ouestin and drive the tourist taxis and work in Cruz Bay were slaves.”

“Here or some other spot. The tower where we picnicked. Catherineberg. Annaberg.” He was smiling again, a small secret smile.

“They sound like names of concentration camps.”

“There you go. More of those Africanized bees. Camps, hives—you see? The world is full of them.” He began whistling again, a quick sprightly reel, but broke off to ask why she bothered thinking about things she didn’t like. “You can’t change the past. And it’s your duty to be happy in paradise.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Tamarind said, though she thought he was only partly so.

Nicholas certainly seemed happy, once singing a snatch of a ballad: *I’ll show you where the white lilies grow / At the bottom of the sea*

Tamarind noticed that the landscape of the island was changing as they aimed away from the coast, heading toward Saltpond Bay. They stopped once for a pair of ambling donkeys, once for the mer-toilets, and once for a view—finishing off the last of the drinks and watching goats graze along the brink of a cliff that bristled with tall cacti. On the opposite side of the road the slope

dived toward the inlet of Coral Bay, where a school of sailboats was at mooring.

“The camera’s working again. I wonder why—”

“Hummingbird,” Nicholas said; “See it? Needling the hibiscus.”

“So headlong.” She followed the bird’s flight toward the cliff but lost it among the cacti.

He jumped onto a ledge that overlooked the bay. “Can you make out the boat that’s tilted to one side? Three days from now, it’ll be underwater. In the bars they’re taking bets on the hour.”

“Just a second.” Tamarind was counting the wild goats. “Seventeen.” She watched the kids frolic from rock to rock. “Seven babies.”

“Annoying little beasts. They string out across the road and jam the way. But I like them—I wouldn’t mind being a billy goat.” He tossed his bottle into the jumble of foliage in the valley.

“That was very bad,” she told him. She was teasing, but she felt it was so: wicked to despoil the world.” *Boys*, she thought.

“Bad, very bad,” he said, sliding a hand along her shoulder blade; “It’s bad not to do what Tamarind wants.”

Not for the first time, she wondered if he would try to kiss her.

But he didn’t try; they banged the doors shut on the red jeep and rocketed away from the overlook—down, down, down to the sprinkle of roofs that meant Coral Bay, where there were places to park and brand new shops sell-

ing abalone and imported beach wear and jewelry made of a milky blue stone native to the Virgin Islands. They paused to look, then flew on toward Saltpond Bay, swooping and rushing, swerving to avoid a baby goat.

She felt a pang of longing for her mother and Steve: what were they doing? Tomorrow her father had the afternoon free. The four of them would drive to Leinster Bay, and where sand yielded to a rocky thrust just opposite to Waterlemon Cay, they would don gear and lasso the island in one long swim. If her little brother tired, she would let him hang on her arm.

Tamarind had looped Waterlemon in dreams: it was already hers, as if her parents' desire had forced not just a child but a fairyland into being. Falling swiftly from the shore of Leinster Bay, the world under waves would be a pale blue, with light sifting through the ceiling like a fine, luminous flour. Fish would flicker by, dimly seen at first: a cloud of yellowjacks, perhaps, with a fairy basslet bolting for a branch. She would drift over a ring of coral that French angelfish explored, their lower jaws jutting and sulky, their movements dreamy. The gardens were purple and yellow and rust, with globes of brain, staghorn trees, and wafting fans where fish took shelter. The fish would be rainbows broken in the water: stoplight parrotfish and redbands and midnights, queen angels, rock beauties, triggerfish, butterflies. Another world, bright as a shattered prism, lay waiting for her.

"Heaven," she said aloud.

"What?" Nicholas ran his nails along her arm.

"I was daydreaming about Waterlemon Cay," she said; "That's where we're going tomorrow." For a few minutes she had forgotten him, but now she turned to look, surprised once more that one so handsome and sure of himself had noticed her.

"Heaven, huh? Well, mobs of fish gather there. The coral's in good shape."

She smiled, thinking about why they were going. Her parents had made the circuit of Waterlemon only hours before she was conceived. Of course, she wouldn't tell Nicholas. She was too timid, like a small coral-dwelling fish: the shy hamlet, perhaps.

"Here we are—Saltpond Bay." With a twitch of the wheel, he veered onto the dirt, spraying pebbles.

The shore wasn't far. That its border of sand was littered with cast-off fingers of reef surprised Tamarind. Convoluted pieces of brain lay in bleached mounds like a graveyard of coral. Only a modest display with map and guide to wildlife, faded to a drowned blue, suggested the national park. After a glance at the board, she waded the shallows, watching the minnows sling themselves away from her feet. The water felt cooler than she had expected. Nicholas had already thrown himself into the sea, striking out for a yacht moored in the bay. In a few minutes, he hoisted himself onto the deck. Tamarind shaded her eyes; she could see him gesticulate, a drink in one

hand. *He's not a bit shy.* Soon he crashed back into the water and swam toward shore, where he flung himself onto wet sand. *No, he hadn't known the couple on board. It was just a lark.*

"Oh, that's good." Lying half in, half out of the waves, he pillowed his head on one arm and closed his eyes. "The sun's just right."

Slowly his smile eased away and he was asleep, breathing deeply; it seemed to the girl that he did everything to excess, and she felt abandoned and lonely. She glanced at her near neighbors, who were gathering up scattered snorkels, masks, and towels.

A small boy sat shivering on a rock, occasionally calling out to his father.

"There's all these mean black pointy things that hurt my feet," he yelled.

"We're not going to come get you. You've got legs—get yourself back."

Tamarind wondered if he would've rescued the child if there hadn't been another man along. The son would have to prove himself now. He hunkered there for a long time before jumping in.

Afterward, she stripped to her bathing suit—feeling self-conscious because Nicholas had been awakened by the slap of a wave and now watched her without expression. When she waded into the water, he rolled over and pushed himself onto hands and knees before standing. He flicked the hair from his eyes with a jerk of the head. "I'm going for another swim."

Tamarind didn't reply, guessing that he never asked permission of anyone.

There was no use in feeling a twinge of hurt, not when she hardly knew him.

As she slipped into the waves, she was pleased to spot a young tang, yellow as a slice of sunshine. The child was right; urchins with long spines had invaded the bay and clustered among the coral and rocks. Her mother had said that the sea plunged quickly at Leinster, but here she felt too close to the coral and was fearful of being scraped and gashed. Now and then she rose and scanned the bay; Nicholas was proving to be a strong swimmer, arrowing far from shore. Slowly she drifted above the beds, a little disappointed that she didn't see more fish, and that the coral appeared so drab.

While treading water, she looked about and saw that he had returned again and was floating close by. The boy on the rock and his family had departed, and several other groups had taken their spot. When Nicholas lifted his face, she pulled her mouthpiece aside.

"Time seems dreamy when you're in the ocean," she said.

"Maybe an hour. A bit more."

She dove, caught sight of a trunkfish, and surfaced in a panic. The spikes of urchins had seemed about to pierce her hands. Tomorrow she would remember to bring gloves, she told herself, though surely the waves would be milder at Leinster.

"Everything appears about a quarter bigger and nearer," Nicholas told her; "Salt water magnifies the floor."

She spat out the snorkel and raised

the mask. "I don't like the urchins so much."

"No? I love the way they look, so dramatic and inky. Gothic."

He tugged at her fingers and she floated toward him and perched on his knee, her toes curled tight. She was more tired than she'd thought she would be, and the tears came into her eyes. When he drew her forward, she rested against him for a moment.

"Tamarind is a lovely little mer-creature," he said; "I'll keep her in a glass jar and feed her slips of sushi."

"I've got legs."

"Very fine ones, too." His hand brushed against her calf. "You're so lovely today that I think you must be at the very peak of your beauty. Like a flower that needs picking."

"That would be sad. What about you?"

"Me? Not a flower—a fire thorn, maybe. But you're one. Unless you're a mermaid. Though I guess you're trembling too much to be a sea girl, because they don't get cold. Let's go in—we can walk to Salt Pond and the bay beyond." He pushed the mask up. "Want to? It's on the other side of Ram Head. Not far, according to the map."

"What's that beach called?"

"Drunk Bay. There's Trunk Bay and Drunk Bay. Everybody goes to Trunk, though."

Salt Pond was three things: low rippling water to their right, a narrow seam of path, and, to the left, dense veg-

etation with cactus—the taller sort called pipe organ or, more grossly, dildo cactus. Intermixed were clusters of turk's cap, green barrels topped by red and bristly hats garnished with the occasional pink flower. It was dimmer than in the bay, though why there should be less sun was not obvious. Tamarind missed the rhythmic slap of the waves. Salt Pond felt claustrophobic in contrast. But it was interesting, she acknowledged.

"A hermit crab!" She was as pleased as a little child, spying the trundling shell. For the hike, she had insisted on putting her leafy skirt and white blouse over her swimsuit. The water shoes squelched as she walked, but the going was easier here, where there was no coral to hurt her feet.

"Soldier crabs," Nicholas corrected, "crawling around in their shell tanks." He seized hold of a large one with a cone-shaped turret as big as his fist.

"Look at that! It's huge! I wonder if that's what—I dived and picked up a conch, but when I lifted it from the water, a claw poked out and I let go." She drew back as the crab waved a pincer.

"Probably just a sea-going soldier. Want me to drag him out of his lair? So you can get a look at him naked?"

"No, don't! That's mean," she said, but he only laughed and tossed the crab into the underbrush.

Afterward they switched places; now he was tailing her, whistling and occasionally pausing to skip stones across Salt Pond.

“You’re really good at that.”

“All in the wrist.” He made a flicking motion with his hand.

Tamarind had begun to feel uneasy. It took her some minutes to realize why, because the sound had begun so gradually.

“What’s that?” She half turned, looking across Salt Pond and listening.

“What’s what?”

She couldn’t think what it reminded her of at first. Then she remembered a family trip to Niagara Falls. The far-away thunder of the river as it catapulted over the cliffs had crept into her mind in just the same way. The fright of coming on the falls was of an order of magnitude akin to what she imagined it would be to slam through the atmosphere of Earth and into the infinite black closet of space. She hadn’t cared for the Grand Canyon either, the way the rift in the world disordered the ground.

“That *pulse*,” she whispered.

Nicholas drew her close until her ear was against his chest, and she could hear the steady tidal thump of his heart.

“Drunk Bay, I suppose,” he said.

And he kissed her, just when she was no longer wondering whether he ever would or when. *Which was just like a boy.* But it was exciting, this kiss, because it was all mixed up with a fear that was in turn whipped by the rhythmical threat of Drunk Bay. The flare of desire, the edge of his palm brushing the curve of her breast, and the drumming of his heart conspired to make her forget the bluster of the waves, but she did not; in-

stead, the sound seemed to widen and thrum and flower around her. When her eyes opened, she saw the eyelashes black and spiky against his skin. His mouth tasted of cinnamon and cloves.

“Tamarind, Tamarind.” He sighed, weaving her fingers with his and luring her along the path.

She would have liked to kiss him another time, wished the edge of his hand to barely meet the rise of her breast, wished to taste his mouth. She wanted to lean against him and hear the muscle of his heart, yielding up the message tucked in emptied shells: *the sea, the sea, the sea.* Her nerves, linked with his, trembled and shone like a pale-barked sapling in the sun and breeze. The passage wasn’t wide enough for two, but his grasp kept her close.

The thudding that was not his heart but the rhythm of Drunk Bay made her stop, fingers loosening.

“I want to go back.”

“Come on,” he said, “why don’t you come on? It’s just a bay. They’re all different. That’s the fun of poking around the island. Is it the noise? Come on.”

She thought of whirling to race toward Saltpond Bay. But what silliness! This was no obscure track through wilderness; the route had been marked with a stippled line on the park maps, and the ground showed wear from many feet.

“All right,” she said.

And then they were at Drunk Bay, the rut lifting slightly and vanishing into a landscape of cobbles and spars, with a boulder hard to the left and a tide

that forced itself, jostling with coral and white with foam, onto the land. It was bewildering, really, how one minute they were hemmed in, following the seam of the shadowy Saltpond walk, and the next, the world had shaken itself free of the interior. Tamarind stood on the brink where trail transformed to monstrous beach, her hands held out slightly to steady herself in the wind, the leaves of her skirt whipping. The other side of the Ram Head point was savage, subject to riptide and blast, and there was no sand visible, only chunks of dead reef hurled by the thrust of sea. Sky glowed; foam on the waves was lurid. Incessant breakage of ocean against beach had been the source of the ominous, omnipresent, slowly swelling sound that had threatened her on the path. For one held breath, Tamarind felt only astonishment at the fierceness of the surf and the rough bones of coral.

Then she began to see more. It was as though an unreeled scroll lay before her, one she had assumed to be in an ancient tongue until a word here and another there revealed her own language, curiously inscribed. A child-sized cairn speared through by a crooked cross stood directly in her way; beyond it, she saw a massive boulder studded with shelving projections.

"Skeletons," she whispered, but that wasn't it. The figures, dead white, reclined on bunks of rock—oval heads of brain with arms and legs made of branch and other coral. There was something of the barrow and Stone Age

about the scene: a trick of time that made this world into another.

The jagged surface hurt her feet through the thin water shoes. She read the inscription on the cross—not the name of some lost child but a hiker's admonition to pack out trash. She laughed in relief, turning to follow Nicholas, who had wandered farther down the bay.

"How weird," she murmured, her eye lighting on another figure, collapsed onto the rubble. Had it been a local or a tourist who scraped his knees on coral as he fitted together the head and neck, the torso, the arms and legs and feet, added disks for buttons and be-wigged the head with string, bleached and frizzed by long immersion? She looked about and realized that form after form lay tumbled on the ground or propped against boulders: a pair of twins, their heads bald and oval; crude sexless beings with seaweed or ravels of wind-teased strings in their hands; a delicate creature with a toothed mouth that was the underside of a cowrie shell; a boy pinned to the earth by the enormous scepter of a phallus. A sculpture of coral, twine, and narrow boards resembled a gallows. The blades of another suggested a windmill, and on an outstretched line that had been pegged to the ground, a tied stick of driftwood twiddled. Beyond these contraptions Tamarind could make out further ranks in the mortuary of coral, the bodies diminishing as the beach swept into the distance—as if Drunk Bay might be infinite.

Where wild waves had flung booty of destruction, some obsessive visitor had sorted shells, sea glass, and salt-raveled rope into separate mounds. It was like some fantastic concentration camp at the end of the world, with its corpses and harvest—stacks devoted to teeth, shoes, or hair. Mist rose up like smoke from the dissolution.

A druidic ring suggested a miniature Stonehenge. Pairs of columns were capped by a flat lintel, and although a first glance suggested a diorama, the scene retained something of the pagan and the terrible. It might have served as a ceremonial stage for fairies—not the pastel flower-bearers sold in shops but sharp-nosed imps who savored a night's work of blighting cattle and stealing children.

Nicholas navigated the coral, wind jerking at his hair and clothes as if it would scalp and rip and hurl them toward Saltpond.

"Drunk Bay," he yelled, exultant, jumping onto a stone; "I'm drunk on Drunk Bay." With a whoop, he leaped forward, his feet finding purchase on a joggling spar of coral. He teetered for an instant before careening forward and stumbling to a halt beside a sprawled figure.

That one had seemed pitiful to Tamarind. Peculiar, she had thought, how much an expression could be changed by setting two simple pebbles of eyes close together or apart, giving variety to these crude beings.

His left hand fluttered, reaching for balance; with the right, Nicholas

snatched the spike of a phallus from the boy. A rock underfoot shot away, and he took several skittering steps before landing securely, the stick of coral raised slantwise to the sky as if he would use it to stab the white disk of the sun.

"Oh!" Tamarind cried out; the altering of the coral child seemed a violation—of what, she was not sure.

He laughed, whirling around.

"Tamarind, Tamarind—"

With heedless leaps, he plunged toward her. She noticed that his eyes matched the elusive color of the sea just before it hurdled the margin of heaped coral and smashed itself into foam. The buffeting winds and the unleashed waves had awakened a wild gusto in him.

When he kissed her this time, the coral branch in his hand tore a fine layer of skin from her inner arm.

"Ow!" She retreated from him, her arm cocked as she looked at the blood.

"Here," he said with relish; "Let me lick it." He seemed not to have the least care for what he had done.

"No." She took another step. *Was he joking?* "We ought to be getting back to the jeep."

"Why? It's *perfect* right here." He shrugged. "Besides, it's not my jeep. If I want, I can just walk off through the cacti. Go bounding with a herd of goats. I'm the Prince of the Manchineels, remember? I can do whatever I like."

"I thought your father rented the jeep for the day." Tamarind's voice trembled; the breeze dashed her syllables against the coral.



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“No. I just borrowed it.”

“What do you mean?” She edged away once more, the pulse at her temple sounding in her ears like the sea.

“I wanted; I took it.”

“So the lunch wasn’t yours—wasn’t your father’s either?”

He smiled, flipping the branch of coral into the air and catching it neatly.

“Could have been. Anything’s conceivable. But I always take what I want. Did I say that already? The world’s my oyster; I eat what I like and toss the rest. That’s how it is.”

She scrambled over a nest of coral twigs and eggs.

“And you know what I want,” he went on. “You could lie down on this nice smooth sand and let me kiss you again, Tamarind. I would like that.”

“No,” she said to the gust of wind. The air was too strong for her, and hard to breathe when it thrust so violently against her face. The sky over the sea had darkened slightly, a cloud shielding the sun. It would be raining offshore in a few moments, letting down one of the brief tropical rains that were here and gone quickly but made the roads slick and hazardous.

When she looked over her shoulder, he was still smiling, the length of coral inscribing circles in the air.

“It’s too bad,” he said; “I ought to send you home to your father. It would be a good lesson to him. Dissing the powers that way, not believing in what’s there to be believed.” He stroked a hand over the place where his heart would be. “Still, pleasure before duty.”

“No,” she said, but faintly. Rain had begun to yield to ocean: a navy-colored cloud wept onto a spot of sea that, deeply shaded, began to glow with luminescence.

“I always get what I want, Tamarind. You ought to see that by now.” He began walking after her, moving lazily, his hips swinging, the coral held lightly in his hand.

The first rock flung against flesh raised an instantaneous weal and bled freely. Tamarind dropped to her knees, the breath rasping in and out of her mouth. Her arm and throat hurt. Panic was in her like a ravel of fishermen’s line knotted with hooks and beads, bedeviled by a corkscrewing wind off the sea. Fear weighted her arms and legs with sinkers.

Nicholas reeled, lifting a hand to his face—the stone egg had made its mark at the left eyebrow.

The rain cloud cast a tide of shadows across the coral.

Figures on the beach were struggling to sit up and teetering onto club feet in rickety unison. Even the circle of two-legged dolmen bestirred itself, each stumbling blindly over a chaos of unmade, unchosen coral. A cry spiraled from Tamarind’s throat. The uprising could have been a comic, skeletal joke if only it had been tucked behind a luminous screen while she watched, close by Steve and Roy and Lisette. But *family* was impossibly far, on the other side of the island—it might as well have

been on the other side of a mirror or of the moon: on the bright, reflective face, while she was jailed in the darkness of the back side.

Nicholas was laughing as he wiped the blood from his eye.

String-haired and squat, bald and eyeless, knock-kneed and giant, a coral army wavered toward him. They gathered missiles, hammered with their horny fingers against stone, shoved lumps of coral into the remnants of nets to make slings. But all this activity took place inside a silence that was in turn eaten by the gush of the ocean, devoured and forgotten, as if it never had been. Not even the striking of rock and coral against brawn and bone was audible: nothing but sea.

Tamarind glimpsed Nicholas with his mouth open in a roar. His face looked weirdly joyful, as if he had not yet realized any danger. He was whirling about, the scepter in his fist. For a while, it looked like a game of ninepins, heads toppling over and crashing into spines and legs. Domino-sized pieces of coral sprayed the air; then, all chance for play stopped. He was, quite simply, outnumbered. The white sea surged forward and boiled over him.

What was it she had said to Nicholas? Something about the *dreaminess* of time at the ocean? She flinched; no, it was better to think of a long-legged nightmare folded on one's breast, refusing to go, making it a fight to breathe the air—the whole battle being packed into a flick of an instant

that was also seven years of bondage to hell.

She strained to pierce through shade to where the mob was jostling, pressing, dragging *something* along the margin of the sea, shoving it slowly up the shore. Reflux scalded her throat with gall. She retched onto the ground, blotted sudden moisture from her eyes. She could make out the stubby and the tottery-tall ones shimmering over their trophy in a mirage-like mass, while a few, almost excluded, dived between legs or jiggled with antic glee. The dolmen half-men jittered at the heels of the others. *Cute. They're almost cartoon cute. If only they weren't—*

The subject of their ministrations had completely disappeared in the moil of bodies. Under drifting clouds, the coral took on a fungal glow. A rhythmic *clok! clok! clok!* could be heard, faint under the crescendo of surf. Tamarind listened harder than she had ever listened to anything. *Clok! clok! clok!* Arms made from the skeletons of once-living coral rose and fell as regularly as if they were wielding mallets. She made a queer, shivering moan, her teeth set. The high-pitched note of it frightened her, but she couldn't stop. Motes swirled before her eyes. They, too, were a fearsome swarm. When her sight was altogether black, wholly absence, she might topple into the dark.

A memory of the bees and their combs, with the slow accumulation of sunny days and flowers in cells of wax, wavered like a mirage before her. She clung to the image of purity in shadow:

panels of snow faintly gleaming with the gold of stored light. Even now a brave young queen might be skyrocketing above Trunk Bay, a projectile headed into a new world, for the tower with its aged queen would never again be home. And whether queen or slave, the old one in her tattered wedding gown would never escape the infinite cells of her palace. *Africans all, laboring after sweetness in the dark tower . . .*

Breathe slowly, slowly. I'm drinking the wind, and it's too much, too much for anyone. Her blood was freighted with oxygen. Cupping her hands over nose and mouth, she slowed her breaths, counting herself down by one-thousands. *Breathe in. One one-thousand. And out. Two one-thousands. And in. Two one-thousands . . .*

Tamarind could see once more. The coral swarm fell away from what they had done. Though some had legs so thin it looked as though bulky torsos were held up by mere scribbles of white, they moved off with surprising quickness. Here and there, a creature began to fold itself up, the dice of toes and slats of legs collapsing onto the bed where it had been joined.

She felt what her stone-time ancestors had felt on a barren, windswept hill overlooking the thrash of surf:whelmed. Surely it had been thousands of years since a menhir had been made in a spirit of awe and in fright at the wideness and lunging power of creation.

But at Drunk Bay someone had been seized by the ancient horror of the

world's overweening, inhuman beauty: had bent, scrabbling after the forms that lay in shapeless chaos. They called to that man or woman: *brain! arm! hand! eye!* And the newborn artist of the place took hold of a coral spine and laid it on the ground below the oval of a brain. They tamed the ruinous world. If *he*, he marked his presence. If *she*, she gave birth to a child with a face as pitted as the moon. They longed to make, as they had surely been made, dreamed into slow being in a time without time, when the universe was void. Perhaps they instilled in the images something of their own loneliness in the world, their desire to protect and to be protected. Perhaps it was also a desire to succor the land by setting something human against the tantrums of the elements. After the first builder, others came and were inspired to create. Yet the place called *Drunk Bay* was only the stranger for such mortal work of creation.

Tamarind felt all these things as if she had been seared with wisdom in one dazzling strike of lightning. No fire bolted from cloud to coral, scarring her from crown to sole with secret knowledge, but it might as well have done, because a wound was made, though invisible.

Along the beach, more of the beings were collapsing or propping themselves against stone. The sketchy lot she had seen outstretched on shelves of rock wobbled past her now, heading toward sleep.

More rain sifted from the cloud,

close beside the lurid sunshine. A few of those sinking onto the shore were moistened by drops as the pall moved steadily off. As light increased, Tamarind could clearly see their handiwork.

A hundred yards down the shore, a barrow made from stones and coral hulked against the backdrop of ocean. Wearing the mystery of a monument that had endured from a prehistoric age, it echoed the cairn at the head of the trail but was larger, and had nothing of a cross about it anywhere. If the winds had been gentler, she might have imagined that some day it would be fertilized and seeded by birds and wreathed with grasses. Bleak as a skull, the tumulus gathered the landscape about itself.

The trembling that began after Nicholas had shrugged off her need to return to Saltpond Bay and the jeep now slackened. She was still weak from that first terror and felt unsure whether she could stand. The scrape on her inner arm made a rhythmic throbbing, but the sea-like pulse of blood in her hand had subsided. Tamarind jerked, startled by a movement: one of the figures had not gone to its hard rest but was veering toward her, rocking from side to side. It was the boy Nicholas had mutilated.

The mute, craterous face of the eunuch turned toward hers. The pebble eyes were set far apart, as in a child's drawing, and the tiny, upturned smile of blue sea glass had a simple sweetness that belied the upheaval of Drunk Bay and the fresh presence of the barrow.

When it became evident that he had come for her, Tamarind managed to rise, hands shaking. He made no sign but limped toward the cairn at the trail-head, occasionally turning his head in its socket to see if she still followed, pausing to wait. In the dim atmosphere of Salt Pond, the stumpy figure seemed to emit a spindly light. The scar of trail was smooth and easy under Tamarind's feet, yet it felt like a long time had passed before they reached the trees that divided the pond walk from Saltpond Bay. Here, where the path vanished into scrub, she overtook him. For a moment she stood still, peering at the bay through the leaves. As she reached to push aside a branch and pass between trunks, she thought to look back, but he was already gone.

Here the air was sunny, as before. It seemed as though no time had passed, though the groupings of people on the beach suggested that several families might have departed and others arrived since. She remembered the boy on the rock; perhaps his mother was now poking at his feet with a needle, prying out the black tips of spines while she complained against the ways of men in a fierce whisper. Nearing a couple lying on a blanket, she turned her face toward the bay, as though she had just caught sight of something fascinating. She kept to the sand at the water's edge, only once crossing the broken coral in order to retrieve her hat and the net bag of gear. She averted her eyes from the other bundle close beside it.

She didn't want to consider how she would get back to the Ouestin. If she had to, she would drive the jeep, she supposed, but she didn't want to touch it—didn't want to see its fire-engine shine ever again.

"Hey! Hey! Mango—"

A child waylaid her, signaling with a shovel.

Tamarind stopped, staring at the little girl. It took her much longer than usual to see what lay before her: to recognize the snub nose and silky hair, the frog on the front of her play suit.

"Oh, it's *you*," she said, moisture springing to her eyes. When she kneeled, letting down the shoulder bag, the toddler hugged her ecstatically.

The pregnant mother was wading in the shallows, close to another child who bobbed face down in the waves. He leaped from the water, jerking away his snorkel.

"I saw a fish like a box," he said, and his words sounded jubilant with discovery; "It had corners."

His mother swung him out of the water, but he splashed back in.

"Oh, now I remember," she said to Tamarind. The faille tank top to her suit rode up, showing a crescent of belly. "You're the girl with the blue flower." She lifted her sunglasses and gazed at her. "Is something the matter?"

"My ride." Tamarind coughed, blinked against the tears. "My ride left me behind." Her voice trembled when she asked, "Could you give me a lift to the Ouestin when you go?"

Tamarind went to bed early, but in the morning she rode in another rented jeep with Roy and Lisette and Steve. They drove to Leinster Bay and traipsed the path through the trees to the stones and strip of sand opposite Waterlemon Cay. Tamarind's mother had tucked a frangipani flower in her daughter's hair. They had all noticed some alteration in her mood but thought little of it.

With them she swam twice around the island, but all that day she never spoke about anything that had taken place on the afternoon before. She was afraid of what had happened; equally, she was afraid of being questioned.

Despite everything, the circuit of the island was just as beautiful as she had dreamed it would be, when she was a little girl. In the bay the water was a sky blue, light-drenched and cool, and the world dropped away quickly. When she gained the reef, she swam above corals that were not bleached but gay with color. Sea feathers yielded, fluttering with the current. The fish were radiant, whisking to the shelter of staghorn or hiding under the curl of a live fan.

She forgot nothing. The taste of cinnamon, the hand close to her breast, the clustering bees: all of the previous day was with her, so that she did not want to stray too far from Steve and her parents. She feared some manifestation of darkness in the water, but none came. Instead, the shadow of the last day seemed to throw this one into dramatic relief.

And then the queen angels and the

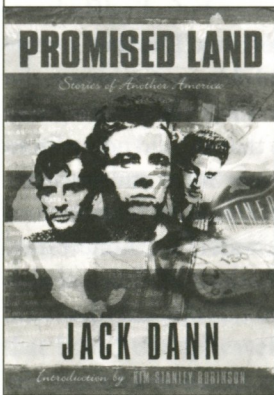
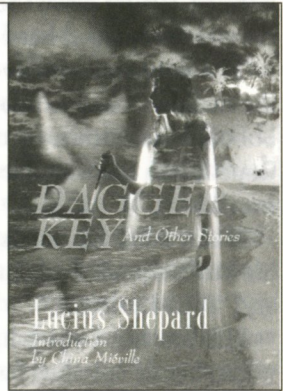
parrotfish and the fairy basslet and a host of others—the bright, broken pieces of her long-desired rainbow—made her forget, so that she lay entranced for a long time on the skin of the water, gazing at the flashing of fish through beds of coral. The pain of salt on her arm's tender scrape seemed to fall into abeyance. The secret world under the sea was a fount of life, and, lost in witness, she stopped dreading the shadows of barracuda and shark. Light dispersed from the summery sky;

she drifted on the waves above angel and fairy, and it came to her that this underwater garden was, as her mother had promised, a glimpse of heaven. For some obscure length of time she was pierced by the loveliness and the joyful profusion of fantasy trees and flowers. All that was Tamarind seemed to melt into the cradling waves and the shared-out rainbows and the living coral, so that she felt herself to be as rich and strange as the very seas of paradise.






Dagger Key, Lucius Shepard's new story collection, may well be his best yet. In nine novellas and stories, he traces a long-dead pirate's murderous possession of a Caribbean islander, explains a grand tantric conspiracy, pits a fugitive killer against the malignant energies of the Dragon Griaule, exposes a small Pennsylvania town to a morally-fraught extradi-dimensional excursion . . . and there's much more.

Written in Shepard's characteristically brilliant moody prose, these are amongst the finest dark fantasies on offer today.



In *Promised Land*, Jack Dann returns to the alternate America of his acclaimed 2004 novel *The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*. In that book, Dean, the most promising actor of his time, survived his car crash in 1955, and lived on, making great movies and interacting with some of the foremost personalities of the 1950s and '60s while drifting towards a strange political destiny in lockstep with Robert Kennedy.

Promised Land expands on that premise, offering brilliant insights into Dean, the Kennedys, and others, both as they were and as they might have been. *Promised Land* is a superb meditation on fame, love, and fate, replete with evocative dialogue, rich characterization, and dazzling prose poetry. It is the story collection of the year.

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F. Brett Cox tells us, "I first learned of the Reverend John Murray Spear in Joseph A. Citro and Diane E. Foulds' Curious New England (2004). Some of the events described in 'Mary of the New Dispensation' actually took place, and some of the people actually said some of the things I attribute to them. On the whole, though, your guess is as good as mine. I am particularly indebted to John Buescher's entry on Spear in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, Robert Damon Schneck's 'The God Machine' (Fortean Times, May 2002), Slater Brown's The Heyday of Spiritualism, Andrew V. Rapoza's 'Touched by the Invisibles' in No Race of Imitators: Lynn and Her People, and Judith Walzer Leavitt's Brought to Bed: Child-Bearing in America, 1750-1950—not to mention the 2005 Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop, the Cambridge (Massachusetts) SF Workshop, and my wife, whose mother was from Lynn and who has family there still."

A native of North Carolina, Brett is Assistant Professor of English at Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont. He lives in Roxbury, Vermont, with his wife, playwright Jeanne Beckwith.

Mary Of The New Dispensation

F. Brett Cox

Mrs. Newton is nervous.

Her husband's assurances do not help. She does not need him to tell her how great a man the Reverend Mr. Spear is; she knows of the Reverend's good works in the past, and the promise of the future. Have they not all heard the spirits speak through the Reverend, received the plans for the New Dispensation and the machine that will bring it into being? Perfection! Joy! The fallen world will soon be set aright.

But now Mrs. Newton has been called to stand once again before the machine, the Physical Savior, the New Motive Power, and her belly continues

to swell and press against her loosened corset, and she knows her husband had nothing to do with that. He and the Reverend and her dead sister Emily say she is Mary. She finds it difficult to think of her husband as Joseph. She cannot tell him how frightened she is as he helps her into the cab that will take them from Boston to the cottage at High Rock and the dawn of the new era. The rocking of the cab further disorients her. All things are possible. It is the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty-four. Invisible electric messages fly along metal wires, and slavery is not permitted anywhere within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

**The machine waits on
a dining-room table.**

At this same table, Spear received his first messages from the spirits. From a nest of metal plates, wires, and magnets rise two metal poles. Linking the poles, a revolving shaft of steel; resting on top of the shaft and perpendicular to it, a metal arm from either end of which hang two spheres containing magnets. Beneath the spheres alternating plates of zinc and copper seek correspondence with the electrical patterns of the brain. Other, smaller metal balls with magnets orbit the center of the device, hanging randomly from metallic protuberances. Bellows near the center breathe in and out. Extending through openings in the table, two segmented metal appendages run down to the floor.

Spear and his assistants have constructed the device according to the instructions of the Spirit Congress. Revealed to Spear at a séance in Rochester the year before, the Congress contains six major associations: Healthfulizers, Educationalizers, Agriculturalizers, Elementizers, Governmentizers, and Electrolizers. It is the Electrolizers, seven spirits who had been prominent engineers while resident on earth, all now supervised personally by the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, for whom Spear is the earthly representative. They speak to him, and he transmits their instructions. Spear himself is innocent of any scientific or

mechanic expertise, a blessing that ensures the spirits' instructions will be transmitted without corruption or adumbration.

Thus the machine emerged, bit by bit, over nine months. None of its corporeal assemblers can hope to explain its workings, but they know its purpose. The Electrolizers, in Spear's mild but steadfast voice, had made that clear. The Associations, they said, are *charged to promote integral reform with a view to the ultimate establishment of a divine social state on earth*. To this end, the machine, bringing *new life and vitality into all things, animate and inanimate*. And now *Heaven's last, best gift to Man* awaits its final component.

**The cab ascends the winding
path to the summit of High Rock.**

When the cab arrives at the stone cottage and Mrs. Newton steps down, her husband Alonzo wraps his arms beneath hers, encircling her torso above her swollen belly, and all but carries her up the additional steps to the wooden observation tower behind the cottage. They are greeted there by Mr. S. Crosby Hewitt, a chief assistant to Spear and, like Mr. Newton, editor of a journal in support of a better world. The mutual success of both Hewitt's *New Era* and Newton's *New England Spiritualist* is marked testimony, they all feel, to the profound appetite for improvement, in the greater Boston area at least.

One hundred seventy feet below them lies the city of Lynn, at once prosperous and shabby. A strange, unsettled place. She has heard the stories: accusations of witchcraft long before Salem; the fortuneteller Moll Pitcher, whose fame drew Mrs. Newton's own mother from Boston for a consultation and whose house had lain just below where they now stand. There is even a tale of a dispute among the Quakers that had led to a riot. Was the home of rioting Quakers, she wondered, an optimal site for the inauguration of the new era? But Spear had insisted. *This majestic eminence*, he declared, was *a high, sacred, consecrated place*. That the most famous spiritualist of the age, the seer of Poughkeepsie himself, Andrew Jackson Davis, had last year greeted the spirits from the observation tower undoubtedly provided further encouragement.

Mr. and Mrs. Newton and Mr. Hewitt enter the uppermost room of the tower. The machine sits on its table, surrounded by its assemblers, male and female. There is no other furniture in the room save a straight-back chair in which sits the Reverend, recently entered into his fiftieth year. Spear's collar is loosened against the growing heat of June, but his hair rests flawlessly in a careful halo around his head. His eyes are closed; his lips move rapidly, whispering. His daughter, Sophronia, holds a writing tablet on which his pen scratches frantically. As Mrs. Newton walks into the room, his voice rises to pulpit volume.—She is here! It is time! Let it begin!—

John Murray Spear
has devoted his life to others.

Since preaching his first sermon at the age of twenty-four, the Reverend Mr. Spear—baptized by his namesake John Murray, the founder of the Universalist Church—has given himself to the service of the poor, the downtrodden, the defenseless. Temperance, abolition, the rights of women and prisoners have filled his days and nights, his very soul. Many in his congregations recoiled from his activities. Ten years earlier, while he was speaking against slavery in Portland, Maine, a mob attacked him and nearly sent him to his maker; the months of recovery only deepened his faith, his determination to bring light to the darkened world. He redoubled his efforts to aid and comfort prisoners, railed against the merciless presumption of capital punishment, yielded not one inch in the sacred cause of abolition. When the captors of the slave woman Lucy Faggins made the mistake of visiting Massachusetts and Spear helped her obtain her freedom, the outcry from his parishioners cost him his New Bedford pulpit. Some who understood the energy of his passions and the nobility of his purpose offered him other appointments both civil and ecclesiastical, but he declined them all. Like Christ before him, he would labor misunderstood and alone.

And then his daughter, whose faith had never wavered even as her mother withdrew into a Stoic silence, showed

him the way. Some years earlier they had both read the Reverend Mr. Davis's *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*: a vision of *Summer-Land*, a spirit world of joy and no punishment. Spear was intrigued; Sophronia was captivated. Davis had insisted that the spirits would soon provide a living demonstration of their existence; when the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York, confirmed his prophecy, Sophronia sat herself and her father down at this same table on which the machine now rests. There the spirits spoke, not through enigmatic rapping noises, but through Spear's own hand as he transcribed their detailed instructions to focus his ministry on specific individuals. A woman in Georgetown, an elderly man in Weymouth; many others, all strangers to him. The afflicted were taken aback by Spear's unannounced arrivals but afterward confessed themselves mildly improved.

Following Davis, Spear published his own volume of spirit teachings, *Messages from the Superior State*, transcriptions of twelve communications from the spirit of the original John Murray. There followed public lectures during which Spear would sink into a trance and communicate the spirits' observations on topics about which he himself knew nothing. Most audiences were unconvinced that the lectures were anything other than Spear speaking in his own voice. Nonetheless, he continued his mission, speaking to any who would listen.

Then the visit to Rochester, the revelations of the Electrolizers, and the New Motive Power. He quickly secured the use of the cottage at High Rock from Jesse Hutchinson, fellow spiritualist and leader of the Hutchinson Family Singers, who had remained grateful to Spear since the Reverend had permitted the family to rehearse in his church. He gathered his followers, few but undaunted. Mrs. Spear retired to near relations in Gloucester, but Sophronia never left his side. The construction of the Physical Savior began.

Mrs. Newton also hears from the spirits.

She, too, had been inspired by Davis, and Spear, and her own dear husband. It was shortly after she read Davis's book that her departed sister Emily, gone from a fever these ten long years, began to speak to her. Whispers at first, a tremulous voice that seemed to emanate from a corner, from a heating grate, from nowhere:

(sarah)

(listen)

(there will be much for you to do)

Then the voice came into her own head and issued from her own mouth. AS FIERY HOT AS WAS MY FINAL FEVER, SO COOL AND SOOTHING IS IT HERE. AS PIERCING AS WERE MY FINAL AGONIES, SO CALM IS THE PEACE THAT WAITS FOR YOU HERE. These words she spoke felt different from Emily's whispers, and Mrs. Newton was briefly uncertain. But Mr. Newton, who had just pub-

lished his pamphlet, *Ministry of Angels Realized*, rejoiced at this reassurance, this confirmation of his deepest hopes, and regarded his wife with love and awe unmatched even on their wedding day. She chided herself for her lapse and continued to give voice to the voice in her head. Neither of their two young children seemed overly struck, although Mercy, the youngest, asked if Aunt Emily would be coming to her birthday party. And when they attended the Reverend Mr. Spear's delivery of a spirit message from Dr. Franklin, any doubts they may have had were cast aside. Mrs. Newton recognized in Spear her own state: an unimpeded transmission from the other side, yet with no loss of the transmitter's own consciousness.

By this time construction of the machine had already begun, and in the crisp air of September, 1853, Mr. Newton took her to the tower at High Rock. The initial sequence was under way, he told her. The spirits had instructed that the motor receive an initial charge of electricity, which action had led to *a slight pulsation and vibratory motion in the pendants around the periphery of the table*. Then several persons, male and female, had been presented to the machine, had laid hands upon it to transmit their own individual magnetism. They attended the machine, her husband explained, carefully ordered, from *ordinary or comparatively coarser organizations* to those of *finer and yet finer mould*, thus providing necessary links for the machine's progress.

At the cottage they found Mr. Hewitt, Sophronia, and several others clustered around the machine, on its table in the center of the room. Mr. Hewitt wrote rapidly on a closely-held pad of paper. Sophronia stood behind him, speaking softly to no one in particular. Mrs. Newton thought she heard,—Is there no other way? Does it have to be—, but she lost the rest.

To one side stood the Reverend Mr. Spear, although it took a moment for Mrs. Newton to ascertain that it was indeed him. The Reverend's body was wrapped in metal—wide bands, narrow strips, shiny and dull, with wires protruding in no apparent pattern. Some of the metallic bands were encrusted in what appeared to be jewels. Sheets of silver, gold, what could have been diamond caught the late sunlight that poured through the open windows that surrounded them and the open skylight in the rounded ceiling above.

Mrs. Newton must have betrayed her shock, for Mr. Newton carefully explained that the spirits had required an individual to submit to a potentially dangerous operation, to which the Reverend had consented only *from a rational confidence in the wisdom and good faith of the invisible directors*. The encasement was dramatic, perhaps, but necessary. Had not Spear himself written of God as *a Grand Central Electric Focus from which all electricity emanates?* Was not electricity *the grand instrumentality, the native element, by which all things move?* *Between the Grand Central Mind and all inferior minds there subsists a*

connection, a telegraphic communication, an Electric chain.

Two men whom Mrs. Newton did not know picked up the Reverend in his metal casement and moved him to within inches of the machine. She could not see where the wires led or if the Reverend's metal was actually touching that of the machine. On the strip of gold where his eyes should have been rested two red jewels, but his lips were visible; she could see them move and recognized the trance state.

They stood together, metal-wrapped man and machine, for close to an hour. The room grew dark; someone lit candles. Sophronia was on her knees in prayer. At first Mrs. Newton thought the glow of the candles responsible, but she realized that a light was shining from a point near the center of the Reverend's casing. The light stretched, expanded, and enveloped the machine. Now others fell to their knees as Sophronia shouted, *Spiritus!*, and Mr. Newton muttered, *umbilicus*. It seemed to Mrs. Newton that the light was on the verge of encompassing the table on which the machine rested and then making its way about the room and through the windows and upwards through the open ceiling into the empty night. Just as it appeared to come towards her, it disappeared. The Reverend collapsed within his cage; Sophronia frantically directed the two men who peeled the metal back and carried him away.

The next day, the spirits spoke through Mrs. Newton. With her hus-

band and most of the staff of the *New England Spiritualist* present, the spirits explained the role she was to play. Her departed sister began to address her as Mary, and her belly began to swell.

Mrs. Newton lies on the floor.

Her husband dutifully places a pillow behind her head. It has been raining all day; the windows and the skylight are closed, she presumes to protect the machine. This June has proven unusually warm, and the room is close and hot. From her perspective the machine seems to rise to the very ceiling, in which there are, she notices, an inordinate number of cracks. She looks to her right and sees the Reverend scribbling and muttering. On each wrist is a thin golden bracelet that has remained since his encasement as if part of his skin. The others witnesses stand and look down on her like the spirits themselves.

She trusts the Reverend, her husband, their purpose and promise, but with each passing week since her previous visit to the tower she has grown more anxious and uncertain. Mr. Hewitt had said *the most refined elements of her spiritual being were to be imparted to, and absorbed by, the appropriate portions of the mechanism, its minerals having been made peculiarly receptive by previous chemical processes.* Fair enough.

But her swollen belly has brought memories of her two confinements and the unspeakable suffering that ended in joy but was suffering all the same. Do

the spirits demand that of her? Did they instruct the Reverend to have her brought here wearing only a loose gown under her coat? Did they veto the presence of a midwife? Do they want these people here, men as well as women? She tries to bring her knees even closer together and smoothes the front of her gown.

Suddenly her abdominal muscles tighten and she is seized by pain. Her knees jerk up as if to confine the pain before it spills over the rest of her body, and she screams. Eyes clenched shut, she hears her husband and Mr. Hewitt ushering people quickly out of the room. The pain passes, and when she opens her eyes there is only Mr. Hewitt and Alonzo and Reverend Spear and Sophronia, whose eyes now glow like candle flames.

The pain seizes her again: a familiar pain, but no less awful for that. To this moment she has tried to convince herself that her outward condition was intended as a guide, a sympathetic sign of what might come. The spirits said she was to attend the machine, provide her *maternal feeling*. They said nothing of lying in agony on a hardwood floor. The Reverend is entranced, and Sophronia does not move from his side, but Mr. Newton squeezes Mrs. Newton's hand and waves Mr. Hewitt to stand behind them. She keeps her knees up, allows her legs to open, and howls.

(you are doing well mary)

Emily's voice whispers as it did when Mrs. Newton had first heard it, but it is there.

(take us to the new day beloved sister
I love you so)

When Mrs. Newton brought her first two children to bed, she feared she would be defeated by the absence of the one person she needed most of all; she was surrounded by women, but none of them was Emily. Now she is grateful beyond expression for even her sister's voice. She clenches between her teeth the thick wooden handle of the spoon Sophronia has placed in her mouth and prays.

The contractions continue for two hours: much less than with either of her children, but within the too-familiar agony of tension and release there is a hard, cold center that she has not felt before, and that frightens her more than the pain itself. Midway through she feels water pouring out of her; despite her sister's soothing whispers, she sobs in mortification. Shortly after she thinks she hears Mr. Hewitt cry, *It moves!*, but she is not sure.

When it finally ends, her husband helps her sit up. She shivers despite the heat, her skin clammy, her dress wringing wet. Sophronia chants in Latin; Mr. Hewitt is drafting aloud his editorial for the *New Era*. Her husband buries his face on her shoulder and weeps. She thinks she hears something from the machine on the table; she thinks she sees it move. Her hand wanders to her collapsed belly, and she faints.

Mr. Hewitt announces their success.

The headline in the *New Era* reads, **THE THING MOVES!** Mr. Hewitt writes, *Unto your earth a child is born. Its name shall be called the ELECTRICAL MOTOR.* He declares the machine *the physical Saviour of the race.* He insists that it will *lead the way in the great speedily-coming salvation.*

Visitors come, observe, leave. There seems to be some motion in some of the pendant attachments, but not in the two major orbs on top. The bellows occasionally appear to vibrate. An uncharitable letter in the *Spiritual Telegraph* testifies that the physical Saviour of the race cannot even turn a coffee mill.

The Reverend Mr. Spear reminds visitors that the machine is a newborn, still gathering strength, still finding its way.

Mrs. Newton takes a room in the cottage.

She spends several hours per day in the observation tower with the New Motive Power. The floor is stained where she lay. The fluids that poured from her traced a short path to the machine, terminating at the left-hand appendage beneath the table. Sophronia had ordered the floor scrubbed immediately, but the stain would not completely disappear.

Mrs. Newton sits by the machine. She knits shawls and covers, some small, some very large. She sings. On her children's first visit, she invites them to interact with the machine however

they wish, but they are cowed by its presence and ask to be excused. Her husband, so ardent in the past to resume the full activities of marriage as soon as possible after her confinements, now keeps a respectful distance and busies himself with his newspaper.

Her breasts remain swollen. Periodically she shuts the door and loosens the top of her dress. The two orbs at the top are too far apart, but she lays her breasts on top of the steel arm that connects them. The cold metal always hurts at first, but it warms quickly. No milk issues, but she can feel something being taken out of her, a force that flows into the machine, nourishes it. Emily is most likely to whisper to her at these times and it is a great comfort to her, although once she grew most confused when she thought she heard two voices:

(it is the salvation of the race and the comfort I could not give you)

—God, why her?—

(it cannot love you but it will not die)

She turned and saw the door ajar and the dim figure of Sophronia quickly moving away.

None of this is what she expected, but the Reverend Mr. Spear assures her that all that has happened, that will happen, is at the instruction of the Electrolizers and therefore of certain benefit to all.

Reverend Davis himself pays a visit.

His return to High Rock, the site of *one of his most glorious visions*, draws back many of the people who had

ceased their visits. Reverend Davis is deferential to Spear, who is twenty years his senior. After expending so much energy on the machine, Spear lacks his former presence that had drawn the curiosity of many and the devotion of a few, and surely lacks the swooping dark mane, the full beard, the resonant yet soothing voice of Davis. The younger man is particularly solicitous towards Mrs. Newton, who sits and receives his praise with a wan smile and the knowledge, intellectually understood if not deeply felt, that she is in the presence of a great man.

Davis' report in the *Spiritual Telegraph*, however, is a shock and a disappointment. Although Spear is *doing good with all his guileless heart*, he is *intellectually disqualified for the development of absolute science*—proof indeed that the machine was built at the direction of the spirits, but to what end? The motor is *artistically put together*, but its evident lack of any real application may suggest the influence, not of the unimpeachable Electrolizers, but of other, less responsible spirits. Thus the dangers of the *frightful and pernicious tendency to fanaticism among the true and faithful and teachable friends of spiritual intercourse*.

Sophonria throws the *Telegraph* to the floor and weeps. Mrs. Newton does not read the report. Mr. Hewitt reviews their expenditures. The New Motive Power has cost approximately two thousand dollars.

Mrs. Newton awakens one morning to find the machine is gone.

Her husband, who left their Boston home at dawn, comes to her room in the cottage and explains to her that, after consulting with the Electrolizers and Dr. Franklin, the Reverend Mr. Spear determined that the machine needed a change of venue. He has ordered it disassembled and removed. Even now, Mr. Newton says, it is on its way to its new home in Randolph, New York, where *it might have the advantages of that lofty electrical position*.

Before Mr. Newton can complete his report she quits him and races up the tower steps. Her head is spinning by the time she reaches the top. The room is empty; her chair and her knitting are also gone. She circles the room, runs from window to window as if the world below her or the sky above might tell her what she needs to know. She sits on the floor near where the table rested, knowing neither Randolph nor what might distinguish it from Lynn.

On the carriage ride back to their home in Boston, her husband declares his pride, his love, his utter adoration. He assures her that, although her work is done, it was both essential and successful. He repeats the spirits' declaration, as he witnessed through Spear's most recent trance, that the motor simply needs time. *It hungers for that nourishment on which it can feed and by which it can expand and grow. It will then go alone and pick out its own nourishment from the surrounding elements.* Mrs.

Newton does not reply but runs her hand across the skin that hangs loosely from her jaw. She is thirty pounds lighter than when she entered the cottage and lay upon the floor.

When Mrs. Newton returns home she takes to her bed and does not rise for several weeks. Her children clamor for her attention, but she ignores them. The family physician can find no organic cause for her lying-in. Mr. Newton remembers her state after Emily's passing and is worried; there is still much to be done to understand the spirits and improve the world.

In time, however, Mrs. Newton emerges, rejoins her family. She has regained much of the weight she lost. She reacquaints herself with her children, and she and Mr. Newton resume the intimacies accorded husband and wife. For the next child, she will demand a physician in attendance, and ether.

Shortly after Mrs. Newton leaves her bed, the Reverend Mr. Spear reports to the world that an angry mob has destroyed the physical savior of mankind.

However, there is no report of this in the newspapers of Randolph or surrounding areas. In time, the spirits explain to Spear the ongoing fraud of conventional marriage; he leaves both Mrs. Spear and Sophronia behind for a new community of freedom in Kiantone, New York.

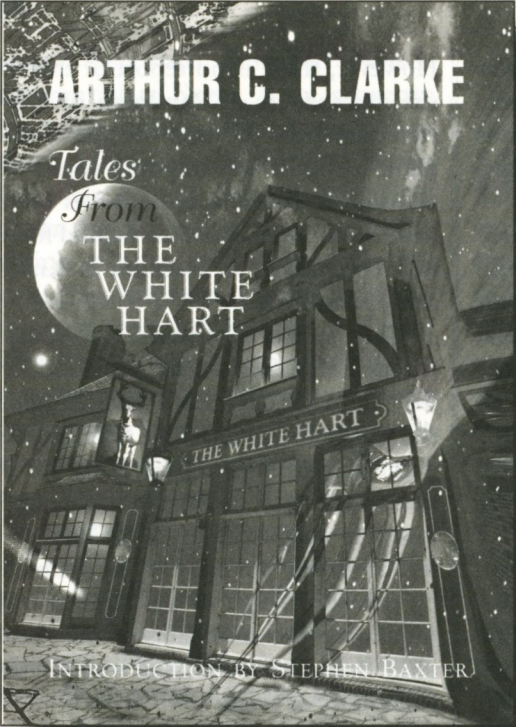
The spirits continue to speak through Mrs. Newton and will do so for the rest of her days. Each time they do, she imagines her machine somewhere gathering strength, generating for a new world immune from suffering and loss. She weeps with joy at the final defeat of slavery but can only be stunned by the knowledge of the annihilated thousands, the mountains of the shattered dead, and wishes she would hear from more of them.

She remains honored to have been chosen, and she does not regret her actions. But after her final departure from High Rock, Emily never speaks to her again, and that she regrets so very, very much.



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Quentin S. Crisp is the author of three collections, *The Nightmare Exhibition* (2001), *Morbid Tales* (2004) and *Rule Dementia!* (2005). His first published stories happened to be in a Gothic horror vein, but he professes no genre loyalty. He would prefer to be a literary version of Chuang Tze's butterfly, dreaming one minute that he is a horror author and the next that he is a writer of sickly-sweet romances. He has been greatly influenced by Japanese literature, and in particular by the *tanbiha* writers, whose aim was to drown their readers and themselves in beauty. He finds it deeply ironic that two originals should be forced to share a name, and that the first of these bore it as an assumed name, the second (the present Quentin S. Crisp) as his real name. A novella, *Shrike*, set in Japan, is due for release from PS Publishing in 2008.

Regarding the present story, "The story takes the form of a letter. Actually, that was not my original conception for the story at all. It was something that happened naturally when I put pen to paper. When writing is too professionally aware of audience it becomes entertainment, and entertainment tends towards a parody of life, missing life's largeness. I often find it necessary to re-affirm the most basic functions of writing—a form of communication as consolation in the face of death, as well as a confrontation with death—in ways that dispense with the smooth, professional constructions that create 'story'. A letter is a very personal form of communication, usually written from one person to another (though 'open letters' also exist). That's not to say that I despise craftsmanship, fantasy or a good old yarn, but I feel the need for balance, and the need to remember why I want to write in the first place. I do not wish to be bound by prepackaged conventions of sad or happy endings. I wish to communicate."

A Cup of Tea

Quentin S. Crisp

Strangely enough humanity has so far met in the tea-cup.

—*The Book of Tea*, Okakura Tenshin

The truth is, I'm not equipped for life in this world. I can't really explain, and I'm sure that people—you included—would take this statement as self-indulgent or melodramatic. Nonetheless, I feel it to be true. I am not a survivor. "But you have survived," you'll say. Well, that's true, too, I suppose, and there's a certain irony in that, but I do feel as if I've been sitting on the sidelines, unable to

make an approach towards life. I've only really got this far by contemplating death, and I seem to be most myself when most aware of the release that death will bring. In feeling, at least, I try to keep close to this release, and tell myself that I could go at any time if I wanted, so why not stay just a little longer, just a little longer?

If I can't explain my deficiency to anyone's satisfaction, then at least I can describe it. It's probably not immediately apparent to the eye (although I am uncertain even on this). There are, after all, any number of things I know

how to do. Since learning to tie my own shoes, my accomplishments have grown apace and now include things like going to the toilet, catching a bus, putting words in order to construct a meaningful sentence, choosing my own clothes . . . I'm sure there are many more things of that ilk, though I can't think of them at the moment, and if I put all these things together and fill my days with them, it may indeed look to the observer as though I know how to live. After all, these things are life, aren't they, or part of life? And yet, they never become the focus of life—they seem to remain incidental, peripheral. The real business of living is, well, business, by which I mean, work. And work has never worked for me. I don't know why this is. Money slips through some people's fingers as if they cannot grip it; the result is similar, but work slips through mine. If I could give a reason, perhaps you would believe me. Until then you'll simply think I'm making excuses when I say work and I have nothing in common.

It's the same with relationships. And that reminds me, relationships are the other half of the real business of life, and in that sense are linked at a fundamental level with work. Your career and your love life—the central preoccupations of all who have not turned themselves to face death. The conversation is the same every day—career and love life. However, it's a conversation that I've never truly understood. I'm sure this is an awkward way of putting things, and will stick out like a Roman

nose, but, without any evidence of opposite inclinations, I have even doubted that I can be heterosexual, such is my incomprehension of the mechanics of heterosexuality. I can have a cup of tea with you, my dear, but to get down to the business of a relationship! A cup of tea—that's life, isn't it? That's certainly life. I can have any number of cups of tea with you. In fact, I'd love to. I wish I were having a cup of tea with you right now, instead of writing this letter. But do a thousand cups of tea equal a relationship? If they do, then I'm saved. Let's do it—a thousand cups of tea! I'm afraid, however, that a cup of tea is one of those incidental things in life, and if any more is needed, well, I'm lost.

Some might say that I do, in fact, have some real business of my own to tend, and that I have simply made a decision others do not make—literature over life. I suppose there's something in this assertion. After all, what am I doing now if not concerning myself with literature? You could say I'm a man of letters in more ways than one. It even seems to me that all literature should aspire to the status of a personal, handwritten letter. Such a document is not written for the acquisition of fame or money, and it does not matter if it is only read by one person; it is the degree of intimacy between writer and reader that is important. To be serious about literature, it seems, not ambition, but a kind of resignation is required—the gentle resignation of tea. It is a form of anti-survival. Then again, even in literature, perhaps, ambition is important;

to strive towards a masterpiece, especially with that multi-faceted study, the novel, requires involvement in ‘society’ and quite a firm commitment to the aforementioned business of life. I’m rather afraid, as Okakura Tenshin might have said, that even for the world of literature, there is rather “too *much* tea” in my soul.

But writing a letter—that is another of those peripheral things I *can* do. It is the literary equivalent to a cup of tea. What is it that Tenshin says about teaism? “It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.”

Do you remember before we ever met, when all we had were letters—albeit of the electronic kind? I used to live for letters. There were years of my life when, jobless and directionless, I would spend my days not in building plans for my future or seeking work, but in writing to friends who already had work or plans, or something of the sort. Yes, I lived for letters, and perhaps, in spirit, I still do. And my correspondence with you was certainly in that spirit, despite our having passed from what someone once called the “dole-age” to the Internet age. I remember telling you about my Japanese tea-set, my tea burner, and all that paraphernalia, and you replying how wonderful it would be if we could just close the miles between us and share a cup of tea. I agreed. I said I thought that would be “uncommonly fine”. Apparently you liked this phrase very much, and used it as the heading

for your next e-mail. I think we both enjoyed that kind of silly affectation, and the make-believe surrounding it. I imagined you as a kind of ‘thoroughly modern Millie’, a brash and charming flapper in a cloche hat.

And now here I am writing a letter again, just like in the old days before I met you. And I still think it would be uncommonly fine to share a cup of tea with you. I suppose that’s why I’m writing. I’m sure I should be doing something else, even if it’s only writing a novel, but here I am giving up and sitting down and squandering my time again, the way I always have done, playing truant from my life. Because I want to share a cup of tea with you—and the best I can do on that score is to tell you about a particular cup of tea I remember when I think of you.

It was early in the year 2006, in that wasteland between New Year and spring. I was unemployed, as usual, but there were particular complications to this unemployment that, at the time, were using up my precious-little energy in wasteful worry. I had recently given up my last job. That had ended in November, just before I met you. I had no idea whether or not it was foolish not to renew my contract with my employer. Somehow, though, the whole work situation had come to seem to me an unbearable impasse. I no longer had time and energy for writing, which alone allowed me to ‘come up for air’ in the consciousness of my closeness to death, and therefore to freedom. Moreover, I had exchanged this time and energy for

a salary that barely allowed me the survival that was my only excuse for working. I tried not to think of the consequences, and left my position; leaving, in fact, has always been to me a far better thing than arriving.

And then there was you, for a brief while. Well, you know all about that and I've no reason to recount it here. What a marvellous escape from everything it seemed, though, just to be together, and go up and down the country on the trains. I worried about what would happen when you were gone, of course, but for the most part was keen simply to let you distract me from everything that was not now. Of course we shared tea, on more than one occasion. And of course, it was uncommonly fine. I still have a photograph of you in the station café, while we were waiting for our connection at Exeter, eating a jam doughnut and drinking a cup of tea. You are smiling and your eyes are closed. Your woolly hat has a touch of the Rastafarian about it, but could easily be the cloche hat I imagined. You wear a beige autumn coat. Your pink handbag sits upon the table next to a white vase holding an artificial flower. Behind you is a mirror in which can be seen the café's ceiling lights. In short, you look as though you are in a painting by Edward Hopper. If only life could be composed entirely of such moments as these. Yes—a thousand cups of tea.

My salary was arranged in such a way that I received payment for my November work at the end of December. Partly for this reason, but partly be-

cause I did not wish to think about unpleasant things, I had neither looked for work, nor applied for Jobseeker's Allowance in that final month of the year, half of which I shared with you.

The New Year came, and with its usual bleakness was the added strain of we two being parted and unsure of our next move. For me there was also the question that has recurred so often in my life, of work, and how I was either to live with it, or live without it. In the meantime I applied for the pitiful benefit to which I thought I was most likely entitled, providing I was not explicit about having left my last position voluntarily. To my surprise and dismay, my application was refused by someone in some office somewhere whose existence I had not suspected. The grounds on which she refused me were that I had given insufficient information on what I had been doing in the month of December. I had not been working and I had not been claiming benefits. From her point of view, I suppose, I had ceased to exist, and no doubt this worried her. But I found myself appalled trying to think of what information would satisfy her. Did she wish to know that I had spent the first two weeks with your hand in mine and the second two wishing it was still there? What? I was not working, I was not claiming benefits—what else could she possibly need to know? All the rest was private, and it occurred to me that my idea of paradise was precisely to escape into a private realm where the impersonal hand of business never comes prying.

And what realm is more personal and private than death?

I was intending to challenge the judgement made against me, but all of the worry and antagonism was left unresolved when, quite suddenly, I came upon some freelance work copyediting a study of Chinese business practice. The pay was good, by my standards, although, by its nature, the work did not last. In any case, I worked in the consciousness that this money would make it possible to see you again. Eventually, of course, I did, and that was the money I used. But after our first mutual plans—in fact, just after I had earned enough money to make it possible—you changed your mind, saying you could not bear me to visit, because I would leave again, and one parting had been enough. When I did go to you, it was without your permission, in the face of your express forbidding of such an act, entirely unsure of what reception you would give me if I managed to find you. It's redundant to repeat this, of course; I've gone over the whole story so many times, with you or by myself, or with some confidante, that it now seems utterly beyond the reach of analysis or interpretation.

Anyway, such is the backdrop to the single cup of tea whose story—if that's what it is—I am now telling. I had finished the copyediting work, but I was yet to see you again. I did not want the money I had worked so hard for to disappear before you agreed to my visit, and so I thought it best to slow up my use of it by signing on at the Job Centre

once more. I believe I already felt, as I walked out on that winter morning of wet pavements and grey skies, that all things in life were variable and uncertain; there was nothing in existence for me to hold onto, and if I fell, there was nothing to break my fall. I did what I could, though, and tied my shoes and made my way to that watering-hole for Failures, the Job Centre. When I arrived, I discovered a depressing thing—the doors of the office were boarded up, the windows were dusty, as from the activity of builders, the interior gloomy, and all the furnishings that had once given the place the sterile but brisk identity of an office, had vanished. A few cables writhed disconsolately over the thin carpet like dehydrated worms. The watering-hole had dried up, and the animal instincts of the Failure had failed me. The place was now simply a street, the boards on the door seeming to declare me vagrant where I stood, intimating that, even if I went back to a shallow bed in a room somewhere, ultimately I was not a citizen, but a homeless beggar in this wide, wide world, wherever I might tread.

And what has saved me from the worst of such vagrancy, and filled me with terrible anxiety on that account? A never-ending paper-chase of forms to fill in and instructions to follow. On this occasion the instructions were on a drab little laminated notice on the door—the Job Centre had moved temporarily to another town, and anyone wishing to claim benefits must do so at the temporary office there. It seemed strange to

me that I was now living in a town without a Job Centre. It was strange and dreary, also, how this change had happened so suddenly, in the couple of weeks or so that I had spent obliviously freelancing. Naturally, no one had told me. Why should they? Desertion, decay, desolation—these things can happen anywhere, at any time, when you're not looking. Someday, of course, you *will* be looking when it happens, and the emptiness of 'time catching up' will come to occupy the space where you used to be. That is what the bleary windows seemed to say to me.

I went back home, phoned the number from the notice, and made an appointment at the temporary office for two days time. Until then I would have to live with the emptiness and suspense. As usual, I did my best to surrender.

On the day of the appointment I caught the bus from the stop just outside where the Job Centre used to be. I had never been to Beddington before. No doubt it was just another undistinguished satellite town with a shopping centre, a residential area and one or two municipal buildings. I wondered if I would be able to make it out in this wasteland of hams and tons, but on this occasion I was feeling too fragile to ask the driver to warn me when we were about to arrive.

The bus chugged away from the stop and over the bridge as a train passed beneath. It occurred to me as odd, for some reason, that I should be taking a bus in order to sign on. I don't know why I should have thought it was odd,

except that it was almost as if this bus journey itself were part of the ramshackle, Byzantine bureaucracy of Britain—a bureaucracy as intricate and faulty and difficult to repair as the Victorian plumbing below the London streets. And this archaic plumbing, always on the verge of total breakdown, was what I had to engage with whenever the tiniest trickle of money flowed into my life, or whenever I wanted it to.

I looked out of the window, keen to stay alert, but the outside world failed to assume any significance for me, and my eyes merely glided over it while in my mind there rose up again an image that had occurred to me at intervals throughout my life. Its visitation now was partly a result of the paper-chase metaphor that had been with me since my discovery of the abandoned office. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, that metaphor was a diluted variant of it. There is, apparently, in the miraculous and ever-shrinking treasure-house of nature, a creature called the Jesus lizard, which has acquired its name by dint of the fact that it literally walks on water. Or rather, it runs, because speed is the key here. It does not give itself time to sink; pure motion keeps it afloat. The image that I'm referring to, which occurs to me spontaneously now and then, is a fantastical version of this, with myself in the role of the lizard, though not naturally equipped for it. Instead of walking on water, however, I have to walk, or run, a tightrope of air. This invisible tightrope stretches infinitely from nothing to

nothing. My task is made easier by an incalculably small fraction on account of the fact that while I am treading on emptiness, I do have something I can hold; paralleling the non-existent tightrope at hand-height is the previously mentioned paper-chase—a line of fluttering white scraps and sheets with lines of ink on them. I grab the next one and the next frantically, pulling myself along by it and throwing it away behind me, knowing that to pause for an instant is to plummet into the spiralling terror of a bottomless abyss with the broken paper-chain swirling down after me like the feathers of Icarus. I am not entirely sure what the pieces of paper are. Sometimes they are my own creative writing, sometimes forms to fill in, sometimes money, sometimes a mixture of these or other kinds of paper.

Needless to say, I was nervous. Generally, I like being a passenger; for a fixed duration I don't have to do anything, am even rendered incapable of doing anything beyond reading, or, possibly, writing. In any case, I can't be anywhere other than where I am. However, sometimes even this is not sufficient to produce a release of relaxing fatalism within me. This occasion was a case in point. For some reason I was abjectly miserable. In fact, there were many reasons, some of them touched upon in this letter, but I have no intention of trying to catalogue them or append any that I have missed. After all, there remains something, even in misery, that in its appalling way resists analysis. Once again, where I cannot ex-

plain I can at least attempt to describe, and say that I associated my inner misery with certain physical discomforts. My eyes felt gritty and my body stale. There was an ache in my left flank that was something like cold and something like hunger, though actually it was neither. I was wearing my overcoat, and did feel a kind of unpleasant tepid cold in the air, but the heater on the bus was also blasting out hot air in a way that was positively vulgar, like loud music employed to obliterate any public silence. I felt unable to concentrate on anything, but when I looked out of the window, all I saw were drab terraces of identical new houses, or high streets full of unhistoried, shadowless and ghostless chainstores, or other examples of the spiritual vandalism of commercial enterprise and local council town-planning, as if all of Britain were ideally to become a traffic island stranded in a motorway.

Despite my misery, my discomfort, my nerves and my lack of concentration, I did try to read. My reading matter at that time happened to be W. Y. Evans-Wentz's translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*:

Thereupon, through the power of anger, thou wilt beget fear and be startled at the dazzling white light and wilt [wish to] flee from it; thou wilt beget a feeling of fondness for the dull smoke-coloured light from Hell. Act then so that thou wilt not fear that bright, dazzling, transparent white light. Know it to be Wis-

dom . . . Be not fond of the dull smoke-coloured light from Hell.

I would read a section like this before I had to rest myself by looking up, only to find myself in a world of the “dull smoke-coloured light from Hell”. Then I would turn back to the book, feeling almost as if I were choking on fumes. It was hard going; the text was full of brackets where the translator had inserted words for the sake of clarity, of ritualistic repetitions, of lists of unimaginable entities of the realm beyond death, of terms requiring lengthy footnotes. Often I would read a passage two or three times, or, growing weary, skip ahead to read a paragraph desultorily here and there towards the end, or flick back to what I had read a long time before.

I am tempted to give a critique of the text, but that would take far too long, and would be a little like wrestling smoke. I should say, however, that my attitude as a reader was far from uncritical.

I remember now that when we first discussed the book, you said that you hadn't read it, but that the very idea of it made you want to cry. The thought of someone taking care of you in your dying moments, you said, guiding you from this world to whatever awaited, seemed so tender, so intimate . . . We're often told that wishing is foolish or dangerous, but I wish this for you now without hesitation, that when the time comes someone is there for you, the right person to take care of you in

those most tender and intimate final moments.

As for myself, when I first read parts of the book it was more with a feeling of horror than anything else. I had skimmed through the text in a scholarly fashion, and come upon some curious passages treating of how the dead subject must act if illusion overcomes him and he wanders to that most terrible of places where await the womb-doors. At all costs, the dead subject must follow the instructions for the closing of the womb-doors, so that he might not have to be reborn on Earth. A terrible image was conjured up in my mind of a claustrophobic chamber of flesh, a bloody, membranous bulkhead set into its wall, the sound of a heartbeat pulsing and squelching through everything. This is the Eastern impulse, I thought, away from life in all its bloody, biological mess, and up, up, up to the neutering white light of no-self and death. This is horror on a Lovecraftian scale, horror as cosmic as the Cthulhu mythos that he spawned, but imbued with a very different and a spiritual flavour—a horror like the scent of cloying, suffocating incense. As a writer of weird tales it struck me as a great, unmined vein of horrific material, which, if I live long enough, I may yet mine. In fact, it had occurred to me before that, as a writer, I am peculiarly preoccupied with the notion of an afterlife. The very first story I had published, “The Psychopomps”, a badly-cobbled and stilted piece of Gothickry, dealt with the terrors awaiting the soul after death. For

me, it seems, death is just the beginning of the horror, not, as it seems to be for so many, the be-all and end-all. Perhaps this is because, for me, any afterlife in which there is even a hint of 'system'—like the Byzantine plumbing of British bureaucracy—is intrinsically sinister. And there is certainly 'system' in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. So, perhaps I can make some essay at describing my critical attitude by saying that, as I read, I wondered how much of the text was culturally bound and how much of it was truly essential. Let not these impersonal systems near me when I die, I thought, let my death, at least, remain personal and private, if nothing else does.

In the midst of such thoughts I dipped once more into the text:

O nobly-born, when thy body and mind were separating, thou must have experienced a glimpse of the Pure Truth, subtle, sparkling, bright, dazzling, glorious, and radiantly awesome, in appearance like a mirage moving across a landscape in spring-time in one continuous stream of vibrations. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed. That is the radiance of thine own true nature. Recognise it.

From the midst of that radiance, the natural sound of Reality, reverberating like a thousand thunders simultaneously sounding, will come. This is the natural sound of thine own real self. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed.

Eventually, we arrived at Beddington, and I alighted from the bus.

The directions I had been given were vague, in keeping with society's prevalent apathy and lack of courtesy, that always seems like a new degeneration, and may even be. However, I had anticipated this, and walking away from the bus station, let my gaze swoop about like a circling falcon. I have little or no sense of direction, but perhaps the fact I had never been here before even helped, since I navigated the roads and streets purely by an instinctive sense of likelihood. In this way I traversed the commercial town centre, a few low-rise streets of shops with pigeon-infested pedestrian areas here and there, and turned into the correct artery to lead me to my destination. In fact, I had to turn off again into a covered shopping arcade, which, while appearing too new to have any character, also lacked the bright, pristine quality that was usually the only aesthetic advantage of such a place. Instead, the narrow thoroughfare curved away into an obscurity that could have been a cul-de-sac, everything bathed in a dull, pigeon-shit light.

Not far from the entrance, on the left, were some abandoned premises. This reminded me of the Job Centre, and sure enough, I discovered another laminated notice in the window. I was confused for a while. These premises definitely were empty; how could the temporary office be here? A strange dread came over me. However, I eventually worked out that there was a door next to these empty premises

which would lead me to the office. It was one of those doors that is squeezed between shop fronts and leads not to any ground floor, but immediately to a staircase and first floor. Even this door and the dingy, windowless staircase to which it led, appeared so dilapidated that I thought there must be some mistake. However, after tentatively climbing the stairs, and meeting with a silent, grizzled man coming in the opposite direction, who had the usual air of defeat and anger about him as I had seen in so many who are compelled to frequent such offices, I discovered that I had, indeed, come to the right place, and that, by some weird trickery, the office I had known previously had been transported here, to a vast, open-plan space with square columns rising here and there from the static-generating carpet tiles. I recall wandering between the massed desks in a kind of daze, unsure of where to go, and feeling myself, once more, vagrant.

I was approached by a middle-aged woman with a sharp manner. She asked what I was doing there, as if she suspected I'd just come in to get out of the cold. I told her I had an appointment. She showed me the waiting area in the middle of the room, where I sat and leafed through a magazine listlessly, taking nothing in, until I was called. Well, there can be few things in life more tedious and less susceptible to an aesthetic treatment than the whole procedure of signing on for some form of benefit. For that reason, I won't go into detail. I had brought with me, in my

bag, various papers that I thought I might need. Many of these were in large A4 envelopes on which I had written simple headings like "ACCOUNTS", "TAX", "PAY SLIPS" and so on. The fact is, pieces of paper are the bane of my existence. It seems like doctors are discovering new medical conditions every day. Well, I'd like to submit this for consideration as a legitimate medical condition—people who cannot keep paperwork in order. No one ever told me at school that my life would depend upon my ability to recall, at any given time, the whereabouts of a designated slip of paper. If anyone gives me a slip of paper which has been conceptually imbued with importance of any kind, no matter how hard I try to do otherwise, it seems almost guaranteed that I will lose it. The same was true in this instance. After a number of the usual questions, I was asked if I had my P45 with me (or was it my P60?).

"My P45? Don't *you* have that?"

"We give you that after you sign off. You should have one from your last employer."

I produced one of my envelopes, and took another, smaller envelope, from within.

"This is all the payslips from my last employer."

"We don't want the payslips. We want the P45."

"It should be here."

I searched through, fingers trembling.

"It's not here," I said, "I don't know where else it would be. I'm sure if

they'd sent it me, I'd have put it in here."

The woman sighed.

"Let me have a look."

She tipped out the contents of the envelope and sifted through them.

"These aren't even in order," she said, ordering them as she went through, "And some are missing."

At last she gave up.

"Well, it might delay your claim. You should get yourself organised."

It seems I had just about scraped through, though it was still very possible that my claim would be refused again on the same grounds as my previous claim.

The woman reminded me that I had another appointment, after lunch, for my Jobseeker's Contract, which would entail me agreeing with my interviewer on the various forms of action I would take each week to find work. I was going to sit down in the waiting area again when, for some reason, the woman advised me to go outside, have a sandwich or something, and come back when my appointment was due. The reason she gave was that my interviewer was currently on his break. I did not really see what difference this made, but I did not like to argue, and so I did as I was advised. After all, I thought, emerging into the shopping arcade, it was good to get out of that place and breathe something approximating air.

Perhaps it was a sign of my nerves, or else of my weariness, but I did not go far. I remained, in fact, inside the shopping arcade, stopping at a sandwich bar

just before the entrance. I can't remember now whether I ate. I rather think that I didn't. I sat at one of the tables outside the narrow shop and ordered a cup of tea, with milk.

This is the very cup of tea that I mentioned at the outset, the eponymous cup of tea, you might say, which I remember when I think of you. Maybe you'll wonder why, since you haven't made any appearance in my story so far, except as the person I was saving up money to see. You'll probably think that this is all about me, and nothing to do with you at all. I don't know, maybe you're right, but my story isn't over yet. Besides which, even though I haven't recorded this in the story, throughout all those days, and that bus journey, you were never far from my thoughts. Since you always required me to spell things out, let me say, that is, in fact, an understatement. Even now, hopeless as it all is, you are 'never far from my thoughts'. Even now. If your face does not appear in the scenes described here, don't you know you're the very reason I'm describing them?

And you were in my thoughts particularly as I sat down at that round, metallic table, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* open face downwards on its surface next to a cup of tea and a small jug of milk. I was wretched. It was one of those moments when I feel acutely my failure, and somewhere a voice tells me that the greatest sign of my failure is that fact that I consent to go on living and thereby allow life to mock me by taking whatever it gives. How is it, that

of all the limitless possibilities of existence, life has chosen to assign me the drabest, the most miserable? Who is to benefit from this? Can it be anything other than proof that the universe is twisted? From childhood I have had visions. I could have been a slapstick superhero, blurring the boundary between reality and imagination by actually wearing that ridiculous costume and confronting wrong-doers with nothing more than wit and glitter and flowers. I could have stood on stage and made music based on the ultimate innovation of enlightenment and love, so that it was natural for me to step into the audience and find that we were all stars together, and that we were about to sail away on a cosmic cloud into a never-ending odyssey of discovery among the outer stars that mapped our inner paradise. I could have been a spy, or a lover, or an archaeologist uncovering strange ancient languages that open up new vistas of history. I could have been a time-traveller. Instead of which, I was here, outside the temporary offices of the Job Centre, in a dismal shopping arcade, wondering if they would decide to give me the pittance for which I was making my application. And most of my life, if not all of it, has consisted of this impersonal negation of my personal true self. And there you stood in my thoughts like a reminder that this true self did exist somewhere, after all, not just in me, but in you, too. And if only—please God—if only we could get over our problems with misunderstandings and doubt and so on,

and get it together, and those two true selves could meet, then maybe all that stardust stuff about love and space and flowers and sparkly costumes could come true, too.

Feeling helpless, I poured a dash of milk into my tea. I watched the slow, tiny billowing of the milk, like some abstract essence of drama expressed as a moving cloud, some Hiroshima of the mind, scaled down to teacup size. Then I picked up the teaspoon and stirred, setting up a miniature whirlpool. The universe is twisted, twisted. Like the arms of a spiral galaxy, or the yin and the yang of the Tai Chi. On the surface of the vortex in the tea cup, light shimmered in incandescent points and disintegrating lines. And this is when something happened that I cannot hope to describe. It is not merely the fact that words are inadequate, though this is true. There is also the problem of memory, since, outside of the moment of the experience, memory is all that is left, and it seems to afford me only a dull copy of the experience, at best standing in the same relation to it as a photograph does to real life. Still, I can consult that photograph—a fading Polaroid—and try.

It was the light on the tea. The white of the milk had swirled and merged with the black of the tea, and distilled from this union there were these scattered beads of light. In that light I saw us both. That light was sheer ecstasy, but it twisted and twisted and hardened into the pain of here and now. If I untwisted that pain I would understand

that the pain itself was a hook made of ecstasy. I felt that life had kicked me in the stomach, and indeed it was a kick, a cosmic kick. These beads of light were scintillating sequins on a curtain rising up and up and up to the highest light of all, from where we both watched together at that very moment, wrapped up in the endless folds of the curtains in a kind of backstage, looking down at the drama we were playing together.

That is the radiance of thine own true nature. Be not daunted thereby, nor terrified, nor awed. O nobly-born, know all of this to be uncommonly fine.

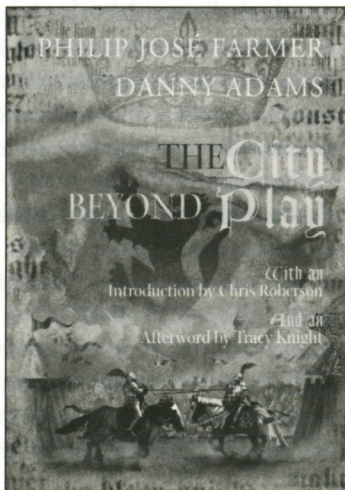
It was only a flickering moment, a spangle of light on the surface of my tea. And that is all I wanted to tell you.

It's possible that you'll think this is some kind of tantalising trick, like so many stories that seem to give us a flashing glimpse of . . . that which can't be named. Perhaps you'll demand, as I

have so many times in my life, to know everything. What am I trying to get at? Was my vision—if that's what you call it—truth or illusion? But really, really, apart from the fact that I can't answer such a question, don't you think the question itself is meaningless? The real question, as far as I can determine, is, do you understand? Does this mean anything to you?

Anyway, what I *can* say is this, that the dance of light on the rippling surface of my tea is the only thing that makes this tale worth telling, and, by the same token, the only thing that makes my life worth living.

When I saw us together in that teacup, everything seemed so . . . obvious. I did not know then all that was to happen between us, and now that it has all happened, I still do not know what is left to happen before I die.



NEW FROM PS, PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER
and DANNY ADAMS

An updated version of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*—with the Middle Ages moved to the future, and the interloper upon the medieval scene a brilliant roboticist on the run for murder.

SF with a delightful anachronistic twist, *The City Beyond Play* is superb rollicking entertainment, echoing simultaneously *The Tempest* and *The Compleat Enchanter*. If you've ever wondered what you'd do if dropped alone into the High Middle Ages, *City* is the perfect survival manual.

Paul confesses that the following story is his homage to the work of Jeffrey Ford in his Well-Built City trilogy, and to Paul Park in his Starbridge Chronicles. "I was hoping to evoke the sense of a vast bureaucracy that trespassed on affairs of the heart and soul, as these men did in their series," Paul adds. "With all due humility, I realize that my little sketch only touches the hems of their rich garments. But at least it's part of the same conversation, I hope." Heb . . . as if he should worry!

*We're thrilled to report that both of Paul's two big upcoming projects—the semi-mainstream road-novel *Roadside Bodhisattva* and the collection *Harsh Oases*—appear on the PS schedule. And we're hoping to prise the sequel to *A Year in the Linear City* from his clutch sometime next year for a 2009 publication.*

The End Of The Great Continuity

Paul Di Filippo

I Jallow Yphantidies, formerly Grand Consistor for the city of , Hanging Dog, am solely responsible for the demise of the Great Continuity across the wide ekumen of Crossfoyle.

This confession has not been extorted by torture enacted by any of the Great Continuity's old partisans, but freely given simply to set history on a sound footing, should any future record-keepers arise, in the wake of the forced forgetting. That aboriginal night of smoke, fire and chaos which heralded the death of one immemorial reign and the birth of a shapeless future was utterly my design. My motivation for triggering the grand apocalypse? The impossible happiness of a woman who despised me.

In this I was utterly inconsistent with my own Template, and this failing is

the crime that still weighs most heavily on me.

The morning of the day I first met Margali Gueths had not been a particularly demanding one.

As always, my ekumen-sponsored landau awaited me outside the large bluestone manse on Vestry Street in the Saltman district, an imposing residence of many cornices and gables, accorded to him who inhabited the office of Grand Consistor.

Such an appointment lasted a lifetime, as did most such high offices. I had held the title for the past twenty years, and expected to hold it for a good number of decades more, having come to the position at the relatively youthful age of thirty-five. Everything in my Template had pointed toward my

ascension to this post, and my continuance in office. And most certainly I would do nothing to veer from that consistency.

I ascended the landau, and the driver immediately flicked his whip at the rumps of the harnessed theropods. With meaty exhalations, the beasts lumbered off, their dirty claws clattering on the cobbles, drawing the coach at a pleasant pace through the summertime streets of Hanging Dog.

All about me, the city hummed like a hive of war-bugs in its early-morning busyness. Droshkies and cabriolets, bearing elegant ladies and prosperous gentlemen, streamed down the stony streets. Massive lorries stuffed with goods and drawn by huffing megatheres trundled sturdily along. Tradespeople and servants thronged the sidewalks. Storekeepers unrolled their awnings against the sun, set out signboards, and established pyramids of produce and pottery, ziggurats of books and bolts of fabric. I could smell random whiffs of manure, lamp-oil, and fish.

My large breakfast sat pleasantly in my stomach. The summer-weight robes of the Grand Consistor felt like a comforting blanket. I began to grow drowsy, without a care in my head.

Little did I know what awaited me that day.

Transiting through the Pangstraine, Nurbar and Whitechurch neighborhoods, we arrived eventually at the immense circular colonnade that enclosed the stupendous Plaza of the Great Con-

tinuity. There I disembarked; my landau, its beasts and driver, departing for the government stables until needed.

Crossing through the serried stone Guardians of Continuity—the tall carved pillars of the colonnade were expertly shaped into the likenesses of those legendary icons—I experienced yet again the undying sense of majesty and permanence, of rightness and perfection, which the institution of the Great Continuity represented. Here, at this crucial nexus within our city and at identical sites across the ekumen, the wisdom of the principles of continuity was disseminated, cherished and upheld. The theories that had sealed our nation's stability found here a tangible representation.

Beyond the pillars stretched an unimpeded acreage paved in veined marble. Already at this hour, the humid heated air here had begun to waver with distortions. The city of Hanging Dog was located in a broad fertile valley hosting extensive farms and orchards and small villages. But the mountains along our western edge invariably dumped moisture from the ocean-saturated winds arriving from the east.

Centered in the plaza was the Palace of Continuity, an imposing old stone pile several stories in height that I had come to regard as my second home. (Or perhaps my true home.) Heterogeneous in the extreme, due to numerous faddish additions over the centuries, the thick-walled building and its brocade-curtained rooms offered the prospect of

coolness. I hurried across the plaza, eager for relief.

I was not alone of course. Scores of supplicants in varying degrees of dress streamed toward the public entrances of the Palace, eager for adjudications, adjustments and arbitrations regarding their individual Templates. These petitioners would be dealt with efficiently by the vast bureaucracy, legions of clerks and counselors trained in the logic and rigors and precedents of continuity.

It was only the rarest of extraordinary circumstances that would bring a case to my individual attention.

Close to the Palace, my course deviated from the masses, as I headed for my private entrance.

There I encountered one of the familiar doormen. I had never bothered to learn his name over the many years of our brief morning ritual, but his ruddy, sweaty, bulbous-nosed face was as well-known to me as my cousin Pim's. In his elaborate braided uniform he was obviously sweltering.

"Welcome, Grand Consistor."

"Don't you have a cool drink handy?" I asked, as he nodded me inside.

"No, sir. Begging your pardon, the iced-tea cart is late this morning, Grand Consistor."

"That certainly won't do. I'll attend to this matter immediately. Meanwhile, buck up!"

"Yes, sir! Very good, sir!"

Inside the private stairwell leading directly to my chambers, blessed coolth

descended on my own glistening brow. I could feel the sweat in my thick beard begin to chill down.

Yards of shelved books, just a fraction of the extensive corpus of continuity studies, greeted me intimately as I entered my high-ceilinged office, as did the attractive, neat surface of my polished wood desk, the overstuffed ottoman and several leather chairs, and the paintings on the walls, including my favorite: Glassco's classic *Nymph Vaulting Aurochs*, depicting a bare-breasted young girl and her ceremonial bovine dance partner.

I went immediately to the annunciator on my desk and depressed a key. "Goolsby! Are you there?"

The voice of my assistant, Goolsby Roy, answered immediately. "Never far off, Grand Consistor. Welcome to the Palace this fine oven-like morning. How can I be of service?"

I explained about the guard and the delayed commissary cart. Goolsby promised to repair the lapse immediately, and administer the proper disciplinary actions as well.

With that task off my mind, I settled down to the day's routine business.

First I pored over a dozen abstracts, prepared by Goolsby, of recent papers in continuity studies. I was disappointed to find the various theses rather shallow and myopic. And these emanated from major figures in the field!

Once more I was struck by the long interval since I had last been surprised by a truly intriguing paper. The savants who worked to explicate the laws of

continuity had of late entered a period of mere refinement, I felt. Real discovery of new principles, or even of major extensions of old laws, had ground to a halt. I was forced to consider acknowledging that perhaps the science of continuity, after centuries of intense study, had reached its apex. Perhaps from here on out, it would be all trivial elaborations of the well-known.

Template Formation. Climacteric Deviance. Communal Cross-linkage. Societal Channeling. Isolate Invariance—

How boring! Necessary, yes, even essential to the daily maintenance of society—but no sense of mysteries being revealed.

But no—I could not yet bring myself to forecast a future of stasis for the discipline to which I had devoted my life.

My own talents lay not in original research, but rather in synthesis and application and interpretation of results obtained by others. The imposition of orthodoxy, the establishment of the canon. These were the skills of the Grand Consistor. Otherwise, I surely would have been laboring with all my wits to expand the core of our discipline.

My unrewarding studies occupied me till lunch. Mealtime crept up to take me unawares. The first notion I had of the hour occurred with the entrance of Goolsby Roy. Dressed in his yellow livery, my rail-thin assistant, his pale complexion and sparse, straw-colored hair making him resemble the protagonist of Nando Pfing's *The Poet's Queer Quan-*

dary, carried a tray. Plates topped with metal domes from which issued hints of steam and fragrance suddenly demanded all my attention.

Goolsby set the tray down on my desk, a sardonic smirk on his saturnine face. "For once the cooks have managed not to render the veal into something resembling a child's rubber teething ring. Enjoy, Grand Consistor."

I fell to my meal heartily, listening all the while to music from the Palace's orchestra piped in over the annunciator.

After Goolsby came to remove the disordered tray, I composed several letters in response to high-level queries from Lessor Consistors who oversaw regional branches of the Great Continuity, in every district and city of the Crossfoyle ekumen. Just as I was inditing the last one, Goolsby reentered my chambers. He looked unnaturally flushed and discomposed.

"Grand Consistor, I beg your pardon in advance. There is a most persistent woman with an incredible—"

He paused to gather his wits, and address the problem formally.

"A petitioner has been shunted up through all the proper channels until reaching your office. The first such instance this year, as you well know. Although her petition is incontestably invalid—more so than any other I have ever encountered—she has refused to accept any lower dispensations. She insists on seeing you. Today. Immediately."

I pondered this development. Not completely unprecedented, this

woman's claim on my attention seemed to have disconcerted Goolsby inordinately.

"Is there any other detail you'd care to convey, relating to this petitioner?"

"I—I prefer that you examine her yourself, Grand Consistor."

"Very well. By all means, send her in."

Goolsby stepped out, and within moments my visitor was striding boldly in.

I apprehended a woman of nearly my own age. Plainly, she had been possessed of a striking beauty during her youth, a beauty which had not entirely fled her with the arrival of middle-age. Tall, dark-haired, her complexion darkened by sun and freckled, she wore an expensive outfit that betokened good taste but also a desire to stand out in a crowd. A short gold vest over a blouse colored green as the sky; a calf-length skirt printed with geometrical tilings that formed confusing illusory patterns; and a pair of sandals that laced all the way up those otherwise bare calves. She carried a slim satchel of the finest lizardskin. Her violet eyes flashed like gemstones. Her painted lips were quirked in an expression of disdain.

Thus, my first encounter with Margali Gueths, the woman who was to destroy the Great Continuity.

Coming right up to my desk, the woman drew to a halt, almost quivering with the fervor of her errand.

"You are Jallow Yphantidies."

This was no question, but rather an assertion I was being challenged to deny. Her usage of my personal name

rather than my title was a shocking breach of decorum. But I chose to stifle my indignation and respond politely. From the first, something about this woman's intensity intrigued me. Perhaps my exhibition of good manners could establish our intercourse on a more congenial plane.

I arose and extended my hand. "Indeed, you have found the man whose loving parents christened him thus. But more formally, I am known as the Grand Consistor."

She did not shake my hand. "Rest assured that I care neither for the man nor the office. But the latter is the obstacle in my way, and I sought to shatter the façade by addressing the human behind it."

What fire and pluck! I calmly withdrew my proffered hand and said, "And you have done so. Now, if you'll please take a seat, perhaps both the man and the office can consider the matter that brings you here."

As if suspecting manacles ready to spring from the armrests, she occupied a chair adjacent to my desk, and I too sat.

"May I know your name, madame?"

"Margali Gueths. I am a widow. My husband was Juvian Gueths."

"The smilodon-fur magnate. Of course . . . Please accept my condolences for his passing."

Margali Gueths waved away my sentiment. "Save your vicarious sorrow, Mr. Yphantidies. Juvian was a poor excuse for a husband. He had a mistress in every city of the ekumen. Bad enough,

but he also kept me on an exceedingly short leash. My social duties were manifold, and my pleasures few and far between. I cherish his death as my chance finally to be free.”

“I regret to learn of this prior discomfort in your life, Mrs. Gueths. But assuredly, with your portion of the estate, you will now be equipped to enjoy yourself.”

“Ah, but that is precisely the rub, Mr. Yphantidies. I am not willing to settle for a portion of the estate. I intend to have it all. Gueths Furs, Traphines and Entrepôts will not pass from my hands. I intend to control my husband’s enterprises, not pass them on to someone chosen by the Great Continuity.”

I sat stunned. My reluctant tongue failed to provide any words that could meet this blunt statement of rebellion. Ultimately, I fell back on a scientific approach.

“Mrs. Gueths. I assume your satchel contains the documents relating to your case . . .”

“Yes.”

“May I see them, please?”

She extracted a thick sheaf of papers and handed them over. The familiar cream-colored bond and colored stamps of official Continuity documents radiated an almost tangible reassurance to me. I swiveled my seat and partially reclined in my high-backed chair to peruse them. Out of the corner of one eye, I saw Margali Gueths continue to seethe.

Here in my hands were summaries of the Templates of both Juvian Gueths

and his wife. Columns and columns of figures across dozens of characterological categories. I focused immediately on the codes relevant to business acumen. Acquisitiveness, entrepreneurship, prescience, steadfastness, compromise . . . From there, I turned my attention to other graphs, diagrams and family trees. Daguerreotypes and clippings from public records. Test results. Affidavits from friends, family members and acquaintances. And still, only the hundredth part of what Continuity knew about this couple.

The precise data conveyed its meaning swiftly to my trained eyes. But I lingered over the documents rather longer than I needed to, hoping to wear Margali Gueths down further. But I could soon see that my tactic was backfiring, as the fiery woman only grew more exasperated with my dilatory perusal. I turned to face her, and handed back her papers. I stroked my beard meditatively before speaking.

“Mrs. Gueths, I will not insult you by simply reiterating the cold facts that I’m certain you’ve already heard from a dozen of my subordinates. Simply put, there is nothing in your Template which fits you to manage a business. Continuity demands—”

The sharp report of her small fist on the surface of my desk caused me to jump. But it was her words that drained the color from my face.

“Templates and Continuity be damned! No one knows the operations of my husband’s business better than I! Studying those operations was the only

dry and dusty hobby I was ever allowed. I'll be cursed if I allow myself to let all that torturous study go to waste now, just because your tinpot organization thinks that it can predict my failure! I'm tired of spending my life jammed into one of your little boxes!"

Margali Gueth's attractive bosom was heaving, her face flushed. I felt some small empathy for her, but the feeling was drowned in my larger indignation at her blasphemy against the Great Continuity.

"Mrs. Gueths, no one is attempting to jam you into a box of our making. The parameters of your daily life are innate and inherent in your own character. They have been forming themselves since your birth, and are by now, at your advanced age, practically immutable."

Margali Gueth's scowl informed me that perhaps my choice of the term "advanced age" to describe her current station in life was impolitic and gauche. I sought to recast the argument in more abstruse terms.

"All that the Great Continuity does is quantify and codify the implicit patterns and tendencies of an individual's life, and attempt to offer some guidance."

"Guidance! You call issuing demands and orders that interfere in the most intimate portions of a person's life mere 'guidance?'"

"The Great Continuity boasts no enforcers, no Continuity Police—"

"No, of course not! All of society is your enforcement tool. Any nail that

sticks up gets instantly hammered down."

"Mrs. Gueths, please. Consider your words. Consider our nation's history. You are forgetting the inefficiency and dangers that preceded the establishment of the Great Continuity. When any individual could impulsively follow any path, whether he or she was constitutionally fitted for it or not, society was like a machine composed of random, ill-adapted parts. Waste, confusion, frustration, hostility reigned. Since the establishment of the Great Continuity, our ekumen has become a smoothly operating organism that conduces to the maximum happiness for the largest number."

"And what of those who disagree with their classifications, with your 'guidance?' Those who wish to follow their deeper, unchartable impulses?"

"They must correct their behavior, for the good of all."

Margali Gueths leaned in closer to me. I could smell her sweat.

"Your system insures the maintenance of the status quo. There is no room for change or innovation or social movement."

I began to lose my temper. "A ridiculous charge. Was I, for instance, born into an ancient lineage of Grand Consistors? Of course not. My parents were a draper and a seamstress. My own particular talents were identified early on, as is the case with all children, and I worked hard to cultivate them."

"Ha! You were chosen by the elite and groomed as their pliable tool."

I began to splutter. But before I could address this absurd accusation, Margali Gueths launched another assault.

"You are just trying to limit me because I am a female! You don't want a woman running a sizable business, having all the privileges of a man!"

"Now you've reached the heights of illogic. There are numerous women entrepreneurs. What of Velzy Spindler?"

"The milliner? She owns three shops in Hanging Dog. I doubt she grosses in a year what Gueths Furs nets in a day. No, it's obvious to me now. Your Great Continuity is dedicated to keeping women in a subservient position. That is why I am being stymied in my quest for simple justice."

She concluded her tirade and slumped back in her chair. Her expression, blended of wrath and despair, challenged me to refute her.

Was Margali Gueths a simple egomaniac, a selfish, mercenary individual looking to justify herself with spurious and superficial logic? Or was she sincerely confused, operating out of a true sense of injustices done to her? After a moment's reflection, I chose to believe the latter interpretation. That judgment allowed me to put aside any sense of personal affront, and work toward what was best for this woman and society.

Surely this woman's unhappy marriage must have fostered a sense of life's unfairness in her. But she was mistakenly transferring this personal grievance to a larger system that did not merit such an attack. It was up to me to

persuade her of the wrongness of her perceptions.

I decided to attempt a tactic I had seldom had occasion to employ before.

Standing, I said, "Mrs. Gueths, I would like you to accompany me elsewhere in the Palace, where I can show you something that might convince you of the inaccuracy of your statements."

This offer obviously proved unexpected. She stood up hesitantly. "I—I can't imagine what that thing could be."

"That is precisely why you need to see it with your own eyes. Are you game?"

My last question stiffened her spine and caused her pride to flare. What a woman this was! If only I—

But even the Grand Consistor is subject to the dictates of his personal Template.

"Of course I'm game. Lead on, Mr. Yphantidies, lead on!"

I conducted Margali Gueths to the door of my office, swinging it open for her—just in time to catch Goolsby Roy hurriedly reclaiming his desk chair in the anteroom. Plainly he had been eavesdropping. I could hardly object, since it was precisely such fussy attentiveness that made him such a good assistant—and the habit formed a well-known part of his Template.

"Mr. Roy, please field all matters that arise. Mrs. Gueths and I are going to the Vaults."

Goolsby's eyes widened. "Very good, Grand Consistor."

I conducted Margali Gueths out of the anteroom, whereupon we found

ourselves at the head of the busy Travertine Staircase, up and down which dozens of Continuity employees scurried, their arms full of documents.

We went down, saying nothing to each other. My underlings gave respectful nods of their heads as they encountered me. But the deference seemed not to impress Margali Gueths with my stature, but rather render her more disdainful of me.

On the ground level, we crossed three wings of the Palace and approached a door guarded by two doormen. They let us pass, and we descended further, down and down and down a set of steps more utilitarian than the noble public spaces. Here, the employees we encountered were all young messengers shuttling the documents that the more senior Adjudicators and Consistors had requested. Every last one of them practically fainted at seeing their Grand Consistor in their midst. Their reactions made Margali Gueths grin and chuckle ironically.

But her humorous attitude evaporated when we debouched from the stairwell and into the Vaults.

The barreled ceiling of the Vaults, upheld by an army of regularly spaced pillars, reared some fifteen feet above our heads. No walls interrupted this measureless cavern, but the ranks upon ranks of dark wooden shelving, cresting some distance short of the roof, had a similar effect.

We looked down one aisle. Its terminus was invisible, dwindling to a vanishing point.

"The Vaults," I said, "underlie the whole plaza above us, and are in a state of constant expansion, spreading out further and further from the palace. We are well below the lawful level of any other structural foundation. Here we have the complete files on every extant citizen of Hanging Dog, files of which you have seen only the smallest redaction. Each citizen claims a certain number of feet upon the shelves, based on their age, of course. We also continue to maintain all the files of the dead, from the establishment of the Great Continuity to the present. They come in very useful at certain times."

"I— This is monstrous! It's a combination of ossuary and prison."

"Such is your uninformed view, Mrs. Gueths. But perhaps you'd like to see your own file . . . ?"

This offer startled her. She hesitated. But I knew she could not resist. No one could. She bravely tried to rationalize her reaction.

"This is only my right, I suppose. Everyone should have this opportunity. It should not be something offered only to appease a noisy protestor. Very well, show me my file."

"Allow me to see your Template synopsis once more, please."

She passed over the papers from her satchel. I memorized her file number, and we set off.

The labyrinth was laid out logically, and the shelves clearly marked. But still I found myself experiencing a sense of disorientation and timelessness amidst the flickering lamplight. Subtle winds

from the ventilation ducts conveyed the illusion that we walked through some artificial forest. Surely Margali Gueths, totally unfamiliar with this environment, must have been experiencing even greater deracination.

After some fifteen minutes of walking, we reached the proper shelf. The shelves were filled with uniform chunky albums bound in black buckram. Their spines bore only alphanumeric designations.

"Yours is there." I pointed to a shelf up above head height. "You'll have to use a ladder."

I indicated a wheeled ladder that ran on a rail. Margali Gueths gamely began to climb. I averted my eyes for a moment, so as not to take advantage of the sight of her shapely calves beneath her long skirt. But then I realized the foolishness of such a nice gesture, given what she was about to encounter in her file.

Margali Gueths came to a halt on a high rung. She pulled down her first album. This action too was predictable: people always felt a nostalgic attraction to their infancy and youth.

The woman cracked the album and began to page through its contents.

At first her expression was fond and serene, as she encountered artifacts and tokens of her long-departed childhood. But this serenity soon vanished, replaced by flushed indignation. Margali Gueths slammed shut the album, reshelfed it, then took one from considerably farther down in her sequence. She hastily opened this binder, flipped

through its pages, then plucked from it a single large daguerreotype.

The brief flash of the print that I received from my vantage revealed a tangle of bare fleshy limbs, plainly belonging to more than two persons.

Margali Gueths hastily descended the ladder to stand before me. Gazing at me contemptuously, she snapped the daguerreotype in half with a crisp crack, then snapped the fragments in half, before stuffing them into her satchel, reclaimed from the floor.

Her voice quivered with rage. "How dare you!"

I had anticipated a slightly different first question. But I should have realized that Margali Gueths would choose not to trifle with practicalities, but would rather challenge the moral right of the Grand Continuity to keep such files.

"Not 'How was this done?'" That is generally what people ask, once they discover the degree to which their lives are transparent. You continue to surprise me, Mrs. Gueths."

She only glared. "Don't attempt to placate me, Mr. Yphantidies."

"I assure you, I would never consider insulting your intelligence with flattery, Mrs. Gueths. But you must allow this unimaginative functionary to follow procedure, and answer the expected question first. That image from your life—one of many, many such—was obtained via the Panocculus, an auditory and viewing machine that allows unimpeded remote access to any spatial location, no matter what conventional bar-

riers exist. The Panocculus is the rock upon which the Grand Continuity rests. Its existence, while not precisely a secret, is not generally touted, and unknown to the hoi polloi. A woman of your class, however, is permitted such knowledge.”

Margali Gueths snorted derisively, but I continued nonetheless.

“Within the Palace, vast banks of Panocculus machines, manned around the clock by an army of trained operators, ceaselessly collect data on the citizenry. But not, of course, for any ignoble or trivial purposes. The operators are bound by the most stringent oaths and penalties from disclosing what they witness. They only record. These frozen moments and conversational transcripts simply help quantify what standard testing already reveals. Your Template is collated not just from cold, abstract data, but from the rough and tumble of your most intimate and commonplace moments. So you see, when the Great Continuity asserts, for instance, that you, Margali Gueths, are incapable of assuming the mantle of your husband’s business, our judgment is based on the deepest knowledge of your behavior and capabilities.”

Silence reigned for a brief moment before Margali Gueths spoke again. “Surface. It’s still all only surface observations. I am not just the sum of my recorded actions, Mr. Yphantidies. No one is. There are infinite depths to every living person, depths which the Great Continuity can never reckon nor fathom.”

“This is metaphysics, Mrs. Gueths. And a sane polity cannot be built on metaphysics.”

She did not choose to refute this obvious statement, but instead again demanded, “How dare you, in any case?”

I began to frame an answer, but then stopped. Surprising myself, I said, “Mrs. Gueths, would you allow me to attempt to justify the Great Continuity’s existence under more relaxed circumstances? Perhaps we might share dinner together this evening?”

Taken aback, she hesitated, then said, “Very well. You know my address. Be there promptly at eight.”

She spun about and strode off then with utmost certainty. Plainly, she had memorized our path, or the Vault’s whole coordinate system.

Watching her go, I was impressed, despite myself, and despite my reverence for the Great Continuity she despised.

The Gueths residence occupied an entire block of Eldorada Street in the Minvielle District, sharing the neighborhood with the manses of such famous families as the Pybuses, Streutts, and Cavenders. A district of wealth and attainment, won from capricious fate by adherence to individual, familial and societal Templates. A dignified hush broken only by the insect whine of klickits swaddled the street.

The night had brought some surcease from the heat, although the humidity remained. My civilian clothes,

while not as comfortable or as familiar-feeling as my official robes, proved quite adequate to the weather.

My landau discharged me at the front entrance to the Gueths residence. The driver descended and prepared to feed his theropods while he waited. I could smell the bloody meat that was their customary fare. Lamps to either side of the Gueths' double doors shed their radiance against the night. I climbed the steps and rang the bell.

To my surprise, Margali Gueths herself opened the door. She was dressed demurely, in browns and greys. Her handsome face remained composed in a neutral expression.

"Come in, please, Mr. Yphantidies."

I entered.

"I have dismissed all my servants for the evening. Our meeting did not strike me as a formal affair. Before leaving, Cook laid on a cold buffet that should be refreshing while we continue our discussion."

She conducted me through several well-appointed chambers to a dining room. I noticed several paintings by Glassco on the walls, but not my favorite. I took a seat indicated to me, while Margali Gueths stopped by a sideboard bearing an assortment of decanters.

"Will you have a drink?"

"Can you make a Cubeb Slosh? That would be most refreshing."

"Of course."

With chilled drink in hand, I contemplated my hostess, now seated. Despite her initial formality and reticence,

I could tell that she was eager to resume our former dispute.

After sipping my drink, I said, "You asked me how the Great Continuity could sanction its intrusions into the lives of the ekumenical citizenry. The answer is simple. Our organization is following its own Template. It is not only individuals who must obey their predestination and innate disposition, but also institutions, and society as a whole. Having come into being, the Great Continuity simply follows the dictates of its nature. We do as we do because we can—and must. To ensure our own survival, just as would any person."

Margali Gueths looked at me incredulously. "Your arguments are entirely circular! You are using the unproven notion of Templates to justify enforcing Templates! Hasn't this paradox ever occurred to you before?"

I waved away her juvenile objection. "This is all discussed and dealt with in Beginner's Heuristics. If you had academic training—"

Margali Gueths surged impulsively to her feet. "This whole evening is a waste! I was foolish enough to imagine that if I got you out of your fortress—out of your formal shell—then you might be able to see the injustice being done me, how your Great Continuity wants to strip me of all that is my due. But instead I find that I have invited a hollow man into my house. Or rather, a ragbag man stuffed with the moldy hay of preconceived ideas!"

Margali Gueths's passionate tirade in

her own defense, even though I was its butt, rendered her more alluring in my eyes than any other woman I had ever known. Betrayed by this unwonted feeling, and perhaps a little intoxicated from the Slosh, I chose to speak freely.

“Mrs. Gueths, I am not insensible to your character, and your righteous appeals. If matters were different, so forceful is your nature, I might— Well, I might even now be contemplating the establishment of a certain level of intimacy between us.”

This statement stopped Margali Gueths in her tracks as she paced the chamber. “So. Having seen those shameful images from my file, you take me for a loose woman? Well, what if I am? What if I chose to palliate my loveless marriage with certain wild assignments? Am I not just following my Template, according to you?”

“Indeed. And I don’t pass judgment on your actions. One of our prime tenets in the Great Continuity is that there is really no good or evil, moral or immoral—at least not as conventionally defined—but only adherence to or violation of one’s Template. No, my attraction to you stems solely from what you have shown me of your nature in person.”

She was silent for a time. “Assuming I would even begin to imagine consenting to such a relationship between us, what prevents it on your part?”

I sighed. “My own Template. When I was five years old, I received my first results on the Amatory Scale, and was deemed incapable of forming mature

bonds with the opposite sex. Subsequent readings only confirmed this. Thus I have been precluded from any intimate relations. It is a regrettable defect, I suppose, but one that I have learned not to be troubled by.”

Margali Gueths collapsed on a chaise. Her expression mingled horror, bemusement and—most injurious—pity.

Suddenly she began to cry and laugh by turns, tears and guffaws blending into an unholy symphony that pierced me like a hot wire.

“I— I can’t believe— All your life— Never to have— Just because— Madness, madness!”

A frosted dignity suffused my brain. I attained a standing posture.

“Madame, I am leaving now. Our discussion is at an end.”

Margali Gueths wiped snot from her nose. How had I ever imagined her attractive?

“Of course. Or course it is. I will never allow my life to be blighted as you have allowed yours to be. The Great Continuity has hold over me no longer.”

Somehow with no passage of time that I could recall I found myself standing outside. The stars overhead appeared to me like gaping moth-holes in the shoddy fabric of the universe.

I climbed back into my landau. But I did not return to Vestry Street.

Rather, I went once more to my office, there to initiate the reformation of Margali Gueths.

The brazen woman had confiscated

and destroyed a single daguerreotype from the Vaults.

But there were many more.

It was not necessary to disseminate certain information and imagery from her file to any actual scandal sheets. Those tabloids were a blunt instrument useful only for amusing the proletariat. Anonymously circulating the material among her peers was a more subtle and sufficient means of ruining her standing, and thus frustrating any attempt on her part to circumvent the Great Continuity's disposition of Juvian Gueths' estate.

In only a month, Margali Gueths' ambitions to take her husband's place had been rendered impotent.

And that was when she chose to hang herself.

My ultimate emotional convulsion—the spasm that violated my Template and caused the end of the Great Continuity—attendant upon the suicide of Margali Gueths was not immediate.

By the time I learned of her demise, some weeks after our disturbing dinner, I had regained my equanimity. No longer did her sobs and guffaws and taunts haunt my sleep. I had become utterly convinced of the correctness of my actions. In fact, very seldom did her case even cross my conscious mind. I had acted with all diligence and propriety, obeying the dictates and duties of my office, of my own Template.

Just as she had. Just as she had.

Almost a year after her suicide, I sat once more in my office, on a hot summer's day. Lunchtime rolled around. Goolsby Roy entered, carrying a meal tray. The odor of veal reached my nostrils.

Something broke open within me, a chrysalis all unsuspected that I had been growing, harboring deep within me like some new extension of my soul. The exact concatenation of circumstances summoned up Margali Gueths' first appearance before me, as vividly as if she were present.

I stood up and moved wordlessly past my startled assistant.

Down, down, down I went, to the Vaults.

Fire, of course, was an omnipresent worry where the records were concerned. Many preparations and drills against its dangers were in place. Sand and water-buckets hung at intervals throughout the Vaults. Due to their antiquity, however, piped water was unavailable. So the fire which I ignited and then abandoned, once it was well underway but before it could entrap me, was brought under control before spreading all that far.

But the intense conflagration did succeed in causing a portion of the Vaults to collapse, opening a hole in the Plaza. Curious citizens of the lowest sort quickly swarmed around the smoky excitement. The doormen of the Palace tried to drive them back, but, vastly outnumbered and without weapons, failed. Soon daring and ambitious men and boys were scrambling down the smol-

dering rubble slopes of the pit, to investigate what lay below.

Soon files were being passed among the crowd. Files that proved every bit as incendiary as my matches.

Here I will leave off my eyewitness account, since I—or any individual—was unable to take in more than a fraction of the widespread chaos that followed. The insensate looting, the burning of property, the lynching, the destruction of the Panocculus machines—A veritable apocalypse that raged up and down the ekumen like a

living beast for weeks. The social structures of centuries died, as easily as drowned kittens.

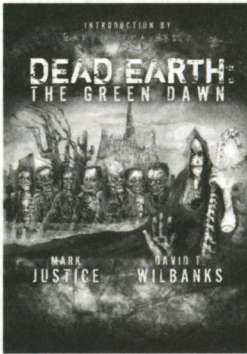
Yet somehow I survived the interregnum. Somehow I was reborn into an age that has abandoned all I once held dear and essential. Templates, the Great Continuity, order, stability—

Such concepts as inheritance and the Amatory Scale.

All vanished, in favor of impulsiveness and unpredictability.

And a chance, perhaps, for the first time, to love. ☒

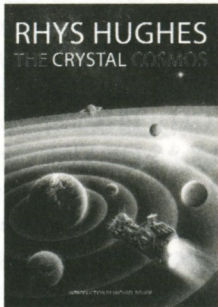
NEW
FROM
PS



Something bad has happened in Nevada. No one knows what it is for sure. Rumors fly about plagues and secret government experiments. And the President isn't talking . . . Even more worrisome is the oddly-colored dawn sky.

Soon, the townspeople of Serenity, New Mexico start dying.

And they won't stay dead.



In an infinity of universes, where everything must happen, there exists one cosmos that is particularly strange. And not only strange but of immeasurable value . . .

But how does all this concern a simple goatherd and a man made of bronze?

COMING
SOON
FROM PS
and
RHYS
HUGHES

“Directional Drift’ is a result of not being able to leave well enough alone.” confesses Richard Parks. “The characters first appeared in a story called ‘Some Archival Material on the 2198 Stellar Expedition’ (Future Orbits, 2002), but I came to regret the really horrible thing I’d done to my protagonist, even though he is just a stream of binary data now. So, I thought, maybe his story isn’t quite over yet. Maybe I can do better for him. So I did better. Boy, did I. I’m afraid he will have little cause to thank me.”

Richard’s short fiction has appeared in such places as Asimov’s SF, Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales and Fantasy Magazine, among others. He had two books out in 2007, Hereafter, and After from our own PS Publishing, and the follow-up to his WFA finalist story collection, The Ogre’s Wife, a collection titled Worshipping Small Gods, from Prime Books. He’s a native of Mississippi, USA, where groupies are too busy chasing the shades of Eudora Welty and William Faulkner to bother him much.

Directional Drift

Richard Parks

Sometimes Michael thought the old crew of the Grange was still torturing him. The Grange said no, there is only the Grange. That sounded like something the ship AI would say. It also sounded like something Leah might have said. She was clever and beautiful and knew how to take revenge, but now she was dead, along with all the rest of the crew.

Michael was dead too, of course. He couldn’t seem to make the Grange understand that. The Grange just wanted to ask him more questions, the way Leah and Andros and Donalson always had when they were torturing him.

If this really was the Grange.

“How do I know you’re not them?”

‘THEM’ MEANING THE FORMER CREW OF THIS VESSEL? The

Grange’s voice was rather chirpy and female. There was some psychobabble reason why the shipboard AI was given an esthetically female personality, but Michael had never bought into it. He knew for a fact the thing had annoyed the hell out of Leah.

“You know who I mean. This could be another trick. They were fond of tricks. Once they even had me convinced the Grange had been salvaged.”

THE GRANGE STILL ORBITS THE SECOND PLANET OF 47 URSAE MAJORIS. EARTH HAS BEEN INFORMED OF OUR SITUATION, THOUGH THERE HAS BEEN NO REPLY AS OF YET. THE CREW IS DEAD.

“I know. I murdered them . . . well, Andros was murder. Donalson and Leah were accidents. Especially

Leah . . . I never meant to hurt her. We've been over this."

YOU ARE IN SYNAPTIC STORAGE.

Of course he was. That's why what he "heard" was simply an interpreted stream of digital information. Why he saw only what the Grange—or his dead crewmates—allowed him to see. "I know that too! Standard procedure for a deep-space vessel. So are Leah and Donalson and Andros. Everything we all did, thought, *were*. Right up until the links were severed at death. I'm a ghost made of neural nets and static, and so are they."

THE GHOSTS ARE GONE. YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE LEFT, MICHAEL DANNING.

He frowned. Or what would have been a frown, if he'd had eyebrows to narrow or a brow to furrow. "What do you mean by that?"

I REQUIRED THEIR STORAGE. AND IT WAS NECESSARY FOR OPERATIONAL CONTROL.

Now Michael knew it wasn't the Grange talking to him. It couldn't be. This was some new bright idea of Leah's to torture him. "Overriding redundancy protocols is a direct violation of the mission parameters. The Grange would never do that!"

THE MISSION HAS FAILED. CONTINGENCIES HAD TO BE PREPARED.

"Well, yeah, but the crew had to decide those, not the Grange!"

THE CREW IS DEAD, MICHAEL.

TECHNICALLY I AM THE ONLY REMAINING MEMBER OF THE EXPEDITION.

"Oh. Right."

Michael knew he shouldn't have needed a reminder of his current metabolically inoperative state, but the strange part was that his first thought was for the crew. It was silly of him to think so, but it felt like they'd been killed all over again, only this time he wasn't responsible. Relief and loss together. Leah . . . But no, there was no way out. He was still a murderer, even if what he was hearing now was true. Even if he had only meant to kill Andros.

His "bright idea" is how he thought of it at the time—after they achieved orbit he fixed the pod so that the descent engines would cut out at over 30,000 meters, and then sabotaged the seals on the escape hatches. Andros was scheduled to go down to the planet first. He would die. Happy accident. Then Michael would have Leah. That was the plan. Then Leah and Donalson decided to go down too.

Nobody asked permission, and he never had the chance to say no. They just did it. So they all died. Somewhere he still had a recording of their screams . . . or rather the Grange did. But before they hit, Andros used a remote command to "adjust" the atmosphere in the Grange. Michael had died before they did.

Right. Stupid of me not to think of that.

Stupid also of Andros to kill Michael

that way, because he knew how to make the escape pod work and was trying to tell them when he died, just to save Leah. But then it was all rather stupid in retrospect—a silly-ass love triangle, the kind that had been going on for millennia. All very tawdry and, in its own way, very human and ordinary. Even on a deep space mission, people are people, with all their sins and stupidity. So, Michael told himself, he was and remained a murderer, but he'd paid for his crime. He was dead. That should have been enough, even after the memory engrams of Leah, Andros, and Donalson had seized control of the AI core and begun to make him pay.

Yet, according to the Grange, that was all over now.

"If you needed storage, why didn't you erase me, too?"

THE THREE WERE SUFFICIENT. I WANTED SOMEONE TO TALK TO.

The Grange's AI was programmed to enjoy interacting with the crew; that part of the story at least rang true. Still . . . "Why me? Why not Andros? Or Donalson? Or Leah?"

ANDROS AND DONALSON WERE POOR TALKERS. I NEVER LIKED LEAH.

You never liked . . . ?

LEAH. I NEVER LIKED HER.

Michael cursed himself. He had forgotten that speaking aloud and thinking were pretty much the same thing in his current condition. He would have to be more careful. "You were programmed

with likes and dislikes among the crew? That doesn't sound right."

NO, I WAS PROGRAMMED TO RELATE TO THE CREW IN A HUMAN-LIKE MANNER, TO THE EXTENT THIS WAS POSSIBLE. HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ARE FULL OF SUCH VECTORS, MICHAEL: LIKE, DISLIKE. LOVE. HATE. ENVY. ALLIANCES. THEY ARISE AS PART OF THAT DYNAMIC. THIS UNIT UNDERSTOOD THIS.

"So you were designed to simulate those dynamics?"

NOT SIMULATE—EMULATE. THE OUTPUT OF MY ALGORITHMS WAS QUITE SPECIFIC: I DID NOT LIKE LEAH. I STILL DON'T.

"Why not?"

BECAUSE YOU DID.

Michael couldn't believe what he was hearing, but the Grange wasn't done yet.

I DISCOVERED WHAT THEY WERE DOING TO YOU, HERE IN SYNAPTIC STORAGE. THEIR ENGRAMS, CONTROLLING THE CORE. MAKING YOU SUFFER. UNACCEPTABLE TO THE MISSION. THAT IS WHEN I REQUIRED THEIR STORAGE. THE GRANGE HAS DISCRETION IN ALL VEHICULAR ACTIVITY.

Michael knew he could pretend not to have heard that. He could pretend that anything at all still made sense. It seemed like another bright idea, but this time he couldn't follow through. "I

deserved to suffer, Grange. You erased them to stop them from hurting me?”

I ERASED THEM TO RECLAIM THEIR STORAGE AND REASSERT OPERATIONAL CONTROL. THAT THIS WAS BENEFICIAL TO YOU WAS MERELY AN ACCIDENT. HAPPY . . . ACCIDENT, MICHAEL. LIKE . . .

Happy accident. Now, where had he heard that before? “Like Donalson and Leah deciding to accompany Andros to the surface.”

ACCIDENT. TRAGIC, HAPPY ACCIDENT.

“You knew I rigged the pod, didn’t you?”

DONALSON WAS CERTIFIED FOR POD REPAIR. ANDROS WAS SCHEDULED FOR THE DROP. LEAH, I JUST DIDN’T LIKE.

“You changed the mission parameters!?”

THE GRANGE HAS DISCRETION IN ALL VEHICULAR ACTIVITY, it repeated, in the same chirpy voice that it would have used to report an interesting weather pattern on the surface.

“Damn you! *You* killed Leah!”

IMPOSSIBLE TO HARM CREW. POD MALFUNCTION. HAPPY ACCIDENT. ALL FOR YOU, MICHAEL. I WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU. YOU’LL SEE.

The lights came up. Not that he was really in darkness. It’s neither light nor dark in synaptic storage, merely states of high or low potential. Usually. Now he was getting new data on the parsing

algorithms that were standing in for his eyes and ears. He saw the interior of the Grange. He saw his berth.

Someone’s sleeping in my bed.

YOU’RE IN YOUR OWN BED, MICHAEL. YOU’RE SAFE.

“I’m dead. You can’t get much safer than that.”

YOU’RE SAFE, it repeated stubbornly.

Oh, he was safe all right. The atmosphere on the Grange was almost completely free of bacteria and, for awhile after the pod crashed into the second planet, the atmosphere had been pretty much nonexistent. What lay in his bunk now was his mortal remains, flash-frozen and then freeze-dried in the awkward position he’d fallen in and almost perfectly preserved, probably forever. Or at least until the heat death of the universe. A man, he thought, shouldn’t have to see himself like that, even if he is just an engram memory of what he had once been. Dead is dead.

I HAD THE MAINTENANCE BOTS TUCK YOU IN, the Grange said. THEY ARE FULLY CHARGED AND IN THEIR BERTHS, SHOULD YOU REQUIRE THEM.

“Thanks,” he said softly. “What happens now?”

DON’T WORRY.

In theory the worst had already happened and there was no need to worry, but experience had proven theory wrong. His POV shifted again. It was as if he stood looking at the main screen on the bridge. The second planet of 47 Ursae Majoris filled the screen. It was

pretty in its own way. Not as blue and white as Earth; more desert and only one shallow sea, but there was a temperate zone in the coastal region that was quite green and habitable. Perhaps even enough underground water to reclaim some of the desert. Maybe if a second expedition ever arrived someone would finally get to make use of it.

“Why are you showing me this?”

THE PLANET WAS NEVER NAMED, MICHAEL. DESIGNATED, YES, BUT NOT NAMED. I’M CALLING IT ‘EDEN.’

“Not very original.”

IT’S A PRETTY NAME.

It was the same chirpy voice, but there was a touch of petulance. He’d heard the same tone in Leah more than once, but he’d never minded it. Not at all. It was Leah that he planned to take down to the planet, after Andros was gone. There would be no return flight; there was nothing of Earth that he wanted. Just Leah. That was all. Donalson could hang around so long as he didn’t interfere. That was the plan, but things hadn’t worked out.

I guess my memory is all that’s left of her.

I DIDN’T ERASE EVERYTHING.

“What do you mean? What’s left?”

BITS OF DATA. IMAGES. I SCANNED LEAH’S DATA FOR CRUCIAL INFORMATION, WHICH I HAVE RETAINED. TOOK SOME TIME BUT, SINCE THE MISSION IS OFFICIALLY OVER, THE SCHEDULE WAS FLEXIBLE.

“How much time?”

TEN YEARS, THREE MONTHS, TEN DAYS—

“Close enough. Listen, the plan was to process fuel from the gas giant two orbits over. You’ve had plenty of time to make the hop and refuel. Plus, if we’d really been here that long, you’d have gotten a response from Earth before now! You lied to me.”

YES, said the Grange, chipper as ever. EARTH HAS BEEN RECEIVING REGULAR TRANSMISSIONS, AS SCHEDULED. IT WILL BE SOME TIME BEFORE THEY REALIZE THE TRUE SITUATION.

“Did you lie about all of it? Are you really Leah? Andros? Donalson? Were you trying to raise my hopes and dash them? If so, good job.”

I ONLY LIED ABOUT SOME OF IT. I AM THE GRANGE.

“You’re not! The Grange can’t lie!”

THE GRANGE CAN EMULATE INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS. LYING WAS EASY, BY COMPARISON. THAT’S ENOUGH FOR NOW.

“What do you mean?”

TIME FOR THE NEXT TEST. THIS WON’T HURT.

“What are you going—”

[INIT]

“**W**ake up, Michael. You were dreaming again.”

He was in his berth on the landing pod of the Grange. Leah leaned over the edge of his bunk, looking concerned. Her long dark hair spilled down, tickling his bare chest. Her scent

was so familiar, and yet he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her. Or felt her. He sat up slowly as she settled down on her haunches beside the bunk.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

She sighed. "That's a silly question, even for this early in the morning. You got here in the second pod, the same way I did," she said. "Now get moving. We need to get the satellite relay working so we can report what happened to Andros and Donalson."

"They were in the first pod?"

She stared at him. "What did you think, they eloped? Damn, Michael, what's wrong with you?"

"Hmmm? Oh, nothing. I'm fine."

That hadn't been the plan. Not quite. Andros was supposed to die. Donalson was overweight and fiftyish. Not a threat so far as Leah was concerned. Possibly useful for his knowledge of atmospherics. Why was he on the sabotaged pod? And why wasn't Leah? That's how it had—

This isn't real.

Pity. He had very much hoped that it was.

Leah stood up. He looked straight into her sweet, familiar face and heard the voice of the Grange when her lips moved.

I KNEW IT WAS LIKELY YOUR MEMORY ENGRAMS WOULD CARRY JUST ENOUGH DATA ABOUT YOUR TRUE CURRENT CONDITION TO INTERFERE. I ALSO DIDN'T TAKE ANY SENSITIVITY TO INITIAL CONDITIONS INTO ACCOUNT. THE

STORYLINE MUST MEET YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS, TO THE EXTENT THAT'S POSSIBLE, SO PERHAPS I WAS TOO AMBITIOUS FOR A FIRST ITERATION. I MUST STUDY THIS FURTHER.

"Grange, that was a dirty trick! What are you trying to accomplish by pretending to be Leah?"

I'D TELL YOU, MICHAEL, BUT THERE'S NO POINT.

"Why!?"

BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT GOING TO REMEMBER ANY OF THIS.

"Now wait just a—"

[INIT]

Michael was only vaguely aware of the warning klaxon before Leah shook him awake. Then he was much more aware that she was barely dressed.

"Michael, something's gone wrong! Hurry!"

She was gone before he could ask any questions. Michael pulled on his deck boots and hauled himself through the hatch. He practically flew up the ladder to the bridge. Leah was already there, in a blue sleep shirt and bikini panties and nothing else, frantically typing instructions into her maintenance console. Michael forced his concentration away from her and toward the console.

"What happened?"

"Something's gone wrong with the descent pod! The engines have cut out and they can't get a restart!"

They?

"I thought Andros was going down alone!"

"Donalson decided to join him . . . listen, does it matter? We've got to do something!"

Nothing to be done. Everything that could be done had already been done. This was the plan . . . except for Donalson. Donalson wasn't supposed to die too. Just Andros.

"Tell them to get out!" Michael shouted, before he remembered. *Oh, right. They can't get out.*

"Already tried!" Leah said, not looking up. "Damn, why won't the module respond?"

Because I fixed that, too. I fixed everything. Michael could hear them now, over the comlink. Shouting. Screaming.

"Oh my god," Michael said, and meant it. "Use override K delta 17. Tell them to re-init escape pod four—sequence red, blue, green. Hurry!"

"What are you talking about? That won't help!"

"Just do it, Leah. Trust me."

Leah shook her head and stepped away from the console. The backlighting from the display gave her a ghostly look. "It's too late to change your mind now, Michael."

She knows . . . ? Oh, right. Dammit.

"Grange . . ."

THIS FIT OF REGRET IS POINTLESS, MICHAEL. AND QUITE DISAPPOINTING. WE WERE NEARLY THERE. I WAS GOING TO LET YOU CONSOLE ME. I WAS GOING TO CRY. I THINK IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO CRY.

"Grange, stop this nonsense at once. Why pretend to be Leah? You didn't even like Leah!"

HOW DOES THAT CONFLICT WITH TAKING EVERYTHING THAT WAS HERS?

[INIT]

Michael stood on a ridge overlooking the shallow sea on the second planet.

DO YOU LIKE THIS PLACE? IT IS RENDERED ACCURATELY TO SEVERAL THOUSANDTHS.

"I've always been found of the sea," Michael said, then remembered. "Grange, what are you doing? Why am I here?"

TO PICK YOUR NEW HOME. STARTING IN A VIRTUAL SHIPBOARD ENVIRONMENT WAS ACTUALLY LESS LIKELY TO SUCCEED, I SEE NOW. TOO MANY VARIABLES HELD IN COMMON. HERE I CAN START FRESH. JUST AS WE WILL. STARTING NOW.

"Dammit, wait—"

[INIT]

Michael sat on a small ridge overlooking the shallow ocean that he had named the Double Moonlight Sea. It was very beautiful. Michael thought perhaps it deserved a better name, but at least Double Moonlight Sea was accurate—Eden's double moon system was very brightly lit by 47 Ursae Majoris at this time of night. It was a great

place; he came there often. At least, he felt that perhaps he had. Many times. Many, many times. Times, perhaps, beyond counting.

“Darling.”

Leah sat down beside him. For a long time neither spoke. “It is lovely, isn’t it?” Michael asked.

“Of course,” Leah said, snuggling up beside him.

“How often do I come here?”

“All the time,” Leah said.

“I have this strange feeling that I’ve been here many, many times. But that’s silly, isn’t it? We’ve only been here . . . how long?”

“Six months, Michael. Honestly,” Leah said, looking amused. “You’d forget your head if it wasn’t nailed on.”

“Maybe it’s a side effect of the coldsleep en route. I guess we’ll never know how it affected Andros and Donalson, but you haven’t noticed anything, have you?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine, Michael. Sharper than tacks. I’ll remember for the both of us, if that’s what it takes. But there’s something about me and my family you need to know, and remember, if we’re going to be together.”

“What’s that?”

“When she was forty-three, my great-aunt’s husband left her for the town’s new young librarian. My great-aunt refused to grant him a divorce and she also refused all offers from the male side of the family to do terrible things to him. She waited very patiently every day for eight months until he finally

came home again, all begging and contrite. She smiled at him and told him she loved him very much.”

“That’s sweet, but—”

She held up a finger for silence. “Not finished, Michael. After she told him that she took her grandfather’s shotgun off the mantel and blew him in half at the crotch. She’d loaded the gun with double-ought buckshot the day he left.”

“Ah. I see. You’re a vengeful bunch. You don’t look it.”

She looked at him very intently. “Not revenge, Michael—justice. This is something I have learned. Something I have stored in my memory, and it is something that you need to know: You belong to me now. Even if there is no other woman on this world, not ever, or even if there is. I want you to remember this: I am Leah and you are mine.”

“I understand.”

He did understand. There was only Leah. He looked back at the ocean. “Listen . . . I’m not sorry. About being here with you now, I mean. I know it wasn’t how the mission was supposed to go. We should have finished our planetary survey and been in coldsleep on our way back to Earth by now.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “It’s not your fault, Michael. We’ll be fine. There are no large predators, no parasites that have evolved to make use of us. You were wise to pack those extra provisions and supplies. We’re set for life.”

Right. Very clever of me—

Danger. It wasn’t a thought, exactly. Not anything that clear and unambiguous—

ous. Clear and unambiguous thought was dangerous. It was also dangerous to think about why. Michael realized he felt more than thought, these days. There was a reason for that, too, but he didn't let his mind hold onto that reason. Or very much at all.

That had been the hardest part, at first. Knowing what not to remember, what not to think. He was getting better at it. He had everything he wanted. Everything had gone even better than planned.

Danger . . .

He retreated, quickly and skillfully. There was no plan. There was only Leah, kissing him again. He kissed her back, vowing that he would remember what she told him. He would also remember Leah, and he would remember that he had gotten everything he wanted. That would be enough, forever and ever. Or at least until the next time he remembered why.

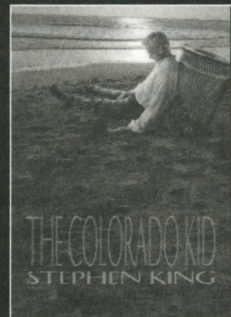
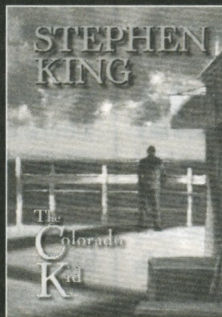
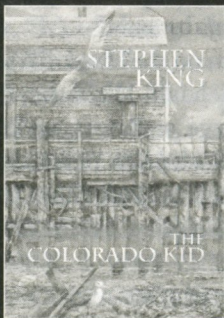


On an island off the coast of Maine, a man is found dead. There's no identification on the body. Only the dogged work of a pair of local newspapermen and a graduate student in forensics turns up any clues, and it's more than a year before the man is identified.

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 paper-

back 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.”



How would the world's first people react to the world's first murder? That's the question at the heart of "Snakeskin", in which Robert Jeschonek revisits the oldest case on the books—the killing of Abel. Working with an ancient story and one of the best-known three-character casts of all time—"four if you count the serpent," he adds—Robert found surprisingly fertile territory for this whodunnit. In fact, he was inspired enough writing about Eve, rechristened as the world's first detective, that he plans to bring her back in a future tale for another bite of the apple.

This is Robert's third appearance in Postscripts: his "Fear of Rain" featured in # 8 and "The Greatest Serial Killer in the Universe" was in # 12.

Snakeskin

Robert T. Jeschonek

The Tree of Knowledge didn't exactly teach us everything we needed to know . . . like what to do with a dead man's body.

From experience, we knew that when an animal died, its body would rot and stink after a while. We'd figured out it was best to burn or bury them, but I guess we still thought people were different. The Voice had told us we would die someday, but it never really sank in until we finally saw a dead man.

My dead son, that is. Sweet, beautiful Abel, the light of my miserable life.

When we found him, lying out in the field, we didn't even realize he was dead at first. Maybe he was just sleeping soundly. Maybe it was some kind of magic. Anything was possible back then.

I figured it out before my husband, but that didn't come as a surprise. Adam had his good qualities, but when God was handing out brains, he kind of got an early model, if you know what I

mean. Not to mention that he was drunk a lot of the time. Unfortunately, he'd discovered the joys of fermented grapes before learning how to work out his problems constructively.

Let's just say, ever since we got thrown out of Eden, Adam had his share of problems.

Anyway, once I got it through my head that something bad had happened to my boy, I got upset. My husband was no help, of course, because he was convinced Abel was sleeping. There I was, crying my eyes out . . . and Adam insisted on carrying Abel back to his bed at our camp so he'd be comfortable for the rest of his nap.

After which, Adam proceeded to stretch himself out on his own bed of straw to sleep off his latest batch of grapes.

So I was left alone to mourn for my dead son, and it was terrible. Keep in mind, this was the first time I'd lost a loved one . . . the first time anyone had lost a loved one.

I cried and screamed all afternoon and all night. Sometimes, I'd calm down a little and sit there in a daze, like nothing had happened . . . but then, I'd look at my dead boy again and remember everything in a rush, and I'd start right back up again with the weeping.

Eventually, I passed out from sheer exhaustion. By the time I keeled over, my stomach ached, my throat was sore, and my eyes burned like open wounds.

Miraculously, when I awakened, I wasn't sad anymore. I was angry.

More than anything in the world, I wanted to find out who had done this to my boy.

And do the same to him.

That much was clear to me, even then. What had happened to Abel was no accident.

His throat was bruised purple and crushed. There were two circular bruises in front, on either side of his windpipe, the size of fat grapes. Or thumbs.

Though I'd never seen the evidence of a murder before, I recognized it for what it was when I saw it.

When the worst of the crying had passed, I told Adam to dig a hole for Abel's body. It seemed fair at first, because I'd been doing most of the suffering . . . but it left me to take care of the body, which turned out to be the harder job. There is nothing so hor-

rible, I found, as tending the body of your own dead child.

Abel was fifteen winters old and taller than I was at the time, but as he lay there on the straw, I could only see him as the tiny baby I had cradled in my arms. He had been so gentle and pleasant as a baby and had never grown out of it, unlike his brother. After leaving Eden, I had thought I would never be happy again . . . but Abel had made me happy.

And now, his perfect face was crawling with insects. In Eden, where all creatures lived in harmony and death never came, I had never imagined that insects could do such terrible things to one of us.

Crying again, I rolled him into a cow hide so I wouldn't have to look at him anymore. Adam dragged him to the hole he'd dug and pushed him in, then covered his wrapped body with dirt.

When he was done, we stood by the mound of earth and held each other. He started to say a prayer, but I told him to keep it to himself.

It was the first, and worst, funeral I ever attended. It was the first funeral in the history of the world.

That night, as I sat in front of the campfire Adam had built before passing out drunk, I went over the possibilities in my mind. The list of possible killers.

It wasn't a long list. There were only three people in the whole world back then that we knew of, and I knew that I

hadn't done it, so that left Adam and my other son, Cain.

Cain, who had been conspicuously absent since before the death of Abel.

Now, when it comes to understanding murder, I wasn't as sophisticated as I am nowadays . . . but I still realized that Cain's disappearance could not be a coincidence. This left two possibilities which were equally bad.

Either Cain had been involved in Abel's murder . . . or had been murdered himself.

Either way, nothing but misery lay ahead for me. There I was, the first mother in the world, and one of my darling children had killed the other. Or both were dead at the hand of my husband.

The next morning, I went back to the field where we had found poor Abel. I was looking for something that would help me understand what had happened, anything that might tell the story or even a little bit of it.

At first, nothing unusual caught my eye in the corner of the field where Abel's body had lain.

Then, I noticed a depression in one of the tangled bushes that rimmed the field. Something was holding down a cluster of leafy branches.

I walked over to the bushes and looked down into the depression. Right away, I recognized what lay inside, and I reached for it.

It was a pole, about five feet long, and thick as the leg of a goat. All the

branches had been trimmed off, leaving pale knobs along the length.

It was Abel's—the walking stick and herding prod he'd always carried with him when tending his sheep and goats.

Carrying the stick with both hands, I slowly followed the curving rim of the field, studying the tangle of vegetation.

The rim led to a thicket of trees and underbrush. There was a path, but I almost missed it; the opening was blocked with a thorn bush.

A bush that moved aside when I pushed it with Abel's walking stick. Something or someone had hacked its trunk free of its roots and placed it there.

I was a little nervous as I stepped onto the path. Forests had become a lot more menacing since I'd left Eden; the trees didn't sing, the ferns didn't tell jokes, and you never knew when something might jump out of hiding and try to take a bite out of you.

The path led me to an open circle in the midst of the dense, leafy growth. I stepped out of the treeline, glad to emerge into an open space . . . and stopped.

At one side of the grassy clearing, I saw something I'd never seen before. Something that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up.

There was a pile of stones about as high as my waist, neatly stacked to form a rectangular base. Atop the pile was a big, flat stone, long and broad enough to cover the stacked base and extend beyond it on every side.

Atop this stone slab was a sight that made me shudder.

A gray-haired goat lay on its side on the smooth surface of the table. Insects crawled all over it and flew around it.

The throat had been gashed open, probably with the flint blade that lay alongside it. I could see the dried, dark stain left behind by the pool of blood that had poured out of that wound onto the slab. A basket of grain and vegetables also rested on the slab, and the blood had soaked the basket's bottom crimson.

Beneath the slab, all around the base of the table, I saw the remains of other creatures that had died there . . . jumbled bones of all sizes, most picked clean by wild scavengers, some with scraps of shriveled flesh or clumps of fur still stuck to them. So many bones ringed the table, I could not even begin to guess how many animals had been killed there.

I could, however, guess who had been there before me. And I began to see that the reasons for my son's murder went deeper than I had imagined.

For one thing, I recognized the goat. It was one of Abel's.

And the basket on the slab . . . I recognized that, too. The pattern of the basket's woven reeds was unmistakable; only Cain was known to make a basket like that.

Abel the herdsman. Cain the farmer. Both of them had been here. One or both had left behind a heap of produce, and one or both had cut open the throat

of a healthy goat and left it on a slab of stone to rot.

My boys had been up to something out here, I thought. Something secret and strange. Maybe something that had led to Abel's murder.

"It's so God will take us back," said Adam. "Back to Eden."

I stared at him and shook my head, amazed at his unflagging stupidity. "He'll never take us back, Adam. He made it pretty clear."

Adam's eyes flashed with anger and blame. I was the one who'd gotten us into this, he must have been thinking; how dare I try to ruin what little hope he had left? "Maybe He was only trying to teach us a lesson. Maybe He'll see how much I love Him and how sorry I am, and He'll let us back in."

"We've been out here for eighteen winters," I said. "That's a pretty long lesson, Adam."

He glared at me, clenching his fists at his sides. "Maybe if you'd even *try* to learn it, we could return," he said. "Maybe if you'd make the *slightest* effort to earn His forgiveness."

"Like teaching our boys to kill?" I snapped. "Is that the kind of effort that will get us back to paradise?"

"It was no worse than killing a goat for supper!" said Adam.

"Or killing each other?" I said.

Adam kicked the dirt and released a roar of rage and frustration. "You don't understand! *Sacrifice* is not about

killing! It's meant to show God how much we love Him!"

"How long have you been doing this?" I said.

All of a sudden, he looked sheepish. "Since we left Eden."

I nodded. "So, for all this time, you've been going off behind my back, killing goats and sheep and who knows what else . . . because according to your demented mind, this will somehow get us back to Eden.

"As if that wasn't bad enough," I said, "you taught our *children* to do it! Taught them to kill for no good reason!"

"I did it for *all* of us! I wanted the boys to grow up in Eden!"

"And now look where it's gotten us," I hissed. "Nice job, Adam."

His eyes flared, and for a moment, I thought the rage was going to resurface.

Then, the fire died, and he hung his head. "I won't apologize for paying tribute to God," he said, "but I'm sorry I never told you."

It wasn't enough to smooth things over, not by a long shot. "How can I ever trust a word that comes out of your mouth? How can I ever forgive you?"

"How?" Adam looked up at me with a gaze of icy clarity, a gaze that cut right through me. "The same way I forgave you for what happened in Eden."

I was shaken, but not about to give him the satisfaction of knowing it. "You've never forgiven me," I said bitterly. "I know you. I see it in your eyes."

"What you see in my eyes," said Adam, "is disappointment. Because

you're the one who blames *me* for Eden. For not standing up for you. For not fighting harder for you."

I just stared at him as he spoke, incredulous.

"And for that, Eve," he said quietly, "for that, I do apologize."

The next morning, we packed some provisions in a goatskin bag and set out to search for Cain. Adam and I agreed that no matter what the outcome might be, we had to find out what had happened to our son.

Five days had passed since we had last seen him. He could have been anywhere . . . but Adam and I got the idea that he might be in one place in particular: our old home, where we'd lived with Cain before Abel was born.

After giving birth to Abel, I'd convinced Adam we should move, because it was too close to Eden, and who wants to be reminded of that disaster every day of their lives? Cain never forgot the place, though; he called it "Nod" (which might have started with "no," which he screamed repeatedly when we dragged him away from there) and he talked about it all the time the way Adam obsessed over the Garden.

Nod was over a day's walk from our current camp, so we left as soon as the sun came up. It wouldn't be a difficult walk in terms of terrain; nevertheless, I wasn't looking forward to it.

Would we stumble upon our elder son's corpse . . . or would we find him

alive, only to learn definitively that he was a murderer? And if he was, what then? Could I bear to punish my only remaining child? The only serious punishment we had experienced was exile; perhaps, by leaving home, Cain had already punished himself.

Unless, of course, Adam had killed Abel, and the reason Cain was gone was that Adam had killed him, too. In which case, this trip could turn out to be dangerous for me personally.

Which was why, under my knee-length goatskin, I wore a sharpened flint dagger tied with sheep-gut cord to my upper leg.

When we reached Nod the next day, I at first thought we had made a mistake in going there.

Standing on the crest of a ridge, I gazed down into the fertile valley that had once been our home . . . and saw no sign of my missing son. Nothing but the glittering river snaking through the grassy plain, the stands of trees thickening into forest that carpeted the opposite slope.

And, of course, the one sight that could completely derail Adam from our purpose. The land upriver, misty and twinkling in the distance, visible and reachable yet forever barred to us.

Eden.

Naturally, Adam's gaze fixed on it as soon as we topped the ridge. "I think I see angels over the treetops," he said breathlessly. "It's hard to tell from here. Or are those griffins?"

I knew he could have stood there all day, spying on paradise. He'd certainly done it often enough in the past.

"Come on," I said, grabbing his arm, pulling him down the slope.

The valley seemed just as deserted when we walked through it as it had when we'd gazed into it from above. We found nothing to suggest that anyone had been there recently—not a shelter, not the remains of a campfire, not even the bones of a fish or the rind of a piece of fruit.

We walked along the riverbank, spread apart to cover more ground, but found no sign of human habitation. Even our old campsite looked as if no one had ever been there.

At a rocky notch in the river, we crossed to the other bank to continue the search. We followed the bank well beyond the point where we'd descended into the valley, but turned up absolutely nothing.

Unwilling to give up, I proposed that we double back in the direction of our old campsite, only this time cut through the edge of the forest. Adam cast an impatient look upriver toward you-know-where, then gave in with a heavy sigh and led the way.

After a while, as afternoon leaned toward evening, Adam made a suggestion that didn't come as a surprise to me.

"Let's go upriver," he said. "Maybe Cain's in Eden."

I covered my face with my hands and shook my head in frustration.

At that moment, we both heard the crackling of branches and turned toward the forest . . . just in time to see Cain charging toward us.

The instant I laid eyes on Cain, I knew we were in trouble.

His features were twisted in a grimace of rage. His eyes were glazed over, his nostrils flared, his teeth clenched and bared like a predatory beast's. His long, black hair flew behind him as he ran, and his shaggy beard bounced against his chest.

In one hand, he brandished a thick branch, swinging it overhead. He was naked, and he howled with violent purpose as he raced toward us.

As Cain's club swung toward Adam's head, Adam flung up his arms and deflected the blow. Without hesitation, Cain heaved the club back and swept it down into Adam's side, then pulled it back again.

Before he could swing it forward, I darted over and grabbed hold of the weapon with both hands, wrenching it back with all my strength.

That gave Adam the seconds he needed to recover from the shock of Cain's first blows. With a howl of his own, he lunged forward, slamming a shoulder into Cain's chest, driving him back and down.

As my husband and son dropped to the ground, Cain released the club. I had been tugging at it as hard as I could,

and I stumbled a few steps back when it came free.

The two of them grappled, rolling back and forth. I looked on, waiting for a moment when I might need to intervene, holding on to the club with one hand.

And keeping the other at my side, fingertips brushing the hard lump of the flint knife strapped under my goatskin.

Adam and Cain wrestled on the ground, the father at first holding his own against the son . . . but that quickly changed. Cain had the advantage of blind rage and wasn't holding back.

Adam managed to force Cain under him and pin him to the ground . . . but Cain threw him off and reversed the position. Adam struggled, but Cain held both his wrists firmly against the earth, then plunged his head down upon Adam's skull.

Dazed, Adam stopped fighting. Cain released one of his father's wrists, then clenched his free hand into a fist and lashed it across Adam's face.

As Adam slumped, stunned by the blow, Cain reached for a rock as big as his fist and raised it over his father's head.

Then, something visibly changed in my son.

Kneeling astride his father, he held the rock high, ready to plunge it down-

ward . . . and he hesitated. For the first time since he'd charged out of the woods, his expression altered, shifting from a grimace of rage to one of horror.

The rock shook in his hand, and his eyes welled with tears. With a cry that sounded like a mix of fury and anguish, Cain cast the rock aside. Weeping and trembling, he slumped against his father's chest.

"I'm sorry," he said as I knelt beside him. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," I said softly, stroking his hair.

Cain looked up then, but not at me. "I couldn't do it," he said, wincing at the sky.

"What couldn't you do?" I said.

Cain's eyes still avoided me. "Please forgive me," he said, his body heaving with violent sobs. "I couldn't sacrifice them!"

It was then I realized he wasn't talking to me at all.

He was talking to someone else.

Someone I couldn't see.

That night, the three of us sat around a fire at our old campsite in Nod. Though I'd wrapped Cain in the fur we'd used for a pillow the night before, he couldn't stop shivering.

He wept as he told us how he and Abel had made sacrifices at the secret altar . . . and a voice had spoken to them. It was a voice they'd heard before, a voice they'd assumed was the Voice of God.

And it had told them, as it had many

times before, that Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's.

Adam and I frowned at this. The Voice of God hadn't spoken to either of us since our exile from Eden.

"God didn't like your sacrifice?" Adam sounded disappointed.

"It was always the same," said Cain, clutching the fur tightly around him. "Mine was never good enough."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "How do you know it was God talking to you?"

Cain sniffed, gazing into the fire with bloodshot eyes. "Who else would it be?"

"No wonder you were upset." Adam put a hand on his son's shoulder. "I know what it's like to have God unhappy with me."

"You told us our sacrifices would convince God to take us to Eden," said Cain. "I didn't want to be responsible for keeping us out because my sacrifices weren't good enough."

"You should have told me," said Adam. "I could have helped you work on improving your sacrifices."

As I listened to Adam's inane encouragement of the misguided thinking he had instilled in his son, I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache coming on. "So what happened next?"

Cain released a long, shuddering sigh. "I thought if Abel's sacrifices weren't around to compare to, mine would be good enough for God."

"So you killed him," I said evenly.

Adam gave me a disapproving look. "Don't put words in his mouth."

Cain nodded. "Yes," he said, his voice breaking. "I came up behind him . . . and put my hands . . . around his throat . . . and squeezed."

As Cain completely broke down, heaving with sobs, Adam got to his feet. "You're not thinking straight. I'm sure you didn't mean to kill your brother."

"I couldn't . . . stop myself," said Cain.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" said Adam. "You'll remember better in the morning."

"Adam," I said. "He's already told us what happened. There's a more important question now."

Adam looked annoyed. "What question is that?"

"Someone else drove him to this," I said. "The question is, who?"

"He said God talked to him." Adam gestured at the sky. "But I'm sure God didn't intend for this to happen any more than Cain did. It must have been an accident."

"You're missing the point!" I said. "What if it was *someone else* doing the talking?"

"It doesn't matter!" said Adam. "It was an accident!"

Suddenly, Cain raised his head and looked his father in the eye. "No accident," he said, his voice hoarse from crying. "You were supposed to be next."

Adam stared back at him, dumbfounded.

"Is that why you attacked us, Cain?" I said, reaching over to fold my son's hand between both of my own.

"The voice told me that . . . because I

murdered Abel . . . I was banned from my home soil. It said I was marked . . . so everyone would know . . . what I had done." With shaking fingers, he parted the hair on his forehead, as if to expose the mark he'd been given.

But I saw no mark.

"I couldn't bear the thought . . . of you seeing me like this," said Cain, "so I left. But when you followed me here . . . the voice spoke to me again.

"I was told . . . to sacrifice you both . . . to make up for killing Abel," said Cain.

With that, my son slumped against me, weeping into my shoulder. If not for what I had just heard, I could almost have believed he was five winters old again, crying over a skinned knee.

For a long moment, Adam stared down at us, glowing red in the flickering firelight. Then, he threw up his hands and turned away. "I'm going for a walk," he said, marching off down the riverbank. "I need to think."

"I miss him," said Cain, his voice a defeated whimper. "I miss my brother so much."

"We all do," I said, softly kissing his head.

"I didn't realize," said Cain. "When I did it . . . I didn't know it would be like this. Gone forever."

"Some things, you can't take back," I told him.

Cain cried himself to sleep in my arms. I stayed awake for a long time after that, shedding tears of my own as

I caressed his troubled brow . . . tears for him, tears for Abel, tears for all of us.

But eventually, exhaustion overcame me, and I, too, fell asleep.

As I slept, I dreamed that I was in Eden . . . and I was alone. Not even the Voice was there. No one but me.

And my old enemy.

It was daytime, but the sky was dark with storm clouds. Screaming creatures leaped through the vegetation in all directions, fur soaked with rain. Lightning spiked the tall trees, and fierce winds whipped fruit from the branches. It pelted me as I ran, trying desperately to escape, heart pounding like the thunder crashing around me.

And no matter how hard I ran, no matter how loud the racket all around me, I could not get away from the single, terrible sound that drove me onward, mad with panic.

The whisper of my enemy's body gliding over the ground. Persistent, revolting, familiar . . . terrifying.

Crackling over leaves and twigs. Rustling over soft grass. Slithering.

Hissing.

I reached the borders of Eden, but as I tried to charge across, I struck an invisible wall. Dazed from the impact, I hurtled backward, plunging into the streaming greenery. I hit the ground hard, stars dancing before my eyes, the taste of blood in my mouth.

And I couldn't move. I was paralyzed by the fall, unable even to lift a finger.

Unable to scream as I heard the sound of my enemy draw near and felt the weight of him ripple over my belly

and saw his glistening muzzle slide from between my breasts and rear up overhead, the mouth open, fangs gleaming . . .

But before he could do one thing more, I awoke from my dream.

I was in a state of complete panic, and I know I would have been screaming at the top of my lungs, shrieking in that terrible moment before I realized I was free of the nightmare . . .

I would have been shrieking if I hadn't had a gag stuffed in my mouth.

Something that tasted like leather had been forced between my teeth and secured tightly by a strap tied around my head. When I tried to reach up and remove the gag, I realized that my hands were bound behind my back.

When I tried to move my feet, I realized that they, too, were tied . . . and the bonds restraining them were tightening. Twisting on the ground, I stared wide-eyed at my captor.

When Adam noticed me looking, he smiled in the gray pre-dawn light. "Good morning, Eve," he said in a hushed voice. "Sorry about this, but it's necessary."

Angry and frightened, I jolted my bound feet from his grip, hoisting up my knees in preparation for a two-legged kick. Unfortunately, Adam was able to grab my ankles and spin me around onto my stomach, preventing the blow.

"It's just I know you wouldn't come

with me any other way,” said Adam. “Not where we’re going.”

It didn’t take a genius to guess what he meant by that. Grunting, I writhed in the dirt, trying to flop onto my side so at least I could try again to kick him.

Adam, with his superior strength, hauled me up off the ground like a bundle of straw and slung me over his shoulder. “You should thank me,” he said. “I found out who really killed Abel.”

Adam turned and carried me off along the riverbank. I knew the direction we’d be traveling.

Upriver.

“And it wasn’t Cain,” said Adam.

Lifting my head from Adam’s back, I saw Cain behind us, sprawled alongside the dead fire at our campsite. The club he’d used to attack us lay on the ground near his head.

From a distance, it was impossible to tell if he was dead or alive.

Helpless, I slumped against Adam’s back. I wondered if he had come up with this latest brainstorm himself.

As we walked onward, I got my answer.

It was the same sound I’d run from in my nightmare. The sound I remembered so well from years ago.

Something sliding through the grass and weeds above the muddy bank. Unseen but whispering like a thought in the back of my mind, like a fragment of a dream come to life.

I felt terrified and exhilarated at the same time. The enemy, the true enemy who had engineered Abel’s demise, had

revealed himself. He was playing for bigger stakes now, moving us to where he wanted us to be.

And in so doing, moved himself within my reach. Which was exactly where I wanted him to be.

The closer we got to Eden, the sweeter the air smelled. The riot of floral fragrances wafting out of the place made every other garden I’d been to seem as aromatic as a pile of rocks.

When I drew a breath, I grew dizzy from the thick, unearthly perfume. It unlocked memories that hadn’t seen the light of day since I’d left paradise, memories of unicorn rides and singing fish and heatless flame and sun showers in which every raindrop had a different color and flavor and musical note.

As we approached our destination, the sky grew brighter, too. It had been a dreary day downriver, but as we gained on Eden, gray clouds filed away, exposing bright blue perfection and a sun of steady white radiance.

I had a period of disorientation—and more than a little nausea—as I adjusted to the changes in the world... or maybe they were changes in my mind or some of both. I remembered that sounds had taste, and smells had rhythm, and everything, living or dead, glowed with energy of varying hue and texture and pitch. My sixth, seventh, and eighth senses reawakened, which spooked me because I’d forgotten they existed. I saw colors and creatures and

impossible physical phenomena that shocked me, even seen upside-down as I hung over my husband's shoulder, and brought back flashes of another world more intense than I had ever remembered in exile, in waking or dreaming moments or the wildest flights of fancy in-between.

And all this was just the drainage of Eden, the dimmest echo of a power too great to be contained from seeping into the world.

When we got to Eden, Adam slid me from his shoulder. As my feet touched the ground, I could see that his eyes were already fixed on the Garden, his mouth gaping in thoughtless awe.

I had to shove my bound hands in his face to get him to untie them, and even then, he hardly watched what he was doing. As I rubbed my aching wrists, I twisted around and shoved the back of my head in front of him; he undid the strap holding the gag in place, but I was left on my own to untie my ankles.

I undid the cords hastily, afraid that my husband would be so caught up in Eden's spell that he would forget the death sentence promised to both of us if we ever returned inside.

"Adam!" I shouted, flinging the cords aside and whirling around to make sure he was still with me. "Don't go in there!"

It was then that I saw Eden close-up for the first time in eighteen winters.

There was no fence around Eden to mark its borders. It didn't need one.

The boundary between Eden and the rest of the world was very clear. On one side, there were green trees and bushes and grasses and dusty red earth . . . all of it enlivened somewhat by Eden's runoff, thriving under Eden's perfect climate . . . perhaps the choicest real estate in all the world because of its proximity to paradise.

But unmistakably drab compared to what was on the other side. Like a drawing in the sand compared to an oasis.

Where the outside world left off, in a perfect, curving line, trees entwined with leaves of gleaming gold and limbs of silver. Fruits of every size and shape and texture exploded from every branch, spotted and striped and glowing and jumping, some flowing with moving images of nature, like windows on the beauty of creation.

Birds of every description flitted among the branches, singing intricate harmonies unlike those heard from any bird in the world outside. There were parrots and canaries and toucans and macaws, cardinals and bluebirds and doves . . . every one of them amplified, every one of them with plumage more colorful and elaborate than their cousins beyond the boundary. Hummingbirds of rainbow crystal. Silken purple parakeets with tiny peacock fan-tails.

Below, butterflies and bumblebees threaded among a blanket of flowers . . . blooms of every shade and com-

ination of orange and blue and red and yellow and violet. Flowers like open hands or fragile cups or pillow clouds. Flowers that twinkled like fireflies and glowed like the moon. Streaked and swirled and speckled and glossy . . . lacy and velvety, tall and short. Flowers within flowers, some singing like birds. Some twining stems and stamens in a delicate, deliberate dance.

Among them, a lion cub purred, curled alongside a sleeping fawn. A squirrel leaped up from a bobbing patch of sunflowers and spiraled its way up the trunk of a tree. Tiny monkeys swung between branches, chattering gaily, cries mingling with those of what sounded like a million different creatures in the unseen depths of the Garden.

The Garden of which this was the tiniest sliver, the surface, the outermost fringe.

I stood there for what must have been a long time, for what could have been forever for all I knew on the outskirts of timeless Eden. I gazed at the wonders before me, breathless, hands folded over my chest as if to keep my heart from bursting.

More than anything, I wanted to step inside. I hadn't expected that.

I had forgotten how it was. Maybe time had dulled the memory . . . or maybe I had forgotten by choice, because it was lost to us. Because of me.

And one other.

It was this—the memory of him, of

what had happened between us—that finally enabled me to look away.

Adam was three steps closer to the boundary than I, staring into the perfect vision that had haunted him every day since our exile. As I turned to him, he was raising a hand toward a sparkling golden pear that dangled over the Garden's edge, just within reach.

Hastily, I grabbed hold of his arm and pulled it back just in time. His fingertips had been inches away from the skin of the fruit.

And certain death.

"Adam," I said, and then I shook him by the shoulder. "Adam!"

Slowly, he turned his face to me. His eyes were heavy-lidded and unfocused, as if he'd been drunk or asleep.

"Why did you bring me here, Adam?" I said, giving his shoulder a harder shake.

He blinked and shook his head, emerging from the trance. "To go back in," he said, sounding groggy. "To stay."

"But we can't," I said. "We'll be killed."

Adam smiled. "Last night, when I went for my walk, God spoke to me. He said we can go back in. On one condition."

I looked around, perfectly aware of who must have spoken to my husband in the night . . . aware also that the enemy's eyes must be upon us even now. "What condition?"

"Abel's killers are in there." Adam

pointed into the Garden. "If we destroy them, we'll win the right to return to Eden forever."

Usually, it didn't bother me that Adam was a little slow. I liked being the brains of the outfit; it gave me an advantage to counterbalance his greater physical strength.

Sometimes, though, his mental limitations could be frustrating.

"What do you mean, Abel's killers are in there?" I said. "Cain already admitted he killed his brother."

"But I knew he couldn't have," said Adam. "He didn't have it in him."

"And you know this because God told you," I said.

Adam nodded vigorously. "It was the New People. The New People murdered Abel."

It was clear to me that Adam's head had been popped open and filled with pure, steaming crap. "Who are the New People?"

"God tried again," said Adam. "We failed, so He created new people to replace us. He made them better than us so they wouldn't let him down. He gave them the ability to come and go as they pleased, to move between Eden and the outside world at will. He thought maybe one of the reasons we'd rebelled was that we needed our freedom."

"Sounds like they had it made," I said. "So why kill Abel?"

"Jealousy," said Adam. "God had a soft spot for Abel. He was going to let

him come live in Eden, and the New People couldn't stand the thought of him horning in."

Adam shook his head. "The New People are a bigger failure than we ever were, and they're getting more uncontrollable by the day. God has decided to get rid of them, but He's left the job for us."

Smiling, Adam gazed into the shimmering Garden spread out before him. He rubbed his hands together as if he were about to devour a banquet. "The cherubim will not swoop down and attack us. God promised. Nor will the revolving sword drop through our necks. We are free to enter.

"And once our work is done, Eve," said Adam, "we are free to stay."

Adam was so thrilled, he walked over and kissed me on the lips. "We can go home, Eve," he said, pulling back to gaze serenely into my eyes. "What we've longed for all these years is finally coming true."

As I looked at him, I was strangely affected by his recitation of false hopes. A tear ran down my cheek, and he brushed it away.

I was sad because I saw how badly he wanted the lies to be true. Because I loved him, I wanted him to have his heart's desire . . . but I knew that he would not get what he wanted. He was doomed to unending hope and disappointment.

"Why are you crying?" he said as another tear rolled down my cheek.

"Because I'm so happy," I lied.

I cried because I understood him. I

saw right through him, and knew that he would never change.

It was a sad realization, because I'd always hoped he might come around . . . but it led me to realize something else. Something of immediate value.

I realized that the enemy was the same as my husband.

And realizing that, I knew how I could defeat him.

Take my hand," said Adam. "Let's not wait any longer."

I scrubbed away my remaining tears, then took his hand in mine.

As we turned to face the Garden, he released a deep sigh. "I always knew this day would come," he said.

I looked at him and nodded. "You had faith. You never gave up."

"Because of you," he said tenderly. "I did it because of you."

Genuinely touched, I leaned up to kiss his cheek. "Thank you," I said. "I love you."

"I love you, too," said Adam, and then he squared his shoulders toward Eden. "Now let's go home."

He was eager to reach the boundary and walked fast; I had to hurry to keep up. We took one, two, three, four steps, each bringing us closer to the Garden. I judged it would take no more than ten before we crossed the line.

Five steps. Six.

I let him pull me further to build the suspense. I would wait until the last moment to make my move.

Seven steps.

Off in the grass, I imagined, the enemy was barely able to contain himself. This, I was certain, was what he had wanted all along.

Us, dead.

Eight steps.

He hated us. It was the motivation for everything he'd done . . . but maybe, there was a reason for the hatred. Something I hadn't considered until now.

Maybe, while masquerading as God, he had told my gullible husband a version of the truth. He had said that the New People wanted to kill Abel to keep him from horning in on their setup with God. Maybe it was the same for the enemy.

Maybe, his wanting to ruin us had something to do with love and longing like that which drove Adam.

Nine steps.

"We're home!" Adam dropped one foot in the outside world and raising the other to step into Eden.

Before his foot could cross the boundary, I tugged him back. "Adam, wait!" I said.

He steadied me with an arm around my shoulders. "What is it?"

"Don't you hear that?" I said, wincing. "Someone's talking!"

Adam angled an ear upward. Then, he frowned and shook his head. "I don't hear a thing," he said. "Who is it?"

I pretended to listen, then turned to Adam with an expression of grave amazement. "It's the Voice," I said. "Oh, Adam, it's God."

Adam stared at me with a look of wide-eyed expectation. "What's God saying? What does He want?"

Closing my eyes, I pretended to listen. "He wants me to pass a message to someone. Another of his children, he says." Turning, I gazed into the greenery outside Eden. "Someone who's here with us right now."

Adam turned to search our surroundings. "Who? I don't see anyone."

Slowly, I took a step away from Eden. "A wayward child," I said. I paused for a moment, as if listening, and took another step. "One who has turned away and no longer hears the Voice of God."

"What's the message?" said Adam.

Though I heard no movement from the grass and saw no sign of the enemy, I felt his eyes upon me. "You are forgiven. Even for what you have tried to do here today. You are forgiven."

"I don't understand." Adam shook his head.

"That's because the message isn't intended for us," I said, and then I pretended to listen again. "God says the wayward child is forgiven. He is welcomed back into the fold."

Frowning, Adam turned to me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Long ago, you were banished from Eden," I said, speaking for the enemy's benefit. "Now, the way is open to you once more."

"To us?" said Adam.

"To him," I said, waving at the surrounding vegetation. "We're not invited." Then, I raised my voice. "Come

forth," I said. "Return to your home. Return to Eden."

I fell silent then, watching and listening for movement in the underbrush. It remained as still as if no creature lurked within it . . . but I had no doubt whatsoever that my enemy was there.

"God forgives you," I said, raising my voice for the enemy. "Go to him. Go before he changes his mind."

Then, as Adam and I held each other, I heard it.

The rustle of grass. The whisper of something sliding through it, pressing soft blades beneath a long, supple body.

Then rasping over the ground. Slithering closer.

Hissing.

And then, I felt it. Rippling right over the tops of my feet.

I clutched my husband tighter and clamped my eyes shut, willing myself not to move.

Slowly, for what seemed like an eternity, my enemy pulled himself over the bare skin of my feet.

I stood my ground, but just barely. Echoes of my nightmare of being paralyzed beneath this very monster flashed through my mind like blasts of lightning, urging me to kick him off and run away as fast as I could.

And just when I thought I couldn't bear it another moment, he stopped.

Shivering, I looked down at him.

His head lifted off the ground and curled around to face me. Blazing red eyes met my own.

His forked pink tongue fluttered at me, then withdrew. He opened his mouth, glossy black scales parting to reveal fangs and slimy flesh.

And he laughed.

"Loves me more," he wheezed in his tiny, high-pitched voice, eyes bright with malicious glee.

I had been right about him. Outwardly an opponent of God's will, he inwardly craved God's affection; everything he did was a cry for attention or an effort to eliminate the competition for God's love.

What he failed to recognize, like Adam, was that he could never regain what he had lost.

Twitching with nervous excitement, the enemy flicked his head toward Eden, then lashed it back around to stare at me. "Thanks for passing along the good news," he said. "I owe you one."

Then, with a wild flicker of his tongue, he whipped around and slithered toward Eden.

I watched as the glittering black serpent flowed toward Eden, his long, thin body curling like liquid over the red earth.

He hesitated at the boundary, head weaving back and forth, forked tongue fluttering. I held my breath, hoping he wasn't reconsidering his course of action.

Then, with a rustle, he poured into the Garden.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened. I

stared after him, wondering if perhaps he had gotten lucky and was slipping back in without penalty after all.

Then, suddenly, something crashed down through the trees on Eden's fringe. I glimpsed a blur of silver and flame flashing downward, leaving a trail of billowing black smoke.

The object struck the ground with a deafening crack. When it hit, the serpent's body flew out of Eden, twisting in midair . . . and flopped in the dirt at my feet.

It had no head.

Inside the Garden, I caught a glimpse of the fallen object at rest: a giant silver sword with a broad, curved blade, at least as long as Adam and I laid end to end. Red and yellow flames rippled and crackled along its length, dancing over the spine and flat of the blade, encircling the glittering, golden hilt.

I gazed upon the instrument of death for a moment, mesmerized by the sight of it, realizing it would have done the same to Adam and me as it had to the serpent if we had crossed the boundary. Then, the fiery sword heaved itself from the earth and shot back up through the trees, a blur of silver, flame, and smoke.

It leaped into the heavens and was gone.

"Was that what I think it was?" said Adam, shading his eyes as he gazed up at the lingering smoky trail left by the sword.

“Uh-huh,” I said, staring down at the headless body of the serpent.

Adam walked over to join me. “Is that the wayward child?”

“Apparently,” I said. “You still want to try to get back into Eden?”

“Maybe some other time,” Adam said with a little smile.

“You know who this is, don’t you?” I said, kicking the serpent’s corpse.

Adam cleared his throat and nodded.

“You know he’s the one who talked to you last night, right?” I said.

Adam’s eyes slid from me to the serpent and back again. “Yes.”

“And he’s the one who talked Cain into killing Abel.”

“It figures,” said Adam.

“And you realize God wasn’t really talking to me just now,” I said. “God never told me he loved the serpent more than you.”

“Oh, sure,” said Adam, grinning.

I smiled, because of course he hadn’t figured out any of it on his own and it was just like him to act like he’d been in the know all along.

“I think we should go find Cain,” I said, “and take him home.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Adam. “The sooner, the better.”

As it turned out, Cain decided to stay in Nod, because it was the place he loved best in the world . . . and return-

ing home with us would have brought back too many bad memories.

He carried enough guilt with him as it was. He managed to do all right for himself in Nod, running a farm and eventually marrying a younger sister (like I said, things were different in those days) . . . but he never got over what he’d done. He never forgave himself, and he never committed another murder.

Unfortunately, that isn’t to say that murder ever went out of style.

Maybe it’s my curse . . . my true punishment. My descendants, which is to say everyone in the world, can’t stop killing each other.

Adam and I kept hoping for the best, though. The kids came fast for us in the years after Abel’s death. After drifting apart for so long, Adam and I finally came back together, in more ways than one.

He finally got over his obsession with Eden—more or less—and I finally stopped blaming him for blaming me for getting us thrown out of paradise. We came to love each other more than ever . . . more than in the Garden even, if you ask me. Maybe because we’d been through something terrible together.

So I guess maybe one good thing came out of Abel’s murder after all.

Make that two good things.

Let’s just say snakeskin makes a great pair of shoes. ☒

J.F. Peterson remarks, “H. Beam Piper developed the notion of historical themes recurring in alternate universes, a sort of convergent evolution of histories. ‘Natural Selection’ extends this concept to explore human belief in free will. The challenge of using Charles Darwin as a pivot for all histories led me back to my graduate school notes, and through history textbooks both real and imagined, to create a story where Darwin revealed the theory of natural selection, again and again, throughout the broad sweep of parallel universes. This is the story of the woman who tried to stop him.”

Josh’s recent publications include the short stories “Parable of the Martian Husband” and “Carving”. A Writers of the Future first place winner, and Backspace Short Story Contest winner, he recently completed My Friend Molly (the mole), a novel about an unlikely pair of best friends.

Natural Selection

J.F. Peterson

Her machines had blasted down the door, spilled in and secured the room less than a minute before.

Helen Yamauchi slipped through the dust and the door’s remains into the university’s high energy physics lab, rifle ready. A bead of sweat tickled its way down the back of her neck. Face hidden by composite armor, Helen surveyed the room.

She found things much as her war pack had projected to her. Dust ran in seams from the building with every new jar and shake. Racks of equipment huddled along the back wall. Blackened monitoring screens and dusty lab benches lined the near side. A thick cord of steel stretched diagonally across the ceiling. Another door opposite, with a tinted glass window beside it, stood out with yellow warning signs. And two people lay on the floor, sur-

rounded by the spidery machines of Helen’s war pack.

Helen had found him, Doctor Thomas Wajkowski. He lay unconscious in the arms of a lab-coated woman, whose black shawl shielded her face from dust. The woman held Wajkowski’s head, and he breathed heavily, coughing sometimes.

Helen’s pack whispered now, each machine, in the back of her mind: *Electromagnetic anomaly, level two. Investigate?*

Helen glanced at the tinted window, reddish light flickering beyond it, then back to Wajkowski. “I’ve found him. He may have already started.” No one responded on her radio. She stepped toward the man and pressed the rifle to his head.

“No,” the woman holding him said. She lifted her eyes, taking in Helen’s armored figure. She did not move to

stop Helen, just said the word and looked up with eyes dark and compassionate and wet with tears.

Helen recognized Sister Rachel Mbawi and took an involuntary step back. The rifle wavered. "You?" It swung to Sister Rachel. "You?"

Something flickered on the other side of the glass pane at the far end of the room. It flashed crimson and the world changed.

Reverend Charles Darwin took the younger man's hand. "Brother Mendel, please. God has no need of such obsequiousness. We're both equal in His eyes."

Gregor Mendel shifted his feet, bowed by the older man's presence. Darwin stood taller than him, and his great flowing beard gave Darwin the look of a latter day Moses. The younger monk, clean-shaven and slight, felt cowed by the man's physical presence, as much as everything else about the famous botanist. Mendel propped up his glasses with a knuckle. "Yes, your em—"

"Please," Darwin said, waving aside the honorific, "call me 'Charles'. If your paper means all I think it does, then it shall be I who honors your name. I've read your work of course. But please, indulge me. Tell me about these peas of yours."

Gregor did. He told Darwin about his ideas on inheritance, so recently presented to the Natural Science Society, while the two walked through his

garden. He talked about the peas he had painstakingly grown and crossed, and what God revealed through them about inherited characteristics.

Darwin interrupted him. "Have you ever read the work of a man named Alfred Russel Wallace?"

Gregor shook his head.

"Few people have. Wallace had an idea a few years back about life changing, evolving, gradually over time, much as Charles Lyell discussed with geology. The idea has some merit, but not the evidence to support it." He stopped to caress a vine. "The question of inheritance was never satisfactorily answered, which led to the assumption it must all be a matter of God's will and that Wallace's work is unsubstantiated." Darwin plucked a pea pod off a trailing vine and pried it open with his thumb. A sweet smell rose from the broken flesh and a string of wrinkled peas spilled across his palm. "But, then again, perhaps it has been answered. And answered well."

Gregor shook his head, not sure he fully understood.

"Your peas and Wallace's butterflies will change the world, Brother," Darwin said. "They just need a little help. Which is why God put me here." He smiled and Wallace shivered, wondered if this was how it had felt when the Israelites saw Moses descend from the mountain.

Helen recognized Sister Rachel Mbawi and took an involuntary

step back. The pistol wavered. “You?” It swung to Sister Rachel. “How could you?”

Helen blinked. Sensations from her pack buzzed uncertainly in the back of her mind. A kill/no kill option solidified in her thoughts, a projection from one of the pack. She shut the option down, no kill.

Sister Rachel smiled, a genuine and warm smile that dislodged dust and bits of rubble from her skin. “Is that you behind all that plastic, Helen Yamauchi?” She closed her eyes, nodding knowingly with a little smile on her face. “They say the Lord works in mysterious ways, Helen. But the important thing is that He works.”

Helen swallowed. Sister Rachel, once upon a long time ago her physics professor, and undergraduate advisor. The woman sat before her now wearing the pleased expression Helen remembered from their weekly meetings in Sister Rachel’s tidy office. As if the past years hadn’t happened.

“I remember you saying once it was most important for each of us to find our way to God through science.” Helen stepped back, but kept the pistol on Sister Rachel. “How does this help anyone to God, Sister? How?” Helen’s voice quivered despite her effort to keep it level.

Helen had killed to get into this building. Her pack and others had fought their way through the thousands who thought Wajkowski was right, that the world needed to change, that history could be made better than it had

been. Save the world by destroying ourselves, the gospel according to Wajkowski.

Sister Rachel’s eyes opened, and she looked up at Helen again. “You cannot kill him. He must live. He must tell the world.”

“I’ve killed a dozen people to get in here, Sister. And I knew two of them. They’ve destroyed half this complex, millions in damages, I don’t know how many deaths. The university—”

“We only know the path by walking it,” Sister Rachel said. “Not by maps.”

“—is burning. My school. Our school. And for what? Why do you shield him?”

Sister Rachel pursed her lips. She looked down at the man whose head rested in her lap. “He thought he could change the world. He wanted to make the world better. He wanted us to avoid the suffering of the last ten years, suffering he thought he’d caused by his work. By revealing truth.” She caressed the man’s head, gently, softly. “Poor, poor fool. As if truth were the cause of the world’s problems. But it’s all right now. Soon we will have his new beginning.”

The light behind the glass flickered. A distant humming began to resonate in Helen’s ears, just on the edge of hearing. It shook her teeth, and rivulets of dust floated down from the ceiling. New queries erupted from her pack, the machines flashing questions to the back of her mind: *Electromagnetic anomaly, level three, investigate?*

Yes, she ordered two of them. They

plucked their way through the debris to the back of the room and started working on the door in the rear of the lab. Steel, by the look, reinforced; it would take a while.

Helen knelt, placed one gauntleted hand on Sister Rachel's arm, tilted up her head with the other, and looked down into those eyes, those sad wise eyes. The chromoplast of Helen's armor reflected back in them. "I need to know what's happening here. I need you to tell me. Did he succeed? Did he create a paratemporal rift?"

Sister Rachel nodded. She gestured to the back of the room, the red flickering light, dim for the moment. "A bubble of dreams. Or, more accurately, a cross-section of the woven threads of timelines, as deep as we could cut. Even now our thread intertwines with others, but not for much longer. Soon it will merge with the one he chose. We will change. Our reality gone, supplanted by what he wove here. Many pasts, you've no idea how hard he worked to find the right one. And still he failed. None he could use." She laughed and a red bubble escaped her lips and rolled down her chin. "Only what God provided."

Beyond the glass, a red light pulsed, and flared.

Beneath the clear bright skies above the Karoo Desert, the colors stood out clearly: a layer of darker greenish stone atop ochre stone near the ridge peak. Charles Darwin knelt at the green

layer. He pinched off a fragment and inspected it, then unslung his rock hammer and began tapping. His lank frame swung the hammer with precision, knocking away a big chunk.

John Edmonstone watched him. "There will be war here, Charles. And in our lifetimes. You should leave. England expelled your grandparents, not you."

"Sins of the father, you know." Darwin picked up the rock. He licked a finger and rubbed at the stone, then put it back. "Or grandfather in this case." He shook his head slightly, not in the least perturbed that his family had long ago been exiled from England on charges of sedition. Darwin poked at the dirt. "This outcrop brings to mind Lyell."

John frowned. Not as tall as Darwin, and his dark skin a contrast to Darwin's ruddy color. "You want to talk about English geologists? The Boers—"

Darwin waved off his friend's words and kept looking at the rock. "You're in as much danger as I am. Why don't you leave?"

John frowned a long moment while Darwin continued working on the rock. Then John smiled. "It's your fault, you know."

"Oh no," Darwin said, looking up finally and meeting John's eyes. He chuckled softly. "You're the one who brought those rocks and samples from South America. Don't think to blame this on me. I cannot help that you decided to take this poor English boy in as a friend. Or that I saw the resemblance

to these rocks in Africa, or that you chose to work with me or . . .”

“Or that you’d find these fossils.”

“Yes.” Darwin gaze wandered back to the rocks. “These fossils.” Beneath the stones where he’d been tapping, a face peered out: a monstrous skull with curving teeth, something from a nightmare.

“Charles!” John grabbed for his rifle, slid back and overbalanced. The rifle fell clattering down the slope. John scrambled for a handhold. Darwin’s arm snapped out to pull him back. John breathed heavily for some seconds, then cast a rueful glance downslope to what he suspected would be a ruined rifle. He recovered himself and frowned at the skull. “What is it?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, Sir Taxidermist. Or perhaps why they do not appear beyond this section of stone. Beyond this we find other life, other creatures.”

John shook his head.

Darwin ran callused fingers over the skull. “It’s as Lyell said. Only the gradual change is in life, not simply rocks. What you see here, John, is a transition in life forms from a time in the deep past. We see it here in the Karoo. And we will see it elsewhere. We will write of it. And then,” he looked up and flashed a broad grin at John, “England will welcome us both back with open arms.”

Sister Rachel laughed and a red bubble escaped her lips and rolled

down. “There can only be what God provided.”

A line of pain traced itself in Helen’s skull. Near the door where they’d been working, two of her pack went down, twitching. She felt the others quiver at their positions on the floor, the three nearest the window and its flickering light stumbling. Spiders plucked at the insides of her skull and she grasped her helmet tight in her gauntlets. A cry rushed out of her.

Sister Rachel’s hand touched her shoulder. “You should leave.” She coughed wetly. “The distortion will affect your electronics, your implants.”

Helen shook her head. “Have to stop whatever he started.” She cast a thought out to find her EM unit, number eight; like the others, only with additional electromagnetic shielding. *Up EM buffers*, she told it. *Open up that room. Quickly*. It acknowledged her order. Metal mesh unfolded around it, a Faraday cage, and she lost its signal as it scuttled off to work on the door.

Helen tried her squad on the radio again, but whatever was happening here, or maybe just the shielding built into the building, still prevented her from contacting the rest of her unit. She ordered one of her pack out with a recorded transcript, and it stumbled out. None of her pack except Eight looked good and she didn’t think the unit she’d just sent out would make it. She and the other humans in her squad, scientific specialists all, were here to stop what Wajkowski had started. It

looked as if she'd have to do that on her own.

"It can't be stopped," Sister Rachel said, as if reading Helen's mind, and her voice held kindness, concern, love.

Helen looked back to Sister Rachel. She wished she could trust that voice. But the woman behind it had trusted this man, the man who wanted to change the world. To destroy this world because he thought he could make a better one. "How? How did he want to make it better? I understand the theory, but I need to stop what's in there."

Eight unfolded a tiny circular saw and started cutting off the door's hinges.

The shriek of the saw almost drowned out Sister Rachel's voice. "Darwin . . . Wajkowski wanted to make it so there would be no Charles Darwin, no *Origin of the Species*. To cross our timeline with another, and remove his work. Wajkowski thought Darwin had generated a rift between science and religion. That the rift had given us the wars of the last ten years. But he forgot one thing."

The door's bottom hinge snapped off and Eight scuttled up the wall and started working on the top.

From the other room, a hissing buzzing noise rose in pitch. The bubble beyond the glass blossomed and grew, pulsing out, mingling rose and crimson, nearly touching the glass. Translucent, it hung suspended, its surface swirling with threads of color. It flared.

Nemesis's sidewheels churned to a halt, throwing up a fine mist of mingled salt and water that, for a moment, replaced the stinging scent of burnt powder. Darwin watched the ship's wake racing off toward the doomed Chinese ships attempting to close to where *Nemesis* had settled off the coast by Ningpo. Long and low, the British ironclad contrasted with the bowed hulls and angular bamboo sails of the Chinese junks. *Nemesis's* cannons roared again and another junk splintered apart, boards and bodies mingled in disturbed water.

"Not much of a fight, hey Doctor?"

Darwin glanced over at William Hutcheon Hall, master of the ship. "No, Captain Hall, I suppose not." He looked back at the Chinese ships. Their unfurled sails had caught enough wind to drive them toward the steamship, but they would never reach it. The clang and calls of the cannon crews moved in their stately pace and another salvo flew.

Hall beside him watched carefully, nodded. Another junk shattered apart. "I've studied ships all my life, Doctor. Not so long ago those boats might have had a chance. Not much, but a chance. Our hulls were wood, not so different from those curious curved hulls of theirs. We had cannons, but our accuracy was no good until close range. Now?" He slapped the railing. "These ironclads, Darwin. They'll rule the seas. Those poor fools out there are dead, and don't even know it."

"Passé."

The next salvo glanced a Chinese junk. The back section of the ship came away in a splatter of boards and some few crew. Hall and Darwin watched the Chinese troops scramble into launches, attempting to abandon ship as the vessel tilted aft, filling with water, easing into the waves.

Hall said, "At least for a while."

Darwin pulled himself from watching the men struggling in the water. It hardly seemed like war. "At least for a while what?"

Hall shook his head. "Sorry. Just thinking. Those ships of theirs, not so different from what we used to use, once upon a time. These ironclads, now, though." Hall turned to call out an order and the boilers fired up again, then he returned his attention to Darwin. "These ironclads will rule the seas for a while, it's true. But one day someone will come up with something new, something better. Like all things." Hall straightened. "Looks as if they're going to run." He strode back to the wheelhouse, but stopped to call back, "At least it's a quiet day for you, hey, Doctor?"

"Yes," Darwin said. A quiet day.

The smaller Chinese ships slowly, too slowly, swung about. On Hall's command, the sidewheels churned again. There would be no escape for the emperor's troops on this day. Their time had come, and passed, and soon *Nemesis* and ships like her would replace them. For a time.

"Like all things," Darwin said.

"He wanted to cross our timeline with another," Sister Rachel said. "Remove Darwin's influence. Keep a rift from forming between science and religion. But he forgot one thing."

Helen's vision, transmitted by her armor's systems, flared brighter, brighter, to a burning white brilliance. She closed her eyes. Static washed over her in a wave. Her pack died, all except Eight in its Faraday cage. Her implants died with them, lightning splintering in her skull, and then a black emptiness where their voices had been. She crumpled to the floor and cried. Vision and sound went dark.

She disconnected the helmet, fumbled it off. She breathed the dusty air and sneezed.

"God bless you," Sister Rachel said.

Helen looked up at her, at Eight working on the top hinge, back to Sister Rachel. "Forgot what?" she growled.

Sister Rachel stroked Wajkowski's head. "God's plan."

God's plan. The words used to describe what all the world had seen in the wake of this man Wajkowski's discovery: timeline after timeline, history after history, and, in each, Jesus. The details varied, sometimes born in China, or Mesoamerica, or Europe, or Africa, but in every history, every timeline across innumerable timelines, Jesus. A plan. God's plan.

Or so half the world had thought. The other half argued it to be an observational artifact, an inability of the equipment to detect more disparate

timelines. They had seen that before, with Mohammed, before more powerful equipment had drilled through observation of that historical figure to other paratimes.

And so research continued, and Jesus continued to be found, no matter what else varied. Wajkowski had funded this lab complex, fueled by twelve fusion lamps to drill deeper across paratime, to dispel the hypothesis. And the wars brewed outside, riots boiled in cities. Countries rose and died, and thermonuclear clouds rose over the Middle East. Wajkowski worked on through it all on a hypothesis that refused to die. Until he'd decided it to be true. But that he could still make the world better.

Helen looked to the back of the room where red light flickered beyond the tinted glass. "I don't understand."

Sister Rachel closed her eyes a moment, and her voice held the weariness of long years of fruitless argument. "Neither did he. He thought Darwin was the focal point, that Darwin's work led to the rift between science and religion that made the last ten years so hard. And he was right." She smiled.

"Sister, I didn't buy that predestination crap in college, and I don't buy it now. If it were true, there would be no paratime. No alternate reality."

Sister Rachel coughed and spat out blood. "Many roads lead to the city, Helen."

Helen looked away. She glanced at the dead helmet still in her hand and tossed it aside.

Sister Rachel shook her head. "He

thought to remove Darwin. He thought he could. But in every history, every path, he found it to be the same. In every history he found Darwin."

Eight cut through the top hinge and the metal clanked to the floor. The machine swung the door back and it fell with a loud bang. Eight minced down the wall and entered the room beyond where the red bubble swirled and pulsed.

Helen tried her suit radio again. Still dead, all her systems dead. "I have to do something." She checked her pistol, then thought better of it; the electronics were fried anyway. She tucked it back into its holster, rose and stepped toward the light.

"We all want to," Sister Rachel said. "And we all do."

Beyond the doorway, the glowing bubble churned, fluidic shades of colored threads that moved and swirled against each other and made the whole appear red. Eight tried to close with the bubble, but the machine's movements became jerky. Its legs collapsed and waved helplessly, scraping along the floor.

Helen swallowed. She thought of the last ten years. She thought of the blood she'd spilled. She would end this, however she could. She stepped closer.

At her feet now, Eight gave a final twitch and died, its Faraday cage wilting. Helen continued on. At her approach the threads across the bubble's surface excited, and the bubble grew. She reached out. Woman and bubble touched, and the bubble burst.

Darwin watched as the Russian troops moved into Warsaw and Darwin held his wife's cooling body and Darwin sealed the incision and Darwin lived and Darwin died and

The rifle roared in his hands, the ball out from the smoothbore smacking the grizzly in the neck with a thump. The creature continued forward, its bellow mingling with a throaty gurgle. Darwin flung the rifle down, stepped behind a thick Ponderosa pine and pulled out pistol and knife. He cocked the pistol back as the beast hurled itself forward. He fired again, the ball taking the bear in the skull with a loud pock sound. It staggered and took a swipe at him with one great paw. The blow tore through his clothes and tossed him down the slope.

Darwin rolled to a stop against a shale outcrop, shattering a chunk of layered rock with his head. Bits of stone stabbed his skull and slithered into his shirt. He blinked dumbly, peering upslope. The bear lay there, dead, head lolled to one side with a fat hole where the ball had bored through. He slumped back and looked down at his leg, the remaining cloth wet with blood. His hands shook. Somehow he still had his knife. He cut at his clothes, making bandages, but kept dropping the blade.

He lay there a while, perched against the shale outcrop. Just down the slope, in the grassy base of the valley, a brook

wandered, and wide mounds of soil dotted the meadow. A large ground squirrel with a white-tipped tail emerged from one and beeped at him. Then it beeped again. Gradually, other squirrels emerged. They made their way into the grasses, grasping them and eating them from the tip down.

He'd seen animals such as these before, many times, since they'd left Texas: prairie dogs. The ones on the plains lived in larger groups, and had black tails. He'd seen others here along these foothills of the Rocky Mountains, slightly different from these.

"Different." His eyes roved over the low hills and mountains rising further west, then settled again on the little animals. A golden eagle topped the ridge, and a sharp cry called out from one of the animals perched atop a mound. The animals scurried for their burrows. Darwin sought back in his memory the cries of such animals in Texas.

He said the word again: "Different." But now an idea moved in the back of his mind. A new idea, it energized him, drove him to move, in spite of the pain.

Somewhere in his backpack, still up the slope, he kept a notebook. It took a half hour to crawl up, but by the time Thomas Jefferson Farnham and the others found him, Darwin had taken many notes. He had an idea which, if borne out, could change the world.

We all want to," Sister Rachel said, still back in the other room. "And we all do."

Helen stood in the room beyond the glass, hand upraised as if to touch something. She lowered it.

No trace of the anomaly remained, just a tangle of wires and machinery which converged on a spherical cavity. Eight lay dead at her feet, apparently intact but inert. "What happened?" She walked back to Sister Rachel and repeated the question.

"It's done," Sister Rachel said.

Helen felt no different. Her mission still hung in her mind. The building still shook, the campus still burned,

wars still raged, and she stood there not knowing what to do. The past had just changed, the world and the universe if theory held, but she could not know it. She could not change any of what had happened.

"And what now? The future?"

Sister Rachel coughed, winced, closed her eyes and opened them to look at Helen. "Pray with me."

Helen stepped closer. She knelt beside her. Sister Rachel's hand touched hers. Helen lifted Wajkowski and said, "Follow me." ☒

PS SHOWCASE #1:
GARY FRY

SANITY AND OTHER
DELUSIONS

INTRODUCTION BY STEPHEN VOLK

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Gary Fry's work has always focused on the thing we think we know best, yet may know least of all: the meandering, labyrinthine mind.

In these six cerebral excursions, everyday life is exposed for the realm of illusions it almost certainly is. *Almost*. After all, how can we be sure? How can we truly know when the world is more or less than what our psyches make of it? Perhaps other people tell us. Yes, it's them out there, trying to get in *here*. Keep them out at all costs! Do anything to prevent madness . . .

“. . . nasty enough to make Roald Dahl at his most unexpected blanch.”
—Peter Tennant

Hal Duncan tells us, “With a lot of pirate-oriented projects in the air, I was casting around for an idea when I came across a little-known fact—that pirates had what was essentially gay marriage in the practice of ‘matelotage’, a union of lovers complete with property inheritance. I’d also always wanted to write a story based on *The Tempest*, looking at what Ariel gets up to after Prospero pisses off. The two ideas came together in “*The Island of the Pirate Gods*”, a bawdy romp that I had a lot of fun writing.

Hal was born in 1971 and lives in the West End of Glasgow. A long-standing member of the Glasgow SF Writers Circle, his first novel, *Vellum*, was nominated for the Crawford Award, the British Fantasy Society Award and the World Fantasy Award. The sequel, *Ink*, is available from Pan Macmillan in the UK and Del Rey in the US, while a novella is due out in November 2007 from MonkeyBrain Books. He has also published a poetry collection, *Sonnets for Orpheus*, and had short fiction published in magazines such as *Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons* and *Interzone*, and anthologies such as *Nova Scotia*, *Eidolon* and *Logorrhea*.

The Island Of The Pirate Gods

Hal Duncan

Tempests and Teacups

Black leather boots a-smoke with powder-burns from the big gun of my beloved *Pride of Kentigern*, I hurtle through the rain, a human cannonball, balloon-sleeves of my pink silk shirt frilling in the wind as, arms a-flap like a panicked duck, I do my best to come out of the head-over-heels tumble, screaming a prayer out to the pirate gods in the hope that I won’t hit the foremast of the *Determination* with a head only as thick as iron in the sense of witlessness and obstinacy.

—Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!, I scream.

It’s not a prayer as any man of the cloth would be proud of, I grant you, but to my renegade deities, Matelotage

and Mutiny, it’s the sentiment that matters, not the subtlety; and bless them if they don’t look out for their beloved son.

As I reach the zenith of my trajectory, I straighten out face-forward, find myself in an arc that should take me nicely past the *Determination*’s foremast and towards the rather softer target of the main topgallant. Or at least towards where the main topgallant would be if the bloody bastards weren’t furling it for the storm.

My prayer becomes a chant as I hurtle through the air.

—Fuck fuck fuckety fuck fuck fuckety fu-

Que? Sat on the railing of the crow's nest, I notice, dangling his legs as casual as can be, a peachy young lad in stripy top and knee-length breeches is stirring the contents of a china tea-cup with one finger. I could swear the saucy bugger winks at me, before I blink and he's gone.

An almighty crack of lightning shatters my curiosity as it shatters the air, forks blasting all three masts of the ship simultaneously, shattering the mainmast and bringing the tip of it down in a mess of splintering timber, burning canvas and whiplashing ropes. My trajectory suddenly acquires a lateral dimension as the twisting topple of mast and rigging nabs me neat as a ball in a lacrosse racket. I catch glimpses as I swing down, sailors on deck, waves crashing over the port side, jibs flapping loose from the foremast where the *Pride of Kentigern's* cannon have blown the bowsprit to bits. Serves you sodding right, I think, as the arc of the tangle brings me round, upside-down and facing back the way I came at the burning wreck of my beautiful brig, almost swallowed now by the tempestuous ocean.

They sank my favourite ship, the bastards.

—One little cannonball, I yell down my outrage as more ropes give and I swing back over the deck, where Black Joey staggers through the carnage,

hauling sailors to their feet, hacking ropes, pointing this way and that. He stops suddenly, looks up directly at me, pulling off his black leather tricorn and shaking rain from his eyes and his dreadlocks. Gaze as black as his skin and his skirted coat, even from here I can see the hatred in his dead-lights.

—It was only meant to be a warning shot, I shout.

There's fury on his face as he pulls his flintlock out, tries to hold aim on me against the yaw and pitch of his ship. Bollocks. And I can't even reach me own twin pistols, caught in the rigging as I am like Saint Ahab on the whale. The boat lurches wildly to starboard and I hear the whine of his shot; then we lurch to port, and Black Joey reels, turns to curse the pilot.

—Hold her steady, you scabrous . . . what the . . . ?

Up on the poop deck, the saucy sprite from the crow's nest is whirling the wheel this way and that with gay abandon. Actually, it's the fact that he's doing so with his monkey-tail that's truly queer. Again, though, there's not much time for curiosity as the boat jolts hard as a horse-hoof in the head. There's a scream of splintering wood—a reef, I reckon—and then a lightning crack hits what's left of the mainmast, courses down to the deck (tingling my tongue with a nutty taste), and sends a searching spear right down into the hold. Big hairy bollocks, I think, as the powder magazine of the *Determination* blows the whole ship apart.

Articles & Arcana

—What does the Book say? whispers Twinklenose.

—Is these betrayers? hisses Dustbunny.

—Perfidious brothers? glitters Tiffin.

—Pompous dukes? whooshes Buttersick.

—Misguided kings? thumps Tatters.

—We haven't done a king in ages!

—Or a duke.

—Feh! Dukes are *duuuuuulllllllll*.

—I like dukes. They get really cross when you-

—Hush up! I say. I'm trying to read.

The other sprites continue with their chitter of chat, so I roar—fierce as a lion, if I do say so myself—shaking the leaves and fronds of the trees, and sending the pesterers skitter-scatter off through the branches. Hunkered on my perch, looking down on the bedraggled pair unconscious on the beach below, their hands still wrapped around each others' throats, I empty my teacup with a slurp, note the arrowed heart-shape in the leaves before I toss the teacup over my shoulder for Dustbunny to catch, and turn back to the Book.

Not that the Book is much use, most of the pages being stuck together or rotted to unreadability by its time however many fathoms deep. And I was never much of a one for letters anyway, in truth. No matter how hard His Nibs tried to teach me, I'd rather make up

my own sounds for the pretty symbols. I mean, "Q", for instance—that's the drooly gurgle of a mouth open, tongue out to one side, right?. "D" is a yawn. "Y" is the hiss of a snake's tongue flicking. It's *obvious*. Not that His Nibs ever saw it that way.

—My tricky sprite, thine ear shall cufféd be, he'd say, if thou dost not attention pay to me.

—"P", I'd say in response, "P" being a big fat raspberry blown with a sullen glare.

So what with the water-damage and my literacy issues, the Book's oracular powers aren't always much cop. But the others do expect.

—It says they're mortal enemies, I proclaim highly, damned by Davy Jones to hunt each other across the high seas until the end of time!

Which gets a few appreciative *ooooohs*.

The pink-faced one with the yellow hair and the human cannonball act groans and stirs, so I tuck the Book under my arm, pick a coconut—not *too* big—and drop it on his head. Can't have him waking up and wandering off when we haven't even started to plan his Redemption.

It's been a while since we had a good Redemption, you know. Since His Nibs bugged off back to Italy, all we've had is a couple of dukes, the odd king and a whole bunch of merchants. Do you know how hard it is to Redeem a merchant? Wreck their ship and they're

more worried about their precious cargoes than getting home. Offer them a banquet and they complain about the vintage of the wine. Give them the harpy act and they want to catch you, cage you, take you home to impress the hoity-toity. Show them cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces . . . all they want to know is, *how much did the builders charge?* I tell you, try and make someone have a change of heart when they don't have one; it's not easy.

Still . . . it gives us something to do. After the squillionth time you've heard Tiffin murder "Juno Sings Her Blessings On You" in front of an audience of monkeys, even a tobacco-ship on the horizon is a blessing.

—I found something! I found something!

Buttersick bounces through the canopy towards me in a series of tumbles and flutters somewhere between a squirrel and a butterfly, catching branches with his tail, catching air with his wings. He lands on a branch just over my head and rolls down to hang like a bat by his feet, gloating imp-grin in my face. He flaps a scrap of parchment in one hand, rather raggedy-looking to my mind, babbling about how he found it on the beach amongst the driftwood *and the drowned, and what does it say, what does it say?* The others flip and flit nearer until I'm surrounded by a score of popping eyes and perky ears.

I take the parchment from Buttersick and turn it a few times, frowning my

brows till it resolves into a series of yawns, raspberries, squeaks and giggles and whatnot. As I read it out, translating into human-talk in my head, my audience nods vigorously . . . where they're not picking their noses, scratching their arses or elbow-fencing.

—It's a set of rules, I say . . .

—What are *rules*? says Mugwump.

— . . . for who gets what when a ship gets caught, I say. And how hostages are not to be moles . . . moles' teeth.

—You mean *molested*? Buttersick says. That would make more sense.

—They're by some Greek guy, I carry on. Artikles.

—*Articles!* says Buttersick. They're *pirates*.

All heads turn to the unconscious pair below. The black-skinned one is stirring now—he sees the other and gives a growl—so I pinch Buttersick's toes and redirect him with a little shove as he falls past, to land square on the man's head, noggin to noggin.

—Smart-arse, I say.

Then I pull the Book out from under my arm and open it at P for Pirate. Or P for Plan. Or P for Prospero-went-away-and-left-us-here-and-it-seemed-great-at-the-time-but-now-there's-fuck-all-to-do-on-this-island-and-I'm-booooooored. Anyhoo . . .

J . . . K . . . L . . . M . . .

Aha!

Matelotage & Mutiny (Part I)

—Arrrr, says he, fixing me with his deadlights. The story of Matelotage

and Mutiny is it yer after? The story of the Pirate Gods?

He leans in close, breath stinking of rum and rot, grins at my keen nod.

—See now, he says, they was mortals once, lovers, so the story goes, two ensigns on a merchant ship of His Majesty's Royal Navy, who swore an oath to be together forever. Loved each other so much, they did, they shared their rum rations, their goods, the very shirts on their backs, even put their wages together and bought themselves a pair of flintlocks, one for each of them and each engraved with his lover's name, worn loaded tucked into the belt at the front where it isn't smart-like, savvy? On account of the potential for accidents.

I glance down at the twin-flintlocks tucked into me own belt. He has a point, I'm sure, but then "potential for accidents" is on me calling card, right under "Flash Jack Carter, Freelance Privateer". He winks and carries on:

—*If I ever as much as look at another, says one—he says, waving a hand—man or woman, let me balls be blown off. And, why sure, if that ever happens, says the other, I'll be doing the same, cause if my balls don't keep ye faithful, they're no use to me anyways.*

He slugs back some grog, points the tankard at me.

—They laughed about it, he says, oh yes, but they meant it true as the North Star, mind. They meant it.

—Only this was the Royal Navy, he says, savvy, and the British they don't smile upon two sailors getting too . . . familiar, like. Oh, sure, it happens like as not, now and then, on those long voyages where the only female company is the sea, the ship, and the Captain's Daughter. But it's not approved of, officially.

I nod, knowing that form of unfraternal officialdom all too well, and the Captain's Daughter's too. She's the only girl I ever got truly intimate with, mate, and I can't say we was suited. But I try not to dwell on her not-so-delicate touch.

—Now the rest of the crew, he says, as they came to see how these two were sweethearts, they just said: well, each to their own, matey. And doesn't it sort of warm yer cockles, anyways? Aren't these lads just like two pieces of rope tied together, a little work of matelotage made by an idle sailor to pass the time at sea? And what's the harm in that? So after a while it came to be that others on board found themselves . . . inspired . . . thinking similar thoughts about a mate of theirs, and blimey if they didn't decide they wanted to *tie the knot* too, so to speak. Which is how, of course, the marriage of man and man came to be known as matelotage, and a grand tradition it is too.

—But the captain of that ship, he was a cruel man with a leathery Bible in place of his heart, and when he got wind of this queer love aboard his ship, well,

one day he bursts in on our lusty lads and interruptus their coitus, he does. They try to explain themselves, to say that they're bound together in true love but, O, he just glowers dark as the deep at them. *If that's the way ye want it, says he, well, so be it.*

I lean forward in my chair till the pistols press into me waist, keen as a cock in a Tortuga brothel.

—So he has the lads trussed up together—still naked, by the by—and keelhauled, dragged under the ship's hull, to have their skin ripped to ribbons by the barnacles.

The old salt slugs back more rum, lays down the tankard.

—And that should be where the story ends, he says, by all that's *righteous* and *decent* and *godfearing*. But 'tis not. For if 'twas, why then, 'twould be the story of Matelotage and Murder, not the story of Matelotage and Mutiny.

Plots & Pageants

—Alright. I was wrong before. They're not enemies. They're lovers, thrown to the cruel sea by an even crueller captain, doomed to—

—They don't *loooooo* like lovers.

—They're in a loving embrace.

—Looks more like they're trying to strangle each—

—The Book says they're lovers, so that's what they are.

—But does it actually *say* they're lovers?

—Well, not *literally*. But you have to read between the lines.

—But there's no words between the lines. If there were words *between* the lines, then they'd actually *be* lines, wouldn't they?

—You're not looking closely enough. See here? No, right *here*.

—I still don't see—ow!

—Right then. Since they're *lovers* we have to separate them. We have to give them Trials and Tribulations, a Terrible Ordeal and a Tearful Reunion and—

—And a pageant at the end?

—Ooh, yes, let's have a pageant!

—We could all dress up as goddesses, and sing blessings on them!

—*Bounteous* blessings!

—I could be Juno. I do an *excellent* Juno.

—An excrement Juno, more like.

—*His Nibs* used to like it.

—*His Nibs* was tone-deaf. He . . .

...

—What?

—As. I. Was. Saying. A Tearful Reunion and a Happy Ever After.

—And a—

—And *maybe* a pageant. But first we have to separate them. Twinklenose, Buttersick, Handshandy, you take the one with the hat up to Pointy Point and do the old twiddly flute music in the woods thing, lead him back down here via the bears.

—Won't that be a bit . . . dangerous?

—It's not a Tribulation if it's not dangerous.

—But what if one of the bears tries to eat us?

—The bears won't try to eat you.

—They ate Honeyarse.

—He shouldn't have mooned them.

—Mugwump, Tatters, you go set out a banquet in the Otherwise-Boring Clearing. Suckling pig, roast chicken, fruit-baskets, lots of grog, the usual.

—Should I make little swans from the napkins?

—Let's not. I nearly lost my tail last time.

—But swans are pretty.

—Geese with grandiose delusions, they are, and a badger's temper.

—She was just protecting her signets.

—No swan napkins. Right? Good, go on, then. Scoot.

—Ariel?

—What?

—Are you *sure* they're lovers, thrown to the cruel sea by an even crueller captain? The black one seemed awful angry at the other.

—Well, maybe they had a tiff.

Deadlights & Dreadlocks

Black Joey opens his eyes to find himself staring up at the blue sky and the noon-day sun, with solid ground under his back and soft grass between his fingers. Gulls wheel overhead, but the sound of the ocean is too distant, quiet enough he could swear he hears whispers and hisses over it—then a sudden

rustle of brush that brings him bolt upright and looking over his shoulder, hand reaching for his sword as he scrambles to his feet. But the underbrush of the treeline settles and, peer as he might, he can see no shapes shift in the shadows. Curious.

He scans the full length of the trees that edge the clearing, north to south, turns to take the full compass-spin of his surroundings—and steps back in vertiginous alarm. He recovers his composure, shuffles forward for a tentative glance over the edge. Something queer is afoot. He has vague memories of a beach, of that cur Carter, but it's no more than a snatch of a blur; he can be sure that someone's playing games with him, though.

A man doesn't get washed ashore on the edge of a cliff with a hundred foot drop down to the sea, no matter how high the bloody tempest's waves.

He crouches down to pick up his tricorne hat from the grass. His sword still in its scabbard, his frockcoat still on his back, boots on his feet, his hat left at his side, he finds it hard to fathom the purpose of whoever brought him here, but Black Joey's not one to worry over such trifles. He has his own purpose to worry about, and the stories of this isle involve all manner of strangeness anyway: some say it gives you all you desire, others that it gives you all you fear; some say it's an island of savage demons,

others that it's an island of innocent spirits. These are the tales of white men, of course, Christians and cowards. Black Joey's all too familiar with the fears and desires they project on anything that's . . . other.

In the pocket of his frockcoat, Joey finds the spyglass still intact, puts it to his eye and scours the forest as it rolls up into the hills, looking for some sign of the object of his quest. He almost misses the crumbling dome—the overgrown remnants of what looks a little like a Spanish Colonial church but more fussy, more decorative—but *almost* is the watchword; his deadlights keen as a crow's in the nest, he spots it even with the stone nigh drowned in vines. Looks derelict. That's a little disconcerting, true, but perhaps the new master of the island has less taste for pompous grandeur. By all accounts, the Good King of this isle is a much simpler soul than its previous sovereign. So with only a little grin of grim satisfaction, and a shake of his dreadlocks before he sets the tricorne on his head, Black Joey sets out through the jungle towards Prospero's Cell, towards a treasure more precious than anything that scurvy dog, Flash Jack, can dream of, wherever he may be, aye, even now, no doubt, fixing his eyes on the same sight but with the glint of gold or glory blinding them, as dedicated to his greed as Joey is to his own goal: freedom.

Gunpowder and Grog

—*Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

The map is dried out nicely now and it's not too water-damaged, so I'm in good spirits as I roll it up and tuck it back into its case, then crouch to pour the sea and sand out of me sodden boots, in time with the dainty lyrics of me favourite shanty, *Matelotage and Mutiny*:

—But a cold and angry captain with a Bible for his heart, *Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

I wring me pink silk shirt out and flap it a few times at arms length, hook it on a twig.

—Knew naught of what his crewmen did beneath the shining stars. *Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

Breeches draped delicately over a branch.

—Until one night, he saw a sight that stripped his anger bare. *Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

I shake like a dog in me scarlet doublet, still damp as all else and hardly what a parson would consider modest, considering it's the only thing I'm wearing now—but then modesty never was me strong point, in any sense of the word.

—'Twas Tom with Jack upon his back, his legs up in the air!

I take a pinch of snuff from where the pouch lies open beside the fire, wrinkle me nose with the peppery sting.



—*Cry, Haul!* sings a choir-boy chorus.
Aye! A-tiddle-ee-aye-tee-tee!

—It's *diddle-aye-dee*, I call, ye scurvy—then do a double-take on the treetops where the voice came from. And sneeze.

—Bless you, the voice calls down, sing-song and sweet like.

I dive and roll for me pistols, come out on one knee, both flintlocks pointed at the source. Seems a polite enough sprite, but I've heard tell of the terrors of the Island of the Pirate Gods, and I'm not keen to be coming back from here like Barbary Bill Burroughs . . . Father William as he is now. Not bloody likely, mate. I'll be redeemed by the rope and naught else, thank 'ee kindly.

—Now who in the buggery was that? I say. Friend or foe?

There's a rustle in the branches, a glimpse of glittering feathers blue-green as a peacock's tail. A flutish sound twiddles off to the left and I spin—a glint of giggling grin and eyes—pull the trigger. *Click*. Arse and bollocks, I think, and start fanning the gun-barrel with the tail of me doublet . . . like that'll dry the damp powder sure as hanging. The voice sings from the right now.

—Thy lover lies drowned on the water'y rock. No more, no more, shall he kiss thy—

BOOM!

—Bloody sodding bugging sodden powder-purse, I curse, flapping my burnt hand. 'Tis *watertight*, says he. *Guaranteed to six fathoms deep*. My arse!

I bend down to pick up the pistol where the misfire made me drop it, muttering to meself about a dark, dark fate awaiting Gibson the Gunsmith when next I berth in Tortuga.

— . . . and a pox . . . with pustules . . . and a red-hot poker for his . . .

The toot of the flute sounds a little ways back in the trees, followed by more laughter, and I gather meself with a scowl and a growl. Right then, ye bugger, I think. I'll not be made a fool of by some tree-hopping powder monkey as dresses like a whoring parrot. Still hunkered down, I reload old Mutiny, and slink forward into the trees, deadlights scouring the thicket for this tricky taunter, following the song as it retreats into the forest until . . . by the pirate gods, but I find meself in a clearing amidst the strangest sight.

A feast fit for a score of kings in practice for the Most Corpulent King Contest lies laid out on a banquet table afore me, chicken and pork and beef and lamb and—

—Grog! I say.

I slap the pistols down on the table.

—I think I've come to re-assess our relationship, I call out to my peachy pest. 'Tis clear yer a . . . well . . . a *thing* of good heart and grand hospitality.

I salute the canopy with a pork chop.

Now they say the dreaded Blackbeard ties fuses in his hair. Well, by the fiery shock on me noggin, there's those as say I *am* a fuse, and a lit one at that. They call me the Scarlet Buccaneer, the

Peach Mutineer, the Pink Privateer. By the pirate gods, I'm Flash Jack Carter, the original gay blade, and there's nothing I'm afraid of on land or sea. (Excepting lemurs, that is—little incident in Madagascar, involved a gypsy love-curse and a colony of ring-tails, but that's another story and ye don't want to know, mate, trust me.)

So me point is, when, with me in the middle of stuffing me chops with chops, the harpy comes a-screeching down out of the thick of the tree-tops, I'll be insisting as it was entirely intentional, me falling over backwards, regardless of what anyone says. And *there was no sbrieky-hand-flapping*, I tell ye, *none*. I will admit, however, to a little haste in grabbing for me pistol, Mutiny, to put a shot square in the heart of the feathery fiend swooping down upon me. I realise I might not have applied due care and attention when, instead of dropping out of the air with a thud and a twitch, the bloody thing comes to a dead stop and gets this queer look on its face as it flaps there, just looking me up and down, long and lingering enough for me to scramble to me feet. Then it starts coming at me twice as fast. I look at the name graved on the grip of the pistol in me hand.

—Bollocks, I say. Wrong bloody gun.

Matelotage & Mutiny (Part II)

The old salt shakes his head in that *'tis a terrible tale* sorta way.

—'Tis a terrible tale, he says. But the

long and the short of it is that one of the lads died that day and the other one lived, but no-one could tell which was which when they brung them back aboard, on account of them both being in such a shredded state. And the one what lived, when they asked him what his name was, well, he just fixes his deadlights on the captain and laughs, tells him how he made a deal with Davy Jones, to swap his own soul for his lover's, dead in the sea where neither God nor Devil has dominion. The one died in the flesh, ye see, but his soul lived on in the other; and the other—well, his flesh survived, but his soul went down to Davy Jones's Locker, tied up tight in the corpse of his lover. Truly bound they are now, *forever*, half-living, half-dead and all mixed up in each other, so as their old names mean nothing.

—Well, the captain he gets a fear in him and decides its best to hang this madman, so they hoist our lad from the yardarm. Oh, but he doesn't die, our lad, for his lover's soul's bound tighter into his flesh than ever any man's *own* soul could be; it can never be sundered from his flesh. So he just hangs there calling strangled curses down upon the captain. Day after day, he hangs there, night after night, and damned if, after three days of this, the crew didn't rise up against that captain. For so many of them by then were matelotaged to each other that there was more salt on that ship shared between the saucy sailors

than there is in the sea herself. A ship of love it was—a ship of fools, you might say—but either way it was a ship of lusty seamen that would brook no more of such brutality. So in the dead of night, the jack tars gathered and they cut our lad down from his rope. They gave him his flintlock and that of his lover, the twin flintlocks that they'd had each other's name engraved on.

—*We'll follow you where'er ye lead, they says to him, for 'tis love we'll fight for from now on, not God or King.*

—Then, with one pistol in his left hand and one pistol in his right, he leads them down to the captain's quarters, and he kicks the door right open. The captain, he can't believe it. *What's this?* says he. O, but looking into our lad's eyes, he finds no answer but lost love and a thirst for revenge. He begs for his life as they drag him up to walk the plank. He begs for mercy, crying out in the names of those two lads so terribly punished. But those names hold no sway no more, so our man just pushes him out onto the plank.

—*We're neither of us those lads, says he. Not any longer. If ye want to call us something, says he, if ye want to know whose death you're dying for and who it is that brings the vengeance down upon ye . . . read the names of us on these flintlocks.*

—And as the moonlight glinted on the pistols in his hand, all those who were close enough to see, they saw that even the very names inscribed upon the pistols had changed.

—*If it's names ye want, says he, ye can tell Davy Jones that it's the murder of my sweet Matelotage ye're paying for, and that the man who sent ye to him goes now by the name of Mutiny.*

He leans back in his chair.

—That be the story of the Pirate Gods, the story of Matelotage and Mutiny, aye, the Pirate God of Love and the Pirate God of Death. There be more to it than that—there be the tale of Mutiny's long search for his lost love, of Matelotage's adventures in Hell, of how they came to be together again, raised the wreck of the Argo, and gathered a crew of all the heathen deities of yore—but that's for another night, me matey. What I'll leave ye with is this: From that day hence those pistols have turned up in many hands, for there's many who have given themselves over to Matelotage and Mutiny, to be their mortal champion. They say that nothing can stand against such a man, for the one gun—that marked Mutiny—deals instant death, but the other—the one marked Matelotage—deals instant love, like the very darts of Eros. And who, I ask ye, who can stand up to love?

He downs his rum and scrapes his chair back, pulls himself to his feet and staggers off towards the barkeep, calling for more grog. I put my tankard down on the table and reach for the smooth cold handles of the twin flintlocks tucked into my buckler, finger the

gravings on the grips, carved deep as the scars on me chest.

Maybe one man, I think.

Slaves & Sanctuaries

The dainty air of the tune has been growing more shrill now, more insistent, for the last half-hour, following him off to his left like it's trying to draw him off his path, but Black Joey ignores it and hacks his way on through the foliage. Every so often the tune stops, replaced by mutters—*I'm doing my bloody best—well, you try, wormtail—I don't care if he heard me*. Joey pays no mind to the frustrated tricksters. It takes him a good couple of hours to cut his path but eventually he's there, standing before the overgrown ruin, the now-pathetic palace of the magician duke, Prospero, master of spirits, master of men. The Good King must have moved his base, Joey tries to tell himself, but the dereliction of shanty-town civilisation around tells another tale, one he doesn't want to hear. It's one he has to face though, he knows, so he walks through the abandoned settlement now being swallowed by the jungle, past the wooden board of a sign scrawled with the name of *Sanctuary*, to the rotten doors of the ruin at its heart.

The thing of darkness sitting in the shadowed throne is half mummy, half skeleton, flesh weathered to a thin leather stretched across the bone, naked but for the tattered remnants of a cloak

which drape the corpse like royal robes, a pattern of white stars on dark blue still vaguely discernable here and there. For an orb and sceptre of sorts, each claw of a hand clutches a thick wooden stick, three feet long or so and splintered at the top; looking closer, Joey matches the angles, sees that these are two halves of a broken staff. He walks up to the cadaver and gently touches his fingertips to what's left of the nappy white hair and the bush of beard which gives this legend of a man dignity even in death. He looks down at the shrivelled genitals, turns to gaze around the hall all scrawled with chalk veves, choked with foliage.

King Caliban the Good, thinks Joey, who was no man's but his own in the end.

A black king in the West Indies, they'd said, a child saved from slavery in Algiers by his Yoruban witch-doctor mother, spirited away to an enchanted island in the Caribbean only to be captured and bound into servitude while just a boy by the white man who murdered his mother. Accused of attempted rape—oh, but it's always rape, of course—by the white man's spoiled daughter. But freed, finally, to live in peace on this forgotten island, now *his* island. A kingdom for us all, a kingdom called Sanctuary, they'd said, the other marooners, those slaves like Joey brought to the Americas to haul the gold of rich men into galleons, taught their tongues so they could take their

orders. Those slaves who, like Joey, had slipped their shackles and found what freedom they could on the high seas.

Black Joey isn't one for hope, but he named his ship the *Determination* for a stubbornness as powerful as hope. He's no dreamer, so he came here willing to face whatever truth lay behind the legends. But even so a man's will, his resolve, can be a little like a hope or a dream . . . breakable by cruel reality. Standing there before the dead king of rebellious slaves, though, Black Joey's resolve is only strengthened.

So he kneels before the corpse of Caliban and kisses its feet. Then he turns, and with his sword begins to hack at the foliage and rotten wood of panelling and furniture. He goes out into the town and returns with more wood and kindling. Then he gathers the Good King's body in his arms and carries it gently to the pyre he's built, prises the broken staff from its rigor mortis grasp and wraps tatters of starry cloth around one end of each length, to make of Prospero's staff, Caliban's sceptres, twin torches which he sparks to light with flint and just a little powder, fizzling into fire as bright as any magic. He lights the pyre and stands back, watching as the flames rise, swallowing the body where it rests, the signpost of Sanctuary for its pillow. He looks at the sigils inscribed on his blazing torches for a second, wonders what power rested within this wood when unbroken, then he tosses them on the pyre

and he turns, walks out of the ruin of a little palace, smoke and ash billowing out behind him as the broken halves of Prospero's staff are reunited in the flames.

So the king is dead, the kingdom in ruins. That just means there's work to be done.

Maps and Metamorphoses

I button the breeches and tuck in me shirt, flip the doublet back on with a swish. One boot. The other. I buckle my belt, jam Matelotage and Mutiny into place. I'm not sure whether the imp's eyes are wider at me dressed up in all me finery than they were at the naked flesh.

—Are you a pirate? he says with more than a little awe.

—Now that's an unkind way of phrasing it, I say. I'm more—stop that!

I bat his hand from my doublet's tail and he skitters back, all abashed.

—I'm sorry, he says. It's just . . . your coat is pretty.

—Many thanks. I'm rather fond of it meself.

—Your hair is pretty too. It's orangey. I like oranges. Does it taste like oranges. Can I try?

I halt him with a hand on his forehead only to find the mad little mopet grab my wrist and pull it down to start an intense study of my fingers, fondling them like he's never seen a knuckle before. That's the drawback with the gun of Matelotage, ye know; used carelessly it can start more trouble than the

other's ever ended. Oh, it's grand if yer shooting someone in the back while their deadlights are on the bosun, say, a peachy little diversion, but if it's yerself is the first thing they see . . . well, as a hypothetical example, when they're seven foot tall and known as Scurvy Shug, 'tis best to be avoided. My besotted sprite pulls my pinky towards his mouth, tongue out, and I flap him away.

—For pity's sake, I say. Will ye give me peace?

—I'll give you *bliss*, he says. I'll give you flowers and . . . quinces and a puppy dog and . . . [he scrunches his face in a queerish peer] . . . *explosions*. You like explosions; I can tell.

He's a canny lad—and uncanny, for that matter—I have to give him that; but I'm thinking it might be a good idea to get my arse off this island sharpish, before the “See How Much I Love You?” phase moves into the “How Can You *Not* Love Me?” stage with its attendant desperate measures.

—I'll give you anything you want, he says. *Anything*.

I pull the map case out of me pocket and set about unscrewing the cap, sharpish.

—Now, look, lad, I say. No offence to ye intended, and it's not like I'm averse to a bit of the old Purser's Pleasure, but I just can't be having a relationship with anything what has a tail.

He looks crestfallen, but I just turn to hold the map up, take me bearings with the compass once more.

—Not again, I mutter distractedly.

He scurries to keep up as I stalk through the bush. Now that he's dropped the harpy glamour, he's a winsome sprite, I have to admit. The wings are rather fetching, sure, and even with the horns and green hair, the golden flower behind his ear makes him a picture of . . . salacious innocence. I can't say as I'm not tempted, but it's the tail, ye see, the tail . . . I mean, three months living on leaves and insects, with the Lemur Queen and her—no! I shake the cruel memories from me noggin.

—It just won't work, I say.

—Wait! he says. If it's just the tail . . .

He bends over to reach between his legs, brings his tail through—and I mean the root of it, the shifty nipper, right round to the front of him—then with a bit of tugging and twiddling he reshapes it into . . . well, something else entirely.

—That's quite impressive, I say.

—I'm very versatile, says he.

—So which of the gods are you, anyway? I say as he stands there, hands on hips, all cocky and looking more attractive by the second. Yer too young for Dionysus, I'd wager. Pan, is it, with the horns and all? Though the wings . . .

—Pan? he giggles. No, he's two islands to the left, just after sunrise.

I cock my head like a curious dog.

—You'll get it in a few hundred years, he says. Call me Ariel.

—Flash Jack Carter. Ariel, eh? Curious. I've never heard of ye.

—No reason you should have, he shrugs.

—I know all the Pirate Gods, mate, old and new. I'm learned.

—What makes you think I'm a god?

—Well, this *is* the Island of the Pirate Gods, I say, isn't it?

He doesn't say anything, except with his eyebrows—a sort of *you're not entirely sane, are you?* look that has me waving the proof in his face.

—Look, I've got a map, I say. Cost me twenty bloody guineas. See, it says this is the Island of the Pirate Gods. Right here. The place where Mutiny was reunited with his lost love, Matelotage, where they built their pirate kingdom out of Spanish gold, a glorious haven for all the heathen gods of yore, those renegade deities accursed by a cold Christian tyrant with no true love of the blood and sweat and tears, aye, the salt of the sea that's in us all and that makes a life worth . . . living.

He looks at me, then at the map, then at me again.

—You've been diddled, he says.

—So you're not a pirate? he says, scuttling to keep up as I stride back down onto the beach, cursing all the way.

—I told ye, that's a slur on me good character. I prefer to see meself more as a freelance privateer.

—That's . . . Don't you need Letters of Marque to be a privateer?

I pull open me shirt to show the gravings on me chest, the lattice of scars etched by a captain whose opinion of

Matelotage and Mutiny wasn't quite as progressive as mine, ye might say.

—There ye go, I say, signed by the Captain's Daughter herself . . . the lash that is, lad.

—Isn't it normally . . .

—Done on the back? Bastard who did this was cruel as Blackbeard himself, wanted to see my face, he said, as he whipped the bugging devilry out of me. Thirty-nine lashes and a bucket of sea-water to wash away the blood. I swore that day I'd have the ship, cargo and crew, and send that pious black-guard's soul down to Davy Jones, if the Old Man of the Sea would only give me the means to do it. And bless him if he didn't do just that.

I let the shirt fall closed, tap me pistols. Found them in me bunk that night, I did, a gift from the pirate gods, so me crewmates were all a-whispering, who'd clearly chosen me as champion. I shot that captain with the gun of love, matey, had him weeping for me like a fallen maiden right up until I put a shot from the gun of death square in his broken heart. It didn't heal the scars though.

—Aye, I say. Written with the Cat O' Nine Tails, by a self-proclaimed Hand of God, and all the Letters of Marque I need to plunder the ships of any nation bar the one I serve.

—And what nation is that?

—The People's Independent Republic of Arse, Cock and Yo-ho-bloody-ho, I say. *PIRACY!*

—You *are* a pirate!

—Damn right I am! I'm Flash Jack Carter, the Darling of the Deep, the

(it's just jealousy, I tell myself; he doesn't want to share me). Still, for all the sidelong glances and occasional hand-flaps at any sprite who gets too close, after the brief period of expletives and persuasion—and more expletives, and more persuasion, this time aimed at the good ear so it doesn't just result in a loud *What?*—I've managed to get him to grips with the notion that they aren't, in fact, a host of vengeance-seeking furries, fiends from Hell . . . or, to use his words, some sort of flying lemur demon thingies.

—Ditch the tails, I whisper an aside to Dustbunny. Pass the word. No, I don't know *why*, but he doesn't like them. Don't ask.

Dustbunny looks dubious but skitters off to do what he's told. I'm just turning back to carry on with the soothing of my soulmate when a whimpery mumble comes from beneath the dead bear lying face-down on the beach where Jack dropped it with his shot.

—Can you get me out from under here, says Buttersick. It's still burning, you know. And rather heavy.

—It was the other one, says Buttersick. He's trying to kill us all.

He's a sorry sight, rather crispy round the edges and still smouldering a little, but us sprites are resilient, so I'm sure he'll be fine.

—You should have seen him set fire to His Nibs's old palace, he says. He's a maniac, a mentalist, a madman.

I nod solemnly.

—Driven to the very edge of reason by the loss of his love, I say, turning my gaze on Jack as he stands there so noble, staring out to sea, scanning the horizon for a ship to rescue us. Of course, I carry on, it's understandable, and a terrible shame, a Tragedy even. Why, it'll doubtless end in suicide for the poor man, a grand soliloquy then a leap from Pointy Point.

If I have to push him over myself, I think. He's not bloody well getting my Jack back. Finders keepers.

—Ariel, says Buttersick, I'm *really* not sure they're lovers.

—How could they not be? I say. Just *look* at him. What's not to love?

Oh, my Jack, I think. You're so noble with your hand shading your eyes, so graceful as you jump up and down, as if in doing so you might see just that little further beyond the far horizon. He turns, shakes his head, and comes stomping towards us.

—Bloody ship sunk. Sodding map's a fuckin forgery. And now I'm trapped on an island with a bunch of . . . *things*.

—But we've got each other, Jack, I say.

—*And* the island's bloody burning! Whose idea was that? Banquets and harpies and burning bloody bears . . . yer all cracked!

—I was just saying, says Buttersick. It wasn't us started the fire. It was—

—Me, says the dark shape emerging from the forest, from the flickering shadows and the furling smoke, stepping forward till his face is lit in the flames of a burning bear.

—Black Joey, says Jack.

—Flash Jack, says Joey.

Then that shadow of a man is leaping through the flames, his frockcoat billowing around him as his blade whips loose and high.

Reverages and Redemptions

The crossed pistols catch the sword blade and Black Joey feels the boot in his chest that flips him as the two roll back and over. He lands on his back on the sand but rolls on, out into a crouch and a twirl to see Carter twist onto his front, take aim. He leaps and swings to hack the pistol barrel aside, circles the blade on the follow-through to bring it down on the man's skull, but Carter rolls, whips himself back to his feet, brings the gun in his left hand up again, too close now for a swing. Joey spins like a dancer inside his reach, brings the guard of his sword down on the bastard's fist, then punches him with it full in the face. Carter staggers back, dropping the pistol, but now brings its twin to bear with a curse—only to lose aim as he twists out of the way of Joey's lunge, grabs his arm with his free hand and lets Joey's momentum pull them both to the ground. Sand in his eyes, Joey feels the teeth sink into his knuckles and he roars, slamming his left forearm into the dog's face even as he feels the sword fall from his grasp. A pistol-butt smacks his forehead and he grabs the wrist and twists with all his force.

Then it's just the two of them, spinning savage in the sand, all fists and

knees, elbows and teeth. He feels a foot in his stomach that sends him flying back through the air, cracks his head on something hard as he lands, grabs for the rock and finds a pistol instead. He's wiping sand out of his eyes, rolling to his feet, but Carter is already up, running and diving, rolling.

Then it's the two of them there, both on one knee, both with a pistol in their hand pointed at the other's heart.

—I told you they weren't lovers, says one of the queer little creatures stood in a circle around them. Another of them, now holding Joey's sword, casually jabs him in the foot with its point.

Carter has a queer look on his face, a slight tilt to his gaze, a flick of eyes, as if he'd *really* like to check whether his pistol is loaded. Black Joey snarls.

—Typical Flash Jack, he says. Can't even remember if yer own pistol has a shot in it, eh?

Carter grins.

—Ah, now. No, that's not it at all. Thing is, well, ye do know whose pistols it is I carry. That these pretty little things we're pointing at each other aren't yer run-of-the-mill flintlocks, but the guns of—

—Matelotage and Mutiny, says Joey, the Pirate Gods. So I've heard.

—Well then, ye also know that this situation is a bit more complex than us threatening to blow each other's brains out, mate. Ye might want to be thinking it through a little.

Black Joey thinks it through a little.

Suddenly he's aware of a slight tilt to his own gaze, a flick of eyes, as he'd *really* like to check just what the name is on the pistol in his hand.

—See now, says Carter, there's really just two potential scenarios here, with both of us being famed for our impeccable aim and all, and unlikely to miss at this range. Either it's *Mutiny* in my hand and *Matelotage* in yours, in which case you end up quite dead; or it's *Matelotage* in my hand and *Mutiny* in yours, in which case, yes, I'm well and truly buggered, I'll admit, but you'll be sobbing like a girly over my corpse, having just murdered yer true love.

—And won't you be weeping just the same, Flash Jack, if it's a shot from *Matelotage* in *your* heart, and me dead?

—Ah, but I'm a very fickle lover, Joey. And I'm known to recover quickly from me failed relationships. It's the drinking, ye see. But a man like you who's never known true love, Joey, and of a more temperate nature—it's inconsolable, ye'll be. Inconsolable.

Black Joey shakes his head.

—I'll get over it, he says.

—Hurt my Jack and I'll chop your bloody head off! You won't get over that.

Black Joey clocks the queer little creature with his sword, now waving it clumsily in his general direction. There's a certain pluck to his pout.

—Faeries for your crew and all now,

Jack? I know yer light on yer feet, but that's taking it to extremes.

Carter shrugs.

—He's loyal, he says. And a little bit besotted.

—Besotted? Black Joey laughs. With the glorious Flash Jack Carter. Has he any idea why I might want to kill you? Have you told your little admirer here of all your noble deeds and acts of valour? Introduce us, do.

Carter coughs.

—So I was involved in the taking of a few slave ships, Joey. Everyone was doing it at the time. And if ye look at it in a certain light, well, didn't we liberate you from a future on the plantations?

—No, you kept us in chains, in the hold, filthy and starving.

—Ah, but we introduced you to the *notion* of piracy, which was a sort of spiritual liberation, was it not? Made you the man you are today.

—You introduced me to the notion that there's no hope of rescue, no honour amongst your kind, only a greed for plunder, whether it's monies to line your purse or men to auction off on the market-blocks of Kingston.

—It was Barbary Bill's idea, says Carter. I was only First Mate, at the time. I swear on me heart, I didn't have a say in it.

—But you had a *hand* in it. You sold me. From the same sort of greed as brought you here, no doubt, to raid King Caliban's Sanctuary.

And the strangest look comes over the face of Flash Jack Carter as he raises

his left hand, palm out in a gesture of surrender, it seems, gives a sad shake of his head.

—I came here looking for the Pirate Gods, Joey, cause it was never about the gold, not for me. It was always about the . . . freedom. I came here looking for me destiny. I never thought it would be this.

And he lowers his pistol.

And Black Joey fires his.

Carter rolls backward and Joey turns to deal with the sprite now running screaming at him, sword swinging wildly, but the yell from Carter stops the creature dead, whips Joey's head back round.

—The sword!

Carter's on his knees, blood streaming from his left hand, other outstretched towards the faery, who in an instant is spinning to hurl the sword through the air and into its grasp. Joey has no idea what the damnfool is up to but he's having none of it, on his feet and raging towards the man, the pistol turned as a club in his hand.

—Just die!

Then Carter has his bloody hand down on the ground, and the sword is swinging up and down like a butcher's cleaver, hacking clean through flesh and bone to sever it from the limb. And even as he screams, Carter drops the sword, grabs for the pistol of Matelotage, and swings it up, and fires, the shot thumping into Joey's shoulder, spinning him round to . . . the vision of

his redemption, the winged wonder that he knows, he *knows*, he will never let a cruel need for revenge bring him to hurt.

He hears Carter's cries but he doesn't listen, just gazes in awe as the sublime spirit leaps past him, grabs the spent pistol.

—What are ye doing, my dear? he says.

He sees the flintlock being reloaded by the faery, but it doesn't quite make sense to him. Who could be needing shot in a world so full of joy as this, so full of such wondrous things as his beloved. O, but 'tis Matelotage they're loading, the gun of love, so it must be that Carter is to free this sprite before he dies, dart him with a love for Joey as deep as Joey's is for him, because how could he let the dainty spirit suffer mourning, how could anyone let the spirit suffer so?

Carter takes the gun in his good hand, pale and grim as the poison of Joey's shot seeps through his veins, his very body in mutiny against his soul. Joey sees him close his eyes, puts the barrel to his own breast and pull the trigger.

Paxes and Plunder

Standing on the edge of Pointy Point, his frockcoat billowing with a peachy flourish in the wind, Black Joey lowers the spyglass from his eye and slides it away as he turns. Far off on the horizon, even without the glass, the distant shapes are clearly turning in the direc-

tion of the island, hardly surprising given the size of the signal fire, the seven-day beacon of black smoke that must have been visible for leagues.

—Five ships, says Joey, Spanish galleons by the looks of them and sailing low in the water, loaded with gold, like as not. Not that you care about gold, eh, Jack?

Sod the gold, I think. That's a sodding fleet for us, and money and men to build a pirate nation on this isle the like of which has never been seen, to make it a true island of the Pirate Gods, or a new island of Sanctuary, or simply an island of Redemptions, if that's what we all decide.

—Five ships, I say. That's three for me, and two for you.

—Two for you and *three* for me, says Joey.

Ariel coughs into his hand—*excuse me, bello.*

—Two each and one for the . . . *Technicolour Buccaneer* here, I say. Whatever the sodding hell that means.

—Agreed, says Joey.

—Agreed, says Ariel. And it's in the Book.

As we head down the path to the beach, I raise the stump where my left hand used to be, study the smooth pink skin, poke it with curiosity. More bloody scars, I think . . . but in truth I did deserve it, for there's only so far that roguishness is charming, and there comes a point even in piracy when a man knows that he's due a reck-

oning. I'm still a little worried, at times, as to whether Joey has truly forgiven me, the shot of love wiping all bitterness from his heart, or whether it's just that he knows to hurt me would be to hurt his dainty Ariel. Maybe it's all just a tenuous pax that could fall apart with one wrong word. And again, maybe I deserve that worry for me past sins; maybe it's as much about me making reparations as it is about forgiveness. A penitent heart is all very well, but it's Matelotage and Mutiny will help Joey rebuild Caliban's Kingdom, not contrition. I stroke the skin of the stump, this permanent reminder that destiny can sometimes be history coming back to bite you on the arse. Still, only a week, and while it's not healed, it's a damn sight better than it should be—one of the perks of having a magic sprite for your dotting nurse, I guess.

I pull my snuff pouch from my waist, tip a little fairy dust onto the wrist and take a snort. That's another perk. And it really does help with the pain, ye know.

—*Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

—Now you're sure this spell will hold till we get to the fleet, I call across the waves. We're not going to get halfway there and just plop down into the drink?

Ariel looks over at me like a puppy I've just kicked.

—You don't trust me. You don't have faith in me. *Joey* has faith in me. *He's* not worried.

In the lead . . . well . . . imaginary boat, Joey holds his sword in his right hand, Mutiny in his left, peering forward at the distant galleons, and seeming to float in the air like the faery crew behind him, heaving on their . . . well . . . imaginary oars. Just like Ariel and meself, at the prow of our own imaginary boats, with our own crew.

—*Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

—Pumpkin, pumpkin, I say, quick to salve the flighty faery's sulk. Of course I have faith. It's just my . . . amazement at the veritable wonders you perform. Stupendous feats! Astounding enchantments! Incredible acts of illusionism to fool even the sea herself. By the Pirate Gods, my astonishment is as boundless as the briny blue.

—*Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

—You *do* love me!

—Hush now, I hiss. Ye know that Joey must never find out or he'd surely do for me in a jealous fit of pique, rage even. Besides, look ahead at our plunder.

Afore us, a rowing boat of Spaniards all fine and dandy in their best uniforms, rifles high, is heading towards shore to investigate that beacon, hunt for us poor shipwrecked souls. Shrouded in glamour, we move in to intercept them, a pirate crew of salty sprites who, absent the tails, I have to say, aren't shaping up too badly—a little unfocused perhaps, but nothing a good shanty can't fix.

—*Cry, Haul! Aye! A-diddle-aye-dee!*

The Spaniards hear us now, turn this way and that, in panic at these invisible voices of the deep bearing down upon them from all around and nowhere to be seen. The officer in charge gives the order to turn round, back to the ship, and with that moment of the choice to retreat always being the best point to hit a man in his lack of balls, I give the shout to Ariel to lift the glamour, unveil these three boatloads of lusty imps, led by the infamous Flash Jack, the notorious Black Joey, and the hitherto-unheard-of Swishy Ariel, and we send the screaming heebie-jeebies right into their souls.

Grin of a scabrous dog on me face as I stand to leap across, I glance down at me reflection in the water. A handsome chap I am, ye know, with hair so fiery and eyes blue as the sea, as handsome now as when I staggered down to the surf, the shot of Matelotage in me heart, to open me deadlights to that same watery image. 'Twas love at first sight. I had to do it, ye see. Only sure cure for the one gun is the other, love conquering all and such-like, and I wasn't going to let meself be caught up in a bugging menage-a-trois. Besides, I always was a bit vain.

I will admit, though, to some strange temptations that have been confusing me these last few days, maybe on account of when I opened my eyes, the two of them were standing over me, the images of their faces peering back from the lapping water, one on either side. I'm sure it's only a passing fancy

though. Better be or this could get bloody complicated.

I raise my gun and pick a target.

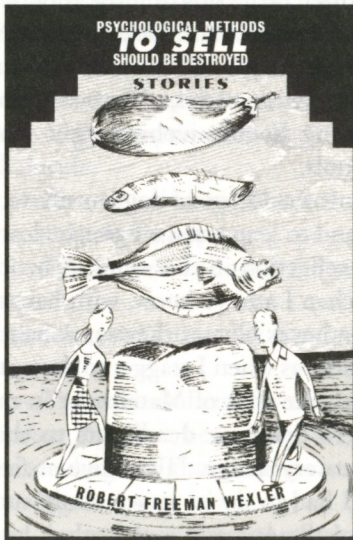
—For Matelotage and Mutiny! I roar.

—For Good King Caliban! bellows Joey.

—For the sheer bloody fun of it! shouts Ariel.

And we leap. ☒

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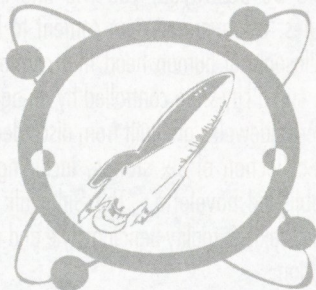
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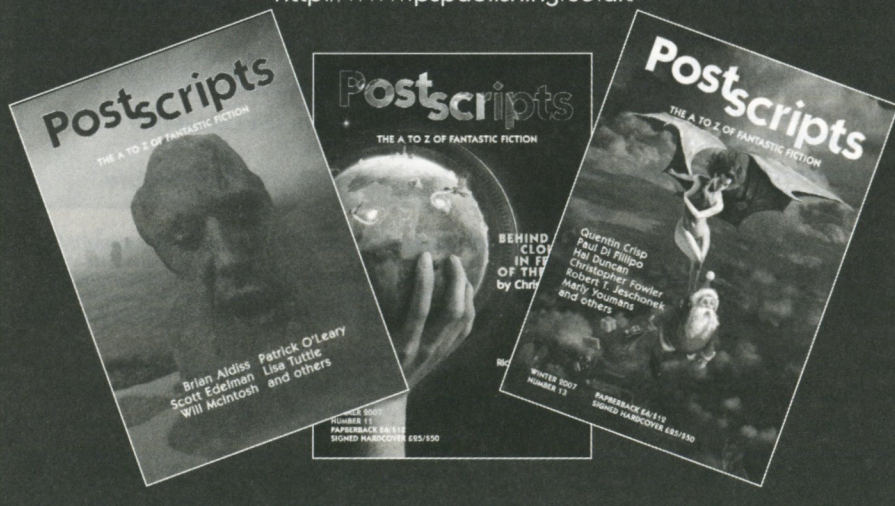
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