

POSTSCRIPTS

Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

SPRING 2008

NUMBER 14

THE GHOSTS WE HAVE BECOME

by Paul Jessup

Plus
Rhys Hughes
Sarah Monette
Robert Reed
Jeff VanderMeer
and others



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Peter Crowther
Publisher and
Managing Editor

Nick Gevers
Editor

Alligator Tree Graphics
Design and Layout

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THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

*Eric Schaller is author of the popular self-help texts, *Release Your Inner Tyrant!*, *Trepanning for Fun and Profit*, and *More Recipes for the Post-Apocalyptic Nuclear-Ravaged Zombie Wasteland*. Be sure to attend one of Professor Schaller's motivational lectures during his current Eurasian tour. Also consider featuring him as a speaker at your next company picnic.*

Editorial: Are You Properly Desensitized?

Eric Schaller

Once upon a curious time, sensitivity was a valued personality trait. Folks would go to museums and art openings and you would hear discussions on the “quality of the brush stroke” and “capturing the essence.” You couldn’t throw a rock without hitting some beret-wearing poet and, rather than pound the living crap out of you like a normal person, the poet would weep a single tear, watch it splash upon the pavement, then make some pathetic comment about “slings and arrows.” Christ, there were even sensitivity-training classes back in the 70s. Nowadays, sensitivity is recognized as the liability that it really is and, led by the entertainment industry, every effort has been made to wipe it out. With a simple click of the remote it is possible to see a decapitation with breakfast, catch some S&M with lunch, and enjoy a little reckless genocide with dinner. But that doesn’t mean that everyone has got with the program. Ask yourself: are you properly desensitized?

Part I: Scenarios

1. You are the sole witness to a traffic accident in which one driver is clearly at fault, the other driver as blameless as virgin snow falling on Christmas Eve. The driver at fault offers you one hundred dollars to back a distorted version of the events leading up to the accident. What do you do?

A. Give the driver a hug, saying that you understand their pain but that you cannot accept a bribe. You can, however, recommend a licensed psychiatrist who will help the driver work through the trauma of the accident as well as the inevitable traumas suffered in childhood.

B. Refuse the bribe and report the incident in your accurate account of the accident. The policeman handling the accident complements you on the legibility of your handwriting. You say that the credit should not go to you but to your second-grade teacher, Mrs Weatherspoon, who used negative reinforcement to great advantage in eliciting good penmanship from her students.

C. Laugh at the hundred-dollar bribe and say that Ben Franklin was never alone, and, although not well publicized, he was one of five identical siblings. You would hate, simply hate, to see him separated from his brothers. The driver at fault is not an idiot and, later on, you buy him a beer with what used to be his money.

D. Go to the trunk of your car and pull out the pouch in which the jack, tire irons, and lug wrench are normally kept. You long ago figured out that a tire iron wasn't very effective and now keep a pistol with silencer in its place. You kill both drivers and take their valuables, knowing that God, if He exists, will sort out who was right and wrong.

2. You have been working late for weeks at the office trying to debug a software program that is already three weeks behind schedule. Your significant other calls at 5 pm to remind you that today is October 31 and you are both supposed to go to a Halloween party. A costume is required. You, of course, have completely forgotten all about this. Why, you barely remember to eat lunch, so how on earth can anyone expect you to remember something as frivolous as a costume party. What do you do?

A. Tell the truth, explaining that the party had completely slipped your mind and asking if your significant other has any ideas for a last-minute costume. You promise your significant other an unreciprocated orgasm to atone for your faux pas.

B. Go into the bathroom at work and steal two rolls of toilet paper. A mummy may not be the best of costumes, but it sure beats donning a sheet with two holes cut out for eyes and going as Casper the Friendly Ghost. Too bad that gray clouds are gathering and it looks like rain.

C. Bring a cup of coffee to a co-worker of the opposite sex. No need to discuss the benefits of caffeine; you're both in this together. After the co-worker says thank-you and leans forward to take a sip, use a heavy paperweight to good advantage. Strip the clothes from your co-worker's body, stuff the body under a desk, and go the party as a cross-dresser with poor fashion sense.

D. Show up at your significant other's apartment dressed in your work clothes and when confronted about your lack of costume explain that everything you need is in the apartment. The first item on your list is duct tape. The second item is a kitchen knife with sharpened blade. Later that evening, after your preparations are finished, you attend the party as your significant other. The costume begins to smell after a few days but by then the party is over.

3. When your mother died, you . . .

A. Cried like a baby at the funeral, then that night, while the earth was still loose

on her grave, exhumed the body. You now keep her in a chest freezer in your bedroom so that she can watch over you while you sleep, just like she used to do when you were a child.

B. Delivered a stirring eulogy at her funeral and made a contribution to her favorite charity. You take an appropriate amount of pride in knowing that her favorite charity was a secluded group of nuns who still practice self-flagellation.

C. Forgot to attend her funeral because you were playing the video game “Alien Predator versus Jack the Ripper” and had reached level seven. Level seven is where Jack has sex with one of the prostitutes. Level eight, you have heard, is where the prostitute gives birth to a hoard of mini-Jacks, thereby greatly increasing his slashing power.

D. Cried like a baby and delivered a stirring eulogy at her funeral, then that night, while the earth was still loose on her grave, exhumed the body. You sold the dress in which your mother was buried to a second-hand clothing store, her hair to a doll maker, and her skeleton to a medical supply company.

4. On a whim you drive to the town where you grew up, but which you haven’t visited in over twenty years. After gassing up your car, downing a chocolate donut and coffee at the local Dunkin’ Donuts, and driving through the streets to check which houses you still recognize, you get down to business.

A. Using the same camera with which you won a high-school art contest, you take a series of photographs of the places that were important to you in your youth. You write a short essay to accompany the photos and send it to your hometown newspaper, which publishes it under the title “Return of the Native.”

B. You drive up to your old high school and, leaving your car in the parking lot, hike back behind the tennis courts carrying a folded shovel from your trunk. It’s here that you lost your virginity to a foreign exchange student. Later, after the exchange student returned to Sweden, you buried a metal box here containing your love letters and a pair of pull tabs from soft drink cans that you had worn on your fingers and called wedding rings. But although you thought you knew for sure where you had buried the box, you can’t find it. Maybe your memory isn’t very good. Maybe someone else found it.

C. You meet with your high-school art teacher and principal and, with their help, establish a benefactor’s fund with proceeds from your most recent book of photographs. The fund will grant teenage girls the opportunity to come to the city and study art during the summers. Once away from home, you will explain to the girls that there is no such thing as a free lunch, which in this case means that in exchange for art lessons the girls will have to pose for art photographs. The girls will become very familiar with the phrase, “Pout for me, baby.”

D. You seek out Mrs Weatherspoon and at gunpoint force her to sit down and

write an essay on the uses of negative reinforcement as a means to instill a proper respect for good penmanship. Each time her writing fails to attain what she used to call “typewriter quality,” you chop one of her fingers back to the next knuckle. When she can no longer hold a pen, you suggest that she write with her own blood. When she faints from blood loss, you lay her comatose body on the floor in a vertical line, arms at her side. You remove her head with a saw and set it below her feet. She looks like an exclamation mark.

Part II: Personal favorites

5. What is your favorite number?
 - A. 2
 - B. 7
 - C. 1
 - D. -1

6. What is your favorite color?
 - A. Green
 - B. Blue
 - C. Black or red
 - D. Gray

7. What is your favorite breed of dog?
 - A. Border Collie
 - B. Golden Retriever
 - C. Pit Bull
 - D. That dog-human thing from the movie “Invasion of the Body Snatchers.”

Everyone else went “Eughh” when that came on screen, but you said, “Cool” and began a line of experimentation that continues to this day. Now that you think about it, the head of Mrs. Weatherspoon is just sitting there . . .

8. What is your favorite movie?
 - A. Bambi (edited for content) or Old Yeller (edited for content)
 - B. Top Gun or Pretty Woman
 - C. Wall Street or Texas Chainsaw Massacre
 - D. Your home videos. Everything else is tame in comparison.

Part III: Short answer/essay

9. Add your own last line to complete the following poem by Lord Byron.

*In secret we met
 In silence I grieve
 That thy heart could forget,
 Thy spirit deceive.
 If I should meet thee
 After long years,
 How should I greet thee?*

10. You and your neighbors have established your own country. Trusting your judgment they have given you the power to create any governing system that you find suitable. Write a short essay describing your ideal government.

Scoring

Questions 1 through 8. Give yourself 1 point for A, 2 points for B, 3 points for C, and 4 points for D.

Question 9. Subtract 2 points if you even considered answering this question.

Question 10. Give yourself one point for each use of the following: secret, torture, police, absolute, Ayn Rand, cannibalism, mutant monkey death squad. Subtract one point for each use of the following: consensus, Marx, healthcare, public, art, education, free, sock monkeys. You may not receive more than 4 points or less than -4 points for this question.

Results

Score of 37 or above: Properly desensitized but mathematically challenged. Consider a career in government. The presidency is not outside your reach. You will die in a compromising situation but still be given a state funeral.

Score of 30-36: Properly desensitized. Your friends call you the Ice Man. You know that they don't really like you, but they do want to be like you and they spend more on your birthday presents than on anybody else's. The word most often used in your funeral eulogy will be "respect." A close second will be "prick."

Score of 20-29: Room for improvement. You've tried but obviously not hard enough. Watching tv twenty-four/seven simply won't cut it. You've got to get out where it's really happening and stir things up. Trip a nun in traffic. Sell your brother's kidney on E-bay without telling him. Start an office pool on when your boss is going to have a heart attack. Otherwise your ex is going to show up at your funeral, still looking for a handout.

Score of 10-19: An uphill climb. You're probably considering buying a hybrid car

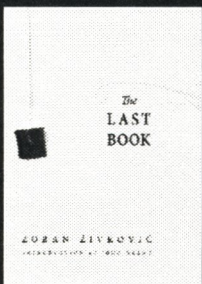
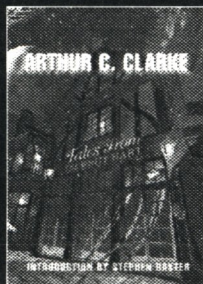
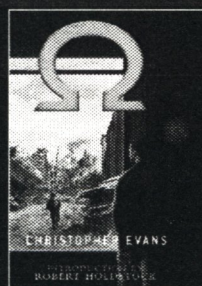
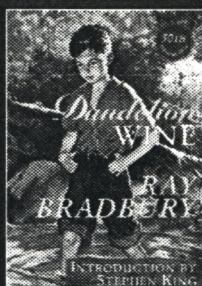
and riding your bicycle more often to work. Screw that! Buy a stretch Hummer instead and park it on your neighbor's lawn. Run over his dog, or his children, if he complains. Trade in your ambient ocean tapes for a soundtrack of Baghdad at Night and get on with your life. Otherwise you'll be damned with faint praise at your funeral. That's right, the priest will refer to you as "nice."

Score of 2-9: A hopeless case. You are just a bundle of exposed nerves and break down into uncontrollable weeping every time a bug smashes against your windshield. The two sentences most frequently uttered in your presence are "It's not your fault" and "Don't take it personally." But behind your back, your so-called friends call you a pussy and are secretly plotting to kill you. You will be woken from a deep sleep to the hammering of nails into wood. When you try to get up, your head will bang against a low ceiling. "What a small room," will be your first thought. True, only too true. You will be the only one that cries at your funeral.



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Robert Reed says, "I live my life cherishing the belief that tomorrow, aliens will speak to us from the sky. My next cherished belief is that once we learned what to listen for, alien words and images would become relatively cheap. But I got to wondering what it would take for people to feel for these distant and possibly extinct entities. As for the title itself: 'Blackbird singing in the dead of night,' from the old Beatles song."

Bob is currently working on stories. "Five Thrillers" just came out in F&SF, and a fat novella will soon appear in Asimov's. "Truth", it's called.

Blackbird

Robert Reed

Blackbird was the 1411th VOICE (Verbalism Originating In a Celestial Environment) reported to the SETI Association, and hers was the 207th signal to be successfully translated. Nearly thirty thousand light-years separated her world and the earth, but she was utilizing an extraordinarily powerful laser array—one of the most intense ever witnessed. Her initial transmission was a coherent flash of ruddy light lasting barely fourteen seconds. But despite some initial excitement, her data-densities proved less than a hundredth of what was considered normal. The core language was a mild variation of Galactic Standard, and a cursory translation was accomplished within twelve hours. But no technological free-rides were discovered, and content-massing algorithms detected nothing of substance buried in the undigested portions of her message. What's more, three historic VOICES were discovered the next day—the fabled Triplets. Frontline studies quickly

focused on them. But even as humanity celebrated these newest revolutions from the sky, little Blackbird was not completely forgotten. A pair of Chinese exoethnologists examined her entire text, discovering a timetable for future transmissions. Then utilizing an infrared observatory suspended on a balloon in the stratosphere above Lhasa, they recorded and subsequently translated three of her next five broadcasts, text and digital images offered to the Web, along with general explanations and a few helpful comments.

VOICES were easy to find, if you knew where and how to look. This was perhaps the critical lesson supplied by the celebrated 5th VOICE—that pivotal thunderbolt signal emitted by an automated probe wandering the emptiness between Mauna Kea and Tau Ceti. In the interstellar night, an asteroid-sized probe had invested decades monitoring earth radio leakage, and through that, its AI pilot had become an expert on human activities. Following a set of protocols that were older

than the Cambrian, the pilot chose a likely moment to announce its presence, sharing detailed instructions about where and how to look for new VOICES, plus offering translations of Galactic Standard into a dozen local languages.

Worthwhile signals were usually the product of large groups—entire worlds and familial nests, multi-species cities or philosophical/religious organizations. What made Blackbird unique, at least during those early years, was that she had worked alone, creating each message for personal reasons, her central subject being herself and the wondrous life that she was living.

Blackbird's world had no sun of its own. But then again, the vast majority of VOICES stood apart from their birth systems. This was a surprise to early observers, though it shouldn't have been: Interstellar planets and dwarf worlds far outnumber the warm bodies orbiting a finite number of benign stars. Terraforming proved to be a relatively simple business, if you knew what you were doing. Fusion reactors and giant lasers could cheaply light and heat the coldest ice ball. And unlike every sun-baked cousin, those drifting worlds could maintain stable climates for tens of billions of years, and with patience, they could be steered toward points of interest and away from all but the worst cosmological disasters.

Blackbird's world was liquid iron and hot stone, with a deep crust topped by cool water and glacial ice. The land-

forms had been significantly reworked during its long, storied history, increasing the living area by a hundredfold. A fleet of lasers orbited above the equator, producing the illusion of an M-class sun holding its world in a tidal lock. That critical system was blessed with redundancies—barely a third of the lasers were firing in any given moment—and for a relatively modest fee, a creature of maturity and means could rent some little portion of that excess laser capacity. Then with nothing but instinct to guide her, she could select a tiny portion of the sky, sending her glorious story to whatever worlds might be hiding out there.

To human eyes, the alien was beautiful: That point cannot be made often enough. "Blackbird" was a credible translation of her name, and it was also a reasonable description. She had bright black plumage, sleek and thick, with scarlet highlights circling her two golden eyes as well as the heat-sensitive pit-eye in her forehead. Her jaws were long and unabashedly carnivorous. Seeing her for the first time, most people thought of raptors from the dinosaur days. Like a predatory dinosaur, she had long legs and an erect tail for balance. Like any self-respecting blackbird, she had wings. But critical differences marked her as something from another world. Her wings weren't modified limbs, but instead they were the living remains of some treasured meal: Blackbird had killed and feasted upon a bird-like organism, then by means only



dimly understood, its wings and supporting bones were grafted into her long back. As a flyer, she was quite weak. But then again, those new limbs were intended mostly for public display—bluish-black on their backsides, and beneath, when she stood tall and flapped at the camera, a rich show of brilliant reds and golds giving the impression of a creature possessed by its own relentless beauty.

Like *T. rex*, Blackbird's front limbs were badly atrophied. But her original fans—the two Chinese exoethnologists—soon answered the question, "How could a girl without hands develop technology?" Blackbird's ancestors had been endowed with working fingers and thumbs, but millions of years of success had shriveled what wasn't necessary. Over eons, her lineage grew vocal to an incredible degree. Every syllable uttered by her long mouth was rich and fluid, and buried inside those elaborately structured notes were instructions. Blackbird's rich world was populated with machines as well as organic life, and entities in both camps were quite happy to do whatever she wished. "Bring that water cup here." "Turn this patty-pie over." "Open this can of worms, then move out of my way."

As demanding and helpless as any queen of old—that telling fact managed to charm quite a few of her early admirers. But by the same token, of course, Blackbird's entire species lived in the same evolutionary bind. Where it was possible to graft wings or fins or a myr-

riad of other spectacular features onto the body, no respectable citizen dared to add even one stubby finger. So thoroughly forbidden were hands that no explanation was even offered. And compared to her brethren, Blackbird was relatively polite with her queenly commands. She didn't demand floods of willing, mindless hands to serve every little wish, and when the nearest machinery couldn't immediately accomplish what she wanted, she didn't curse and scream—unlike a famous few of her good friends and neighbors.

Among her kind, Blackbird seemed to be smart.

There was no Galactic Standard for intelligence—no straightforward, uncluttered way of measuring an entity's capacity for memory and wisdom. But judging by the texts and images sent to the earth, that alien lady had a reputation as being gifted and charming, as well as clever and loved by her immediate peers.

She was a trim ten kilos, approximately.

Each broadcast began with a new song and dance involving her as well as various friends and current lovers, plus machines and animals drafted from the surrounding terrain. Her home was an elaborate nest of delicately carved timber and organic foam resting high in the canopy of an ancient forest—a physically gorgeous setting highlighted by the swollen false-sun hanging motionless above the northern horizon. The atmosphere was dense and suffused with carbon dioxide as well as

considerable free oxygen. The biosphere was many times more efficient than the earth's when it came to energy use and space allotment. Blackbird's territory wasn't especially productive—her journeys to the cloud forests of Lish and the fusion-lit caverns beneath the night-side glacier proved as much. But it was a lovely location, vaguely familiar even when utterly alien—forests always appeal to human eyes—and her songs and dances became instant pleasures for a rapidly growing audience.

Simple chance caused little Blackbird's signal to cross paths with a planet that she could charm.

Yet when hasn't fame come first to the lucky, staying around only those few that genuinely deserve it?

Most VOICES work like demons to convey the logic and history of their world and species. But Blackbird didn't seem to care about those pivotal moments that happened before her birth. Perhaps she was genuine in her disinterest; or perhaps she was skillfully telling that story by subtle means—hints and casual references, with tiny clues delivered by her closest companions during otherwise idle conversations. Whatever the reason, the results were effective. The exoethnologists soon abandoned their girl for richer, more obvious VOICES. But by then Blackbird had been embraced by a substantial public. And when the fifteenth flash of laser light went unrecorded, missed by official observatories chasing

more fruitful signals, there was an immediate, utterly emotional uproar.

"We can't let this screw-up happen again," her fans declared. Which led to protests and a hasty reshuffling of work schedules for public facilities, and by month's end, ad hoc laser antennae constructed inside various garages, only one target in the minds of their devoted builders.

Blackbird's transmissions were repeated every seven days, four hours, and three minutes. She might have been the 207th understandable VOICE, but before the first year was finished, no other VOICE was as recognizable. An estimated four billion people knew the lady's face and bright wings, and while few could actually point to the sky and correctly declare, "She lives there, between and beyond those little stars," there were at least a billion admirers who could relate some deeply personal tale about "little Blackbird".

By human standards, she was a bawdy, oftentimes promiscuous girl. But then again, she was not a human being, which gave her certain freedoms and her audience permission to delight in her sexual pleasures.

Yet at the same time, Blackbird was capable of deeply felt monogamous attachments, or at least some other-species flavor of that critical human emotion.

After six months, she fell in love. The object of her affections was a sleek strong and undeniably handsome male sporting an oversized set of wings and an elaborate beard of bioluminescent

fungi that dangled off his broad, powerful mouth. Blackbird had a dozen names for her man, but the one that stuck was Click-Click—the crudest possible rendering of an elegant yet soulful sound that rose from the lady's deepest set of lungs, usually in those quiet moments after intercourse.

Click-Click lived across the Central Sea, in the twilight regions of the northern hemisphere. Like many of her species, Blackbird met her prospective lovers through what can only be described as a dating service. In one transmission, she showed herself enduring an elaborate questionnaire. Electronic payments brought a bundle of candidates that both she and humanity were free to observe, gauge and weigh, all while making the harshest possible assessments.

"I want a man with youth and passion, but with a discriminating penis, and the look/sound/taste of a wisdom that finds the wisdom in me."

She might have been speaking for every human woman, though she couldn't have realized it.

During the next transmission, she declared, "Click-Click is my mate to be." Her happiness was obvious, and for many, intoxicating. Blackbird's emotions were visible in her mouth and eyes, but most importantly, in her feet. The most observant people, whether housewives in Finland or mullahs in Somalia, had learned that the powerful gripping toes held the most important clues about Blackbird's moods and intentions. While those big false wings

were nothing but bluster meant to startle and mislead.

"A flesh-meeting is arranged," she promised in the next message.

And then in the message after that, she offered highlights of what can only be described as a successful and ultimately pornographic first date.

But again, she wasn't human. She would never be human. Evolutionarily speaking, two goats copulating was far closer to human conduct than what she and dear Click-Click managed. Even pollen riding a bee's knee into a willing flower . . . even that was infinitely less alien than what those two winged friends achieved on the side of a great old Hair-Upon-the-Sky tree.

Of course people had to comprehend each image with human eyes.

Every bright sweet word was translated, but there were always contexts and subtleties that could confuse an entire planet, at least temporarily.

From the beginning, even the genuine experts assumed that Blackbird was young. In her manners and morals, she was reminiscent of an intensely social, bright and fetching sixteen year-old girl. But a thousand little clues eventually led to a second, unexpected option: Yes, she acted self-possessed and passionate, and sometimes quite impulsive. But those around her who seemed older and more mature . . . well, they weren't. For Blackbird's species, as well as for all life on their ancient fat world, youth was consumed by conservative thoughts and rational actions. The wildness of growing children

wasn't a winning strategy for this other, much different world. Life spans were extremely long. Food and water were never in question. But social credibility took decades to acquire. Only after the midpoint of life was a soul educated enough and hopefully smart enough to throw convention into a blaze, letting a million stored-up impulses bubble wherever they wished. Only the oldest citizens could afford to act young, and they were the only ones considered good enough to begin new lives.

By year's end, Click-Click and his lover were contemplating children. Genders and names were discussed. Vague plans about a shared home were brought up in passing. But then something went wrong—an intense, unseen disaster that poor Blackbird decided not to share for several weeks. In one transmission, all was fine. The happy couple was taking a holiday to the towering salt pillars on Shadowless Island. But then seven days later, Blackbird was dancing alone, and the great love of her life had simply, irrevocably vanished.

Click-Click had put an end to their relationship, it seemed.

The bastard.

Feet and wings and everything between were showing the brutal pain. The old lady felt cheated and sick, and after a period of grieving that might or might not have been appropriate for her species, she stood before the camera in the airy greeting room of her home, explaining to her audience that her lost love had found someone superior. He believed. Wrongly. And then alone, she

stepped from her house to stand on a high branch, in the open, and framed by the deep front door, she let a great pained voice rise from every lung, piercing the sky with a scream soon to be carried considerably farther by a deep red band of light—a brilliant light that shoved its way through space, some tiny portion of that misery falling upon the earth, while the rest of her wailing continued its journey toward the unreachable ends of the universe.

Twelve months of Blackbird, and in that span, the total number of VOICES had quadrupled. If not for a shortfall of worthy lenses and trained technicians, those numbers could have blossomed fifty-fold. The Milky Way had proved to be a living, vibrant place. Humans were one minor ape surrounded by millions of older, wiser species. And what's more, it was quickly becoming apparent that the great souls that were presently chatting with one another were not the final culmination of life and intellect. No matter how populous or powerful, each of these neighboring worlds understood that even greater beings lay out of reach: Beyond the galaxy, inhabiting the cold and silent dark-matter realms, were older and even more inventive creatures. With ways far more sophisticated than the spectrum, they spoke to one another. No one understood quite how. But it was rumored that even those far flung souls were dwarfed by a host of godly forces and personalities that were

as old as Creation, or perhaps, quite a bit older.

In an age of scientific revolution and magnificent, soul-searing thoughts, Blackbird was simple and sweet, even ordinary, and of course people cherished her and even loved her, precisely because she was so tiny and vain, petty and pretty, and in everything she did, unapologetically passionate.

After that first year, countless new companies were springing into existence, applying the early lessons given by the VOICES. One start-up enterprise thought to build a line of robots in Blackbird's likeness, her body mimicked perfectly and her voice and attitudes a little less so. Within weeks, the pseudoBlackbirds were selling briskly. Within a couple months, the software running their rapidly improving brains had reached a plateau close to sentience, and on six continents, certain people began to consider their automated friends as being their best friends, with a few prurient cases reaching quite a bit farther.

The authentic Blackbird continued performing for her adopted world. Every week, another fourteen seconds of compressed light was shunted through a series of translation programs, yielding a new dance and warbling song that led into several hours of edited but always captivating life. Millions of self-taught experts pored over each image as well as audio tracks and the diagnostic records laid down by unseen cameras. When the lady was traveling to new parts of her aston-

ishing world, every distant feature was enlarged and studied in numbing detail. And the details usually yielded new treasure: Scaly black backs breaking the surface of the Central Sea. Living clouds that hung in the expansive twilight zone, anchored to the ground by cable-like roots. On the world's permanent night side, a forest of telescopes with their vast mirrors turned toward the eternal stars. And in that sky, visible only with the most extraordinary magnification, were half a dozen ruddy splotches that lay billions of kilometers away, but that exactly matched the spectrum reflected by Blackbird's world.

But perhaps most important was a tall metal plaque, heavily oxidized and fixed to a plain gray obelisk—a simple, unobtrusive monument soaring over what looked like a happenstance glade in the jungle. Blackbird had gone to that place for no reason except to copulate with her latest male. But a pair of Russian men and a Japanese couple, plus an Indonesian boy and a French woman, managed to tease free a clear picture of the plaque. After decoding an archaic dialect, each of them realized that this was the critical place where settlers—Blackbird's most distant ancestors—first stood upon what had been a barren, cold and miserable world.

And now that world was alive. At least thirty thousand years ago, it had been prospering, and Blackbird was back to embracing her life and loves with the same infinite fervor. The male

in the historic glade was a stopgap. Most people knew from the beginning that their relationship was temporary. But the next male was something more to her, and when he vanished, she spent several weeks being sorry. But not devastated, either. Certainly not sad enough to cease playing games with those young male friends who had always been close, always waiting for their chances to entertain her gorgeous body.

Eventually another suitor appeared, and within a few days, a fair portion of Blackbird's audience had embraced him. "This is the right one," they proclaimed. "The worthy one. Our girl's long-sought soulmate."

One interesting note: The present man of her dreams was younger than the others, and poorer. He came from the windy mountains of an obscure district. Among his own people, his status was less than enjoyed even by her baby-men lovers. And not only was he an inferior candidate, he was part of an alarming continuum. Each prospective mate had been less spectacular than the last, and that was a tendency that seemed more ominous with each passing week.

Sweet Blackbird might seem liberated and carefree, joyous and caring about others. But that didn't mean she had successfully escaped all the miserable pitfalls of rank and ratings.

In her world, a woman entered her late years with certain resources and status. But if a male of one rank refused her offer of mating, then only lesser

males were viable candidates in the future.

"How many fiancés do you think she had before?" asked the wagging tongues. In those corporations that were building the new world, and the dinner table in a billion homes, people looked at one another, and without needed a hint of context, pointed out, "We don't know how many of her broadcasts we missed. Ten? A thousand? Who knows? Which makes you wonder: How many stupid men turned her down even before we met her?"

But the latest fellow wouldn't do that. He couldn't refuse their girl. If a separate species watching from the most remote distance could recognize that she was special and that he was damned lucky, how could he possibly tell the poor girl, "No.?"

But knowing eyes studied the male's feet. And even when his songs and toothy grin promised nothing but years of making and raising exceptional babies, those clawed toes were slipping against the polish of a rain-in-the-eyes tree, waiting for the first excuse to bolt.

Around the human world, voices began to remind one another, "Men are dogs."

And not just female voices were doing the reminding.

Worldwide, a kind of collective outrage and horror began to build. Wives threw accusing stares at their husbands, no explanations needed. Boyfriends endured questions along the lines of, "Are you just using me, or what?" Mothers began to lecture their young sons about

telling the truth to women, always. And with their next breath, the same mothers would warn their daughters to never believe what even the most truthful decent boy said to them.

As feared, that final suitor eventually decided to turn his genetics toward another lady.

But better than predicted, Blackbird absorbed that blow to her soul with little more than quiet whimpers and some simple, mournful songs that didn't sound too unlike lullabies. She even acted happy in the company of old friends. The editing of her transmissions changed abruptly, scenes last longer and acquiring a slower pace, with a different taste for conversations. Old friends spoke encouragingly about several nephews and nieces that had never been seen before. In essence, Blackbird was being coached on the merits and joys of being the matronly aunt. And with her own mock enthusiasm, the lady made a string of positive sounds. Yes, she would play a role in the lives of her sisters' dear children. Yes, she looked forward to the next long span of her wonderful life. She even had sex with some of the reliable gusto—that athletic, semen-free intercourse practiced by those young male friends who were saving themselves for ladies only half-grown yet.

But then came a transmission that was barely half-a-second long. Only twenty minutes of real-time imagery was shared with humanity, without breaks or any other trace of edits. Blackbird asked a single robot to shadow

her, along with an airborne camera. To every servant machine and friendly animal, she said, "Stay where you are. Do not follow me." Then with only two companions, plus the entire population of a distant world, the sad creature strode into a certain room in her famous house—a room with a view of the changeless false-sun, the thick canopy of her beloved forest, and a flock of jeweled insects circling in the air after the passage of a brief rain shower.

To the camera, she gave precise instructions, telling it how much longer to operate and when to upload its entire memory to her own "mental nest".

Then she turned her back to the glorious view, and to her robot companion, she said, "Open the vial."

On a low tabletop was a crystal bottle. In a coincidence that shook more than a few people, the image of a featherless, skinless skull decorated the outside of the bottle, while inside lay a single pill dressed in a pouch of pale yellow fat.

She bent for the pill, her long mouth barely opened.

And that was the final image. No one saw her ingest what could have been—probably was—poison; and that was a hopeful point that was made for the next week's long wait.

"Always the drama queen," people liked to say.

Even a month later, most of the garage-made telescopes dedicated to Blackbird were continuing to watch for the next updated signal.

But there was no telltale flash of ruddy light.

For a little less than four years, a single alien had accompanied humanity on what was only the start of their most fabulous adventure. Even though she hadn't given one clue about workable fusion reactors or the history of her great species, she was the face and voice of all things alien—familiarity mixed with a great, compelling strangeness that only brought her audience back to the inevitable insight that they were the same: Familiar and strange in all the best ways.

Here was a death in the family, and for an entire planet.

During those early weeks, when the loss was realized but still not absorbed, it was common for two people to meet at a party or tavern, in the subway or on a mountain trail, and the first words exchanged were, "Poor lady." Every sad expression was assumed to spring from an incident that had occurred when men still wore skins and edged their way across the dry Bering Strait. Mention the dead alien's name, and everyone in earshot would pause, eyes dropping, chins dropping, a shared army of grieving minds recalling those long black toes with the biting nails at the ends, each nail sharp enough to bite into any wood, allowing its owner—now lost, damn it—to scramble up the smoothest face of the mightiest tree.

And then from somewhere came a hypothesis that had no evidence to sup-

port it and yet was thoroughly believed, if only for a week or so.

Blackbird had never existed. The hopeful, earnest notion was that some alien species had indeed sent a signal into space, but each weekly transmission was a work of fiction. Everyone's favorite lady was an invention, a digital flight of fantasy. Certainly her creator or creators were similar to Blackbird, but she existed only to do exactly what she had done: Telling the story of a world and its people through the example of one made-up character.

That idea was embraced fiercely, and then it was cast aside.

But the possibility served one clear function: Human beings required those few days to believe that she hadn't existed, and afterwards, when they were better able to let go of their first great alien love, they could again believe that she was real and true and her life had been genuine, but her loss was suddenly more bearable.

Blackbird was lost, but her sky remained vast and crowded with signals—flashes of light that were dimmer and more distant than hers, and very nearly as remarkable.

Within that first decade, two thousand individual VOICES were identified—entities operating their own transmission systems to tell individual stories. The nearest few were emitted by a sunless gas giant barely fifty light-years away; they were next-door neighbors, if biochemically quite strange. Then came one of the strongest laser beacons, springing from one of the spi-

ral arms of Andromeda and telling the noble story of a kingly soul with an eerie resemblance to any and every human being.

Each of those newer VOICES found its audience, but never more than a few tens of millions, even for the most popular.

At some point, audiences shrank down to a few hundred or maybe a thousand individuals keeping tabs on some tiny glow in Orion or from the edges of the Milky Way. And that was for the lucky aliens who weren't ignored completely—the creatures that showed humans some quality that demanded enough interest to fill the empty moments in what had become incredibly busy lives.

The earth was rebuilding itself, and armed with what seemed like limitless technologies, the moon and the inner solar system were next carved up and refabricated.

An exodus from the cradle world began, never to end.

Humans and their sentient machines and reengineered animals as well as plants took off toward the cold vastness beyond Neptune, and what soon became many trillions of organisms built

new homes and conjured vast beauties, and if nothing they achieved was entirely original to them, at least their own happiness was something for which they could take considerable pride.

In many ways, Blackbird was never forgotten.

A case can be made that she was responsible for much of the tone and drive of what humanity became.

After a few centuries of wild growth, individuals began to purchase time on the new laser arrays, and with the same self-centered fascination displayed by their old friend, they told the stars about the adventure of their own little, great lives.

On more than one occasion, robots that were built long ago to look and act like Blackbird, and then upgraded by kindly owners, would rent lasers and point them at a world that had effectively vanished with the death of their inspiration . . . and with a grace and song that the entire generation of a world would recognize, they would dance and sing, showering that speck of Creation with their heartfelt, most lovely greetings.



NEW FROM PS

Lawrence Block has never written another book like *Random Walk*.

Neither has anybody else.



Paul Jessup informs us that the “The Ghosts We Have Become” takes place in Silas Bay, a large industrial metropolis which is always at war with the Yellow Coat Republic. It is part of a series of short stories showing war from the viewpoint of civilians, and the results of what happens when the little people try to survive a devastating attack. Visit online to find out more at <http://pauljessup.kapo.ws>.

The Ghosts We Have Become

Paul Jessup

They built a home out of Mary’s bones and called it the Dancing Legs Hotel. They used her skull as the attic, her femurs and humerus as doors and walls, her clavicle as the waiting room. This was a hotel of humors. A hotel made of the greatest ballet dancer that Silas Bay had ever seen.

During the hours of war the ghost of Mary would huddle in her bonecage, hoping the zeppelins overhead wouldn’t blast her remains to shreds. She heard the sounds of explosions to the right and left of her, her ghostly breath stuck in her attic in anticipation of finality.

The people inside of her hid under beds and in closets when the bombs of war echoed into the air, shaking her architecture around them in painful vibrations. She felt so sorry for those inside of her in those moments—she wished she could protect them. Keep the fires out of their skin, hold away death just one more moment.

One stray ceramic bullet through the windows of my heart and a body will fall. It could be a little girl, an old gentleman having a smoke in my ballroom, or a eunuch of a waiter giving a warm beer to the band playing in my restaurant thighs.

Just one bomb blasting the side of me, tearing holes through my bones, that is all it would take to kill so many innocent civilians. And I cannot, she thought, offer any of them protection. No matter how hard I try, they will always be exposed to the war around them, their skin transparent and easy to pierce with shrapnel.

The governor of Silas Bay came to the Dancing Legs Hotel to stay on many an occasion, and felt a certain companionship with Mary. He was one of the few people that could see her ghost, and one of the even fewer that she carried on conversations with.

He stayed up into the late hours

drinking cheap scotch and singing songs to her. She felt safe when he sang to her, his voice rising up in a triumphant staccato of sounds, short of breath and culminating in an orgasm of operatic wonder. She would cling to her bones around him, enjoying the harmony of his lyrics and the subtle yet corrupted sadness in his song.

Two of the refugees of war were a ballerina and her dancing partner. The ballerina's name was Gale and she was considered a prodigy. She was beautiful for a twelve year old, her skin tight and pale and her muscles springy and tied with a perfect balance. When she smiled the younger boys wept with romance. When she suspended herself above an audience, performing motions in dance that made her bones look like water flowing in the air, grown men and women fell to the ground and screamed in envy.

Her partner was named Cakak and he was a clockwork man. He had a white and porcelain mask for his face, and his body was shined and polished wood concealing brass and gold gears, constantly ticking away underneath. When he walked he sounded like a forest of clocks, his body tick-tick-ticking, limbs moving with a strange and unreal gracefulness.

Cakak's soul was bound to the body in much the same way that Mary was bound to her bones. Not by spell or by chance, but by choice. He was a

haunted automaton, and he looked weary from a life worn to the end.

Mary distrusted Cakak. There was something about him, something about the way he talked and walked that felt filthy to her. That felt dark and sinister to her. Her ghost shook and rattled from fear, from this strange clockwork monstrosity that walked through her bones with a smug and knowing smile.

Mary kept a special room for Gale and her dancing partner, one closest to Mary's still living heart. The heart was buried underneath some floorboards in the little room in the cramped center of the hotel. Here Mary felt her weakest and her strongest. Here she was her most vulnerable, and here she could appear as a solid creature. As a being in the flesh.

She felt like she could keep Gale safe here. Mary felt an affinity towards her. She felt a bond that beat as thick as blood, the bond of dancers. Of fellow artisans trapped in a world of senseless violence and brutal ignorance towards the arts.

In the early hours of the morning Mary liked to walk through her corridors, slinking past the closed doors and the strangers sleeping around her. She felt the shadows of each, felt their dreams calling out to her, begging her to follow them into eternity.

She sat on her back porch and

watched the morning sun crawl up the coastline of cliffs and paint the town behind them blue with the onslaught of dawn. Some of these mornings were peaceful, quiet and tranquil. In these mornings she would lay back and think about random things, like the shape of flower petals, the smell of ocean on the breeze.

Some of these mornings were tense, the humidity of war in the sky strangling any peace she'd ever dreamed of having. These mornings were filled with air raid sirens screeching around her and clouds of zeppelins polluting the air. In these mornings she would fidget about the ether in anticipation, her ghostly visage restless and fearful from those who lived inside of her.

Some of these mornings were happy, with just woken lovers singing to one another in the early hours of dawn. She would spend these mornings walking through the garden and remembering what it had been like to have flesh that wanted, flesh that desired. Flesh that felt the need to combine with other flesh, to spark the other with the fire of lust in her bones.

Some of these days were tinted with nostalgia. Like the time she saw Gale practicing ballet in the gardens with her mechanical partner. The way Gale's legs moved up and down, her body dancing through the hedge maze to silent string quartets, Cakak catching her and releasing her, spinning around her with his oddly graceful movements. In these moments Mary wished she could live again, could dance

again, could go out there and be lauded again.

Mary wanted to lift her legs into the air, and feel the weight of a crowd's eyes on her and watching her every move. She felt such closeness with Gale, such affinity and such jealousy. I want that flesh, Mary thought. I want to be able to dance again. To spring my body into the air and let out the wonder of music with my limbs.

In those moments she realized that there was something sensual about dancing, something erotic and holy. Both the thought of dancing and sex made her feel the same way inside—the same desire for the flesh, the same need to be corporeal again.

The governor made the Dancing Legs hotel his main branch of operations during the hours of war. He unrolled large maps with precise measurements. He pulled out colored knives and books on the enemy homeland, studying until the morning hours the export and import of the Yellow Coat Nation, learning their battle hymns and local mythology and folklore.

Soon he knew them better than he knew Silas Bay. He knew their national anthem, and the reason for fourteen orange stripes on their rebel flag. He knew the reasons for secession, and the reasons for bloodshed and war. And most of all, he felt sorrow for them. Sorrow and a sense of kinship. He could understand them, understand their desire for freedom and happiness. Under-

stand their need to be away from a controlling foreign power.

In this understanding he could plan attacks on their soil in a dexterously accurate manner. He could move troops and predict where enemy deployments would be, he could find the perfect areas for looting local crops and feeding his hungry soldiers. By understanding them, he could defeat them.

He planned into the morning hours, concentrating on each map and singing to Mary in his spare moments. She felt such sorrow for him. He did not want to go to war. He did not want to kill anyone. He thought this was pointless and terrible.

These days Mary knew his secret thoughts, knew of his suicide thoughts. She knew of his gun in the safe, hidden there for the moment when it all became too much. When the death tolls of both enemy and companion weighed too heavily on his soul, and he needed to lighten it by removing the flesh.

She knew of his cowardly moments, when he wanted to stop it all by genocide, by dropping magic from the heavens in five mile flames, razing the enemy into the abyss. She knew of the days he wanted to end it all, to make it all stop even if it meant smashing a world all too familiar to him. And even in the suicide hours, even in the cowardly days she saw him in such a noble light.

Mary liked to whisper to Gale while she slept, ignoring the ticking body of Cakak who spooned up around

the curves of Gale's body. She told Gale never to die, never to stop dancing even when she was old and her joints moved slower and less surely.

She told her never to get shot in the days of war, an innocent bystander in the streets of chaos. Never become a hotel, she whispered. Stay young. Stay beautiful.

Mary wanted to materialize in front of Gale, but was scared she would frighten her. I want to teach her dances of the dead, ghostly moves that no living eyes have ever seen.

I want to sing her songs of the after-life. Those wonderful choruses of death and revenge, with their strange and chaotic harmonies and accentuation of discord. Mary felt that the living would appreciate such strangeness and other-worldliness presented in their songs.

Still, still. She held back. For her own good, for Gale's own good. Sometimes we have to keep our distance. Even from the ones we love. If only to protect them from ourselves. From what we are afraid of. From the ghosts we have become.

As war moved on Silas Bay fell into the chaos of revolution. The buildings became dark smashed shells, more eating holes than architecture. Only a few still stood amongst all the wreckage. The Dancing Legs Hotel was one of them—standing proud and still on the large cliffs overlooking town.

Some people moved underground, in the sewers beneath the city. Others hid in the shells of houses, hoping for protection in the most shattered of remains. The remainder came to stay at the Dancing Legs, a solid stranger of a house in a ruin of a world.

Mary waited and watched, feeling helpless as Cakak talked to those she loved. She felt helpless as he and Gale danced, jealous of his automaton fingers as they clutched the clay of Gale's skin.

You have no right, Mary thought. You have no right to touch her, to touch the beauty she is. You corrupt her with your very being, your very presence in the room. There was a strange stink about him—like the smell of burning insects. And the ghost that haunted the shell looked sinister and silver as it floated around, controlling the clockwork body with invisible fingers.

The ghost of Cakak looked smug. His specter seemed to enjoy the pain he caused Mary. He would float around the body, controlling the gears and the face, his eyes looking up towards Mary's ghost, grinning with a grin of broken glass. A smile of strange sensations, like a dagger being spun under your skin.

The governor no longer sang to Mary. Not a note since word came to him that his son was dead, that the Yellow Coats shot him through the skull and

then took his heart and his bones and turned him into a battlefield hospital.

The governor also stopped making plans for war. He stopped charting out battle fields, stopped trying to figure out ways to save Silas Bay. Mary tried to comfort him, tried to make herself flesh in order to bring him into her arms and make him feel like fighting once more. Alas, she was too weak in spirit to do anything more than become refracted light in a reflection or a pile of smoke on a misty morning in the shape of a woman.

She tried singing, but her voice came across as the tinkling of bells and the scratching of branches on window panes. She could not even summon the ghostly strength to give him the same comfort he had once given her. She could see the suicide thoughts once again in his mind, raised in his memories like burns on flesh.

To him the city was dead. It was captured already, and he was just waiting for a bomb to come and remove the Dancing Legs Hotel from the face of the earth. The city outside looked like some dream, some dream of a half eaten world.

An hour of straight bomb bursts in the sky lit the hotel with the fireworks of death. A burst of white, a burst of orange, and then an echo of colors across her bone walls. Through her ribs ran Cakak. He had a look of terror in his eyes as the fire lit the rooms around him in flashes of unreality. By time he

got to Gale's room he was out of breath and smelling of burnt oil and spent fuel. If he did not hurry, he would make them both late for tonight's show.

Mary flew to the other side of the door, saw Gale there in tutu and greasy white face paint, practicing some simple movements for the show tonight. Cakak swung open the door and walked in, the light of the room changing each moment, his gears exposed by the shadows of war.

He said something to Gale in a language Mary could not understand. It sounded like a broken music box, musical yet full of discord and distressed notes. Mary thought it might be the Yellow Tongue, the language of the Yellow Coats. Gale responded in like, her voice reproachful and distant.

Another bomb blast, the walls shaking and the air filled with fire. Mary felt her sides split as the bones of the hotel crumbled. She felt a sense of despair as she realized that fifteen rooms had been destroyed, the people inside of them collapsed beneath the rubble and dying.

Cakak responded in loud and angry notes, his graceful mechanical hands sliding in the air in large and aggressive gestures. Gale shrugged and then danced out the door, the tips of her shoes glowing with a sickly orange color.

The minute the door closed Mary watched Cakak open up his mahogany ribcage, exposing his tick-tock intestines behind it. He grabbed a box from under their bed, pulling out a revolver and loading it with ceramic bullets. He

put the gun in his chest, the ribs closing around it like wooden lovers.

Cakak looked up at Mary and grinned from behind his porcelain mask, the ghost a sinister shimmer around the clockwork body. Mary wondered who the bullet was for—was it for Gale? Was that argument so dire he was going to murder her? Or was he a Yellow Coat in disguise, ready to kill the governor in cold blood?

Another explosion as Cakak ran out the door, following Gale to the dance hall. Mary's attic skull was in ruinous remains. She felt sick to her stomach. Her bones were being ground to dust from an attack in the sky, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She spirited through her bones, searching out Cakak. Mary had to stop him, couldn't let him kill either of the people she loved and cared for. The governor may have given up hope, but she hadn't.

There, over there—lit by the orange light of the bombs—Gale danced. The sounds of the orchestra and chorus seemed to be accentuated by the dream beats of war from the streets outside, adding an extra layer of cruelty to the already beautiful display of Gale half naked, suspended in the air above them. Cakak was beneath her, smiling up at her with a sly and murderous rictus.

Mary had to find a way to act fast, had a find away to stop him. She knew that he waited for the exact moment to act—intuited that the artist in him de-

sired for the most dramatic string of events. She watched for any sign of the gun, watched for Cakak's ribs to open and his hands to move towards it.

During the final moment the bombs ceased and the air smelled like after war, all ground stone and burning flesh. The orchestra was in a chaotic pitch, the instruments playing notes either too high or too low for their own good—Gale leaping higher than Mary had ever seen, the landings coarse and vulgar, the ground smacking roughly against the tips of her toes.

Cakak smiled, his ribcage opening as he reached for his gun. Mary decided that this was the moment to act—her moment to stop him. She desired to dance herself, to dance one more time as Gale's partner, to bring her stone to life in harmony with that last movement. She raised her bones, moving them in the air like legs, gracefully extending them into the movement.

She performed her greatest arabesques as architecture, surrounding Cakak with her bones and body, suffocating him beneath her beams and chandeliers. He tried to move, tried to breathe. She crushed his gears inside of her, crushed his machinations with her very body, the ghost of Cakak sliding sinister around the wreckage and grinning a dark and knowing grin as cogs slid out from the wreckage of dust.

The orchestra did not stop playing. Onward, deeper and darker into the chaotic crescendo as they bent their

instruments into shadowy notes that stifled all human thought. Gale kept dancing, even as the white of architecture lifted in cascading legs around her, the body of Cakak in rubble and ruin.

In the air Gale's shoes lit up red and orange, the tips like smoking pipes. She grinned with her greasy white face paint, grinned insanely and sung out an operetta in a strange and foreign tongue. The governor knew this song—had memorized it not too long ago, and began to harmonize as well, the orchestra destroying the rhythm with their overpowering in between notes.

It was the Battle Hymn of the Yellow Coat Republic. Mary could not think. Could not do anything but shimmer in her ghostly form and watch as Gale landed and explosions lauded the air in an applause of wreckage and destruction. Mary realized all too late that Gale's shoes were bombs, and this dance, this last dance, would bring death to them all.

The ghost of Mary wept, unable to protect them as holes opened up in her bones like war sores. When this is all over, she thought, I will go and get my heart from the wreckage. I will take it and become flesh again, wandering this earth with the weight of sorrow I have seen.

Someday, I may be able to forget all of this. Not now, though. Not anytime soon. ☒

“A Little Knowledge” plays with the paradox that genome size is unrelated to complexity—“Some salamanders have 40 times more DNA than humans,” Guy Immega points out. “Einstein never agreed with the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics—God does not play dice!—and many biologists refuse to accept that most of our DNA is ‘junk’.” Mr. Immega’s tender hard SF story dramatizes the potential to use superfluous DNA to store vast amounts of knowledge in the brain, a Vinge-style “Biological Singularity” that could forever change humanity. This is a rare example of SF that actually does anticipate the future—see the Addendum.

A Little Knowledge

Guy Immega

The medic placed Oskar’s head in a 3-point stainless steel skull clamp and tightened the pins into bone. Once his cranium was rigid, a gleaming robotic arm swung above his face and bored a tiny hole through the centre of his forehead. A circle of blue light illuminated a drop of blood that swirled around the whining drill bit. A second robot inserted a thin stereotaxic needle into his brain. As the syringe was slowly withdrawn, a hundred thousand neuronal stem cells, genetically modified, were pumped into the prefrontal cortex—an infusion of only a half c.c. of fluid. The procedure took less than an hour under local anesthetic, and was painless. Oskar was awake the entire time and I was there with him.

The Alzheimer’s Treatment Centre referred Oskar to me. We only do experimental therapies at the free clinic at Mnemonic Cognition Corp. Oskar

was a special case—he was in the first stages of the rare, early onset form of the disease.

He came alone and identified himself to the receptionist, who ushered him into my office. His grip was firm. “Good afternoon, Dr. Markham. I’m Professor Lutz.”

He seemed normal, able to focus and carry on a conversation. His face was pleasant—blond hair, strong cheekbones and chin, attractive. He spoke with a faint German accent and carried himself with dignity. I knew from the referral that Oskar was a professor of mathematics and that his IQ was still above average. At forty years of age, he appeared healthy and in his prime. I liked him.

“What brings you to MNEM-COG, Oskar?”

He sat in the oak chair in front of my desk. “Dr. Markham, I think my memory may be failing.” His blue eyes were a little watery and he wiped his cheeks with a white handkerchief.

“Please call me Cora.” I gave him a warm smile, my best feature, I’m told. “So what makes you think there’s a problem with your memory?”

He hesitated before replying. “My specialty is number theory. When I give a seminar, I use my old lecture notes. The trouble is: I can’t understand what I’m saying. The equations are incomprehensible.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure they would be to me, too.”

Oskar’s face contorted as if he were in physical pain. “But I used to *know* this material. Now, I’m terrified that a graduate student will ask questions. Thank god I’ve tenure—and a medical leave of absence.”

“I think I understand.” And I really thought I did.

His pain had softened into frustration. “You can’t *begin* to understand. I was very close to proving the Riemann Hypothesis!”

“What’s that?”

Oskar stood up and started pacing my office. “It predicts the distribution of prime numbers. It’s the most celebrated problem in mathematics—the *holy grail* of number theory! There’s a million dollar prize for the proof.”

“How exciting! What would you do with the money?” That was a stupid question. I regretted it immediately.

Oskar collapsed into his chair. He looked like he was going to cry. “I . . . I don’t know. Maybe . . . My wife left me—and then she filed for divorce. That’s why I decided to get help with my memory. Perhaps the money

would . . . impress her. I’d be a little bit famous. She might come back to me.”

I didn’t know what to say. Alzheimer’s often destroys marriages. But what would I know? I’d been married to my work for the last twenty years, since my husband died of thyroid cancer. I had a little papillon dog named Poppy for companionship.

Oskar dabbed his eyes again. “I have a draft of a proof sitting on my desk. I’ve worked on it for years. Now, I can’t even remember my line of reasoning—and I *know* it’s not complete.”

“Is this what you want to do, finish your proof?” I’d heard of scholars, mathematical monks, who work year after year on a single grand problem. The few who succeed become scientific celebrities—and are commonly regarded as the smartest people in the world.

Oskar recovered his composure. “Yes, I want to complete my proof. It’s my only reason for living.”

I waited until he was able to look me in the eyes. “Oskar, we’ve developed a new type of memory augmentation. The FDA has approved it as an experimental genetic therapy for cases like yours. However, it’s never been tried before. Perhaps you’d be a good subject.”

He sat up straight. “Yes. Yes, of course. I’m interested. That’s why I’m here.”

■ suggested we take a break and go to the cafeteria. I wanted him to feel

comfortable and I like tea in the afternoon. We found an empty table.

“Cora, please tell me about your research. Do you have many patients?” His curiosity was a good sign. If his attention wandered, the damage from Alzheimer’s might be too great.

“No, Oskar, I’m not a medical doctor. Actually, I’m a molecular geneticist—my specialty is noncoding or ‘junk’ DNA.”

He frowned. “If it’s junk, what good is it?”

“The DNA in your cells, in everybody’s cells, is mostly nonfunctional. Only about 2 percent is biologically active, used to build and run your body. About 98 percent doesn’t do anything. There’s so much of it—that’s why I find it interesting.”

“But how did it get there?”

“Our DNA is riddled with fossil genes, called pseudogenes—long-dead leftovers from our evolutionary history, although a few are sometimes active. Also, transcription errors cause a lot of useless repetitions. Finally, inside the active genes are introns, which don’t code for anything—they must be snipped out before the gene can be properly read.”

“It’s hard to believe that nature could be so wasteful.” Oskar seemed offended.

“There isn’t any selection pressure, or a genetic mechanism, to delete the junk DNA. A bullfrog has more than twice as much DNA as a human. It usually doesn’t do any harm, so it tends to accumulate and bloat the genome.”

I looked at his eyes to see if he was still following me. “If you replace the junk DNA with data, there’s about 333 megabytes of storage space available in each cell in your body.”

He was definitely paying attention now. “You mean our chromosomes are like a fragmented hard drive with only a few useful files?”

“Exactly. And now it’s possible to overwrite the junk DNA with new information. We can stuff any data we want into the DNA, in place of the pseudogenes and introns—without changing the cell’s biological function in the body.”

Oskar paused, considering the implications. “Interesting. But 333 megabytes is only one-third of a gigabyte. That’s not very much data.” He was still competent with ordinary arithmetic.

“True, but individual cells can be loaded with different information. There are 25 million books in the British Library, which is about 15 thousand gigabytes of data. It would take less than 50 thousand unique neurons to store it all. That’s a very small percentage of the 100 billion neurons in your brain.”

Oskar grasped his head above the ears, as if measuring his skull to see if it would accommodate so much data. “I don’t want the whole British Library. But I would like all of higher mathematics. Is that possible?”

“I think so—we can replace the junk DNA with number theory documents.” Perhaps I spoke a little too soon but I didn’t want to discourage him.

I knew MNEM-COG's engineers could synthesize megabase genetic code and insert it into the chromosomes of a neuronal stem cell. And cloning thousands of the modified stem cells is relatively easy.

But I didn't tell him about the tricky part, the technology we hadn't tested yet. How do you access all that information when it's locked up in the chromosomes?

We kept Oskar under observation after the stem cells were injected into his cerebral cortex. We had to wait two weeks for them to divide and differentiate into neurons. The big unknown was how many, if any, functioning neurons would be connected to the rest of his brain. Unused neurons die quickly.

The hospital rooms at MNEM-COG's private clinic were pleasant, but boring. Oskar watched TV and read magazines. One of his graduate students visited him, but she didn't stay long. I had tea with him every afternoon in the outdoor patio adjoining his room. I was worried that he seemed increasingly withdrawn.

At the end of the second week I started probing. "How are you feeling, Oskar? Sleeping okay?"

"Nothing unusual." He never complained. But he didn't show any ambition, either.

"Let's do a little test. Can you write the equation for the Riemann zeta function?"

Oskar blinked and rubbed his eyes. "I don't remember it."

I showed him a printout of the formula. Not that I understand it myself, but the math geeks at MNEM-COG assured me that Oskar should know it.

"That looks very familiar."

"Just study it for a while—think about it."

That's when the trouble started.

Oskar disappeared from the clinic ward. After a frantic search we found him in an empty seminar room. He was covering the whiteboards at the front with equations. They were neatly lettered, row upon row, in text less than an inch tall. I took a seat and watched him work—he had an air of grim concentration. He was oblivious to me.

"Oskar, what are you doing?"

"I'm remembering . . ." His voice was faint and a little hoarse. I got him a cup of water from the drinking fountain. He drank it while he continued to write. I could see that he was going to run out of whiteboard space.

I fetched a blank notebook from my office and a bowl of potato salad from the cafeteria. He slumped into a chair at the table—he must have been standing for hours. While he ate his dinner, he resumed printing at the top of the page in neat, cramped figures. I watched him for an hour and then went to my office to check my email. When I returned, he was asleep in his seat, snoring softly.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

“Oskar, it’s time for you to go to bed.” He woke with a start and looked at me.

“Where am I?” He blinked his eyes.

“Oh, yes of course.”

He followed me to his private room in the clinic. I put his notebook on the bedside table and left him to retire for the night.

When I looked in on him the next morning he seemed relaxed. I noticed that his notebook was unopened. “How’s your work coming?”

“What work?”

I handed him the notebook. He scanned the contents—more than twenty pages of equations. His face was blank.

“I remember writing this. But I have no idea what it means.”

His wide eyes made him look like a lost child.

The Engineering Department at MNEM-COG had the best nanoshop in the UK—it still does. I depend on Rakesh and his team from Bangalore to support my research. They’re a pretty amazing bunch.

Rakesh and his engineers had been working on a tiny microprocessor, a molecular nano-computer designed to work inside each neuron: a Drexler “rod-logic” CPU. He explained that it’s a purely mechanical processor—like Babbage’s Difference Engine—but with specially shaped molecules for pivots and ratchets. And the marvelous thing was that the rod-logic CPU was built on the ribosome, outside the nu-

cleus, from instructions stored in the DNA.

The little base-4 CPU ran a Codon Search Engine in each neuron to extract data stored in the chromosomes. The query inputs came from the dendrite synapses. The output was a sodium-ion pump that sent action potentials down the axon. Rakesh called them “smart neurons.”

I walked down to Rakesh’s office. “We’ve got a serious problem. Oskar is no longer a functioning human being. He’s become a number theory automaton.”

Rakesh’s dark eyes flashed. “But don’t you see? It’s *working!*” He had a lilting South Asian accent. “Some of the thousands of neurons that were injected, maybe just one neuron, got properly connected to the other nerve cells—integrated into the cortex.” When he said the word “neuron” the R rolled lovingly off his tongue. “His brain has adapted to communicate with the smart neurons, and interpret the output. Oskar can now access the data that we stored in his brain!” Rakesh was obviously delighted with the results. Like most techies, he was a compulsive optimist.

“But it’s useless! *Why* did he mechanically copy all the equations?”

“I think his curiosity is driving him. The brain is plastic and he’s just starting to learn to use the new smart neurons. When he asks for more formulas, the smart neurons keep pumping them out. *Brilliant!*”

And poor Oskar tried to write it all down.

The next day Oskar stopped writing equations and fell into a deep depression. I could be a bit blockheaded at times about reading emotions—but I honestly thought that he'd adapt to having an eidetic memory for number theory. I blamed myself for not visiting him in the clinic over the weekend.

When I looked in on him late Sunday afternoon he was sitting in an easy chair staring at the patio garden. He was wearing a bathrobe and a two-day beard. His cheeks were wet with tears. He didn't look at me.

"Oskar! What's wrong?" He wouldn't answer me, either.

I took his hand—he had large, fine hands—and gently tugged him to stand up. He rose compliantly.

"Oskar! When's the last time you had a meal?" Nothing. I realized he had not eaten all weekend. The doctors said he was fully recovered from the brain injection, and the nursing staff assumed he would dine in the cafeteria. He was only at MNEM-COG for a follow-up assessment of his long-term memory.

He obviously needed better care than he could get in the corporate clinic. I felt responsible for him and decided that, on balance, human contact was more important than the legal niceties of medical ethics. I had him get dressed and then drove him to my little apartment. I'm not much of a cook, so I made spaghetti and salad. He was ravenous and seemed to perk up after the meal.

"Now, please tell me—what's happening with you?"

He closed his eyes. "I'm still looking at equations in my mind. It's like reading a telephone book. I wish I could stop."

"Can you find a particular equation that you want?"

"Sometimes. Mostly my mind wanders aimlessly. I'm lost in a forest of mathematical trees."

I decided to try to distract him. "What's your favorite music? I have a good collection."

"Ah yes, Schubert." His accent reverted to German. "The Trout Quintet."

"Okay, I have it." I started the MP3 playing. I also poured him a flute of Rhine wine.

He closed his eyes and rocked his head gently to the music. Little Poppy jumped on his lap and Oskar petted her absently. He finally seemed comfortable.

That night Oskar slept on my couch.

The next day I asked Rakesh to meet me in my office to discuss alternatives. He knew I was distressed and angry. As usual, he was ready with a technological fix.

"Just knowing facts isn't enough," he said. "You have to understand how they fit together. Maybe we could set up a relational database with hypertext-like linkages, to put all the mathematical knowledge into context. That's a much bigger job but, since it's already on the web, we should be able to transliterate it to DNA."

“That’s good, but I don’t think it’s enough.” I decided we had to go beyond logic. “We also need emotions.”

Rakesh blinked. “What kind of emotions?”

“We know that learning is easier in an emotional context. Every fact you know has some emotional flavour attached to it.”

Rakesh considered this claim in silence. Sometimes it’s hard to know what he’s thinking. “You may be right, but how do you store emotions in a database? How do you encode love?” If I couldn’t convince Rakesh, he wouldn’t cooperate.

I was stumped. “I don’t think it needs to be that profound. What if we attach a colour, an emotional hue, to each fact in the database?” I knew I was groping.

Rakesh regarded me doubtfully. “So which emotion goes with which fact? Do you want green for the Taylor Series and red for divide by zero?” Rakesh knew a lot more mathematics than I did, but I didn’t appreciate the sarcasm.

“Sure! How the hell should I know? *Work* with me please! Why don’t you assign a point on the colour wheel for every equation in the database? Vary the hue and intensity—use several colours for each equation. Colour-coordinate the relational database so it’s easier to use.”

“You sound like an interior decorator for the mind. There aren’t enough colours.”

“Don’t worry too much about repeating colours—I’m sure that we have similar emotions attached to countless

different memories. There aren’t that many categories of emotions. Besides, people also have feelings about the colours themselves.”

Rakesh exhaled loudly. “Well, that could work as a mnemonic device, to help him find whatever fact he’s looking for. But I don’t know if he’ll actually see the colour in his mind.”

“Maybe just the name of the hue is enough—let his imagination reconstruct the colour. I’ve never seen a blue rose, but I can visualize it. Can colour be part of the relational database?”

Rakesh shrugged. “Sure, why not? Adding a colour is only a little bit of extra data. We also need to upgrade the Rod-Logic CPU to work with the new data structure.”

“Okay, when you’re ready, have your team prepare a second batch of neuronal stem cells.”

I just hoped Oskar was willing to be the subject of another experiment. We had to do something.

It took three weeks for Rakesh’s team to prepare the new stem cells. During that time Oskar continued to stay in my apartment. He was much easier to live with than my late husband, god bless him. Oskar was a tidy man and spent a lot of time listening to music. He even helped in the kitchen and made his own lunch.

During evenings I worked with him on memory recall exercises. Using a printout from Rakesh, I would read part of an equation. He would then search

his memory and try to remember the rest. At first he had a lot of trouble, but gradually he started getting it right. Neither of us understood what the equations meant—but it was a fun game and seemed to calm his mind and give him a sense of control. Still, progress was slow and I wondered if the Alzheimer's was progressing.

The second injection procedure went smoothly. This time I held his hand while the robot drilled through his skull. He seemed glad for the human contact.

When his head was released from the bone pins, there was a small amount of bleeding. They gave him a sedative and put him to bed in the clinic to watch for adverse reactions. He became agitated and at one point started speaking incoherently in German. They gave him tranquilizers to keep him quiet. I visited him several times each day, but he didn't recognize me. After a week of intensive care, he seemed to recover.

But Oskar was a changed man.

I took him home with me again. I wanted to care for him because I knew that the MNEM-COG clinic couldn't do it properly. I was one of the few people who understood what was happening in his brain. He deserved my best efforts. Besides, I think he liked living in my apartment—and I enjoyed the company, too.

After resting for two days, he abruptly announced, "I'm ready to begin."

I was delighted. "Would you like me to read equations to you?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "I'm bored with games. I need to focus on real work." His newfound determination was refreshing, but I wasn't used to it.

"I want to start again on the Riemann proof. Do you have my draft?" His tone was imperious, almost accusatory.

He took over my home office, spreading papers and notes on every horizontal surface. He was gruff and preoccupied. I could hear him talking loudly to himself, "Gott im Himmel! It's the blue one, dumkopf!" He was obsessed.

At one point I brought him a cup of tea—he took a sip, made a sour face, and poured it back into the pot. "Don't bother me!" Fifteen minutes later he called, "Ich habe *hunger*, bitte!" I guess he had run out of sausage and pumpernickel. I gave him an unsliced loaf of rye bread—he tore off a chunk and started chewing it. "Danke" he mumbled, but he didn't look at me.

He hurt my feelings but I didn't think it was intentional. It went on like this for weeks. He wouldn't bathe and he stank of stale sweat. His hair and beard grew long. I left food for him and escaped to my job. I dreaded coming home. He worked day and night on his proof. I couldn't tell if he was crazy—or inspired.

But he was hell to live with.

One evening I returned from work and found Oskar asleep on the couch. There was a half bottle of schnapps on the floor next to him. I don't know where he'd gotten it—I don't drink the stuff. On the coffee table was a copy of his divorce decree. There was also a letter from his ex-wife saying that she was getting married again, to her tennis instructor.

I went to the bathroom and filled the tub with warm water. It took all my strength—I'm a petite woman—to haul him off the couch by pulling on his wrist. He fell to the floor and got up on his knees. I helped him rise and then led him to the bathroom.

He stood groggily while I stripped off his clothes. Even unkempt he was a fine looking man. With my hands on his back, I pushed him into the bath. I shampooed his hair and shaved his beard with my leg razor. Like grooming a horse, it was a pleasure to wash his body and scrub his feet with a bristle brush. When all that was left to wash was his genitals I looked at him and said, "Do you want to, or shall I?" He closed his eyes and leaned back in the tub. I was very gentle.

After I changed the sheets on the couch and prepared a tray of sandwiches, I left my apartment. There was a nice French restaurant nearby and afterwards I went alone to a late movie—it was awful. I returned after midnight. Fortunately, he was snoring peacefully on the couch. I walked silently past him to my bedroom. I was exhausted and quickly fell asleep.

In the night I awoke to see him standing next to my bed. He was naked. "Oskar, is that you?" He didn't answer me, but somehow he didn't feel menacing. He seemed a bit shy.

I'm almost fifty, nearly a decade older than Oskar. I take care of myself and I'm not ugly. But I know I'm not beautiful either—brown eyes with crow's feet, graying hair, sagging cheeks, and a sagging body. When a single woman is older than thirty-five, she becomes aware that all the good men have been taken. Besides, I didn't want to compromise my career with the complications of a relationship. I hadn't slept with a man in years.

"I need you, Cora," he said in a quiet voice.

While I was wondering about the ethics of having an affair with a patient, he climbed in the bed with me. Naturally, I moved over to make room for him. I guess I wanted him, too.

He was gentle and strong. I got lost in his smell and the texture of his skin. At one point I became demanding, and he easily accommodated me. He maintained complete self-control, which allowed me to cede myself to pleasure. His stamina astounded me. My energy was measured in orgasms—he overwhelmed me with ecstasy. I dimly wondered about his satisfaction but could only wait for his climax. When he gave it to me, it was like a blessing—and I rallied from exhaustion to respond in kind.

I'm not so foolish as to think that one night of sex means true love. I just didn't believe it. I still don't believe it.

However, where Oskar was concerned, what I believed just didn't matter. His pheromones, my psyche, his intellect, my energy, his needs, and my desire to nurture—all combined in a vortex of daily life. I guess I was happy, but that didn't matter either. I know I wouldn't have changed a thing.

Each day I commuted to my job at MNEM-COG. Oskar stayed at home and worked on the Riemann proof. He said he was close to completing it. He would concentrate for ten or more hours each day on a line-by-line analysis of the equations. The proof was very long and any error or omission would be disastrous—invalidating the entire effort. Nothing less than perfect, step-by-step rigor would suffice. He liked being alone, so he could work without interruption.

And even when Oskar took time out to be sweet to me, I knew he was also thinking about his work. He frequently told me I was beautiful, which was a shameless and transparent lie, but I loved it anyway. Maybe I was beautiful to him and I did try to look my best. I think he loved me in his way. But the only time he was totally with me, when I was the complete focus of his mind and will, was in bed. Perhaps I should have felt insulted, but that's not how it works for me. Somehow, no matter how sexually powerful Oskar was, when we were in bed together, I was his equal.

And he knew it. And he knew that I knew it.

I dropped by Rakesh's office to talk about Oskar. We needed to understand what was happening before we could move the research forward. But my real motive was to comprehend my new lover. Besides, I enjoy brainstorming with Rakesh.

He does have an annoying air of certainty, even when he's guessing—but he's usually right. "The second generation smart neurons are coming online. Now, Oskar can access the same information from two points of view."

"Maybe," I replied, "but now he's functioning at a *much* higher level. How could the transformation happen so quickly? It can't just be the new database with colour-coded emotions." That alone wouldn't make Oskar such a sweet satyr.

Rakesh nodded. "Maybe it's simply a fresh supply of gray matter. Oskar must be laying down new long-term memories in the natural way—by growing dendrites and synapses on the smart neurons."

"But that doesn't explain his *drive*," I said.

"I think it was always there—that's why he started the Riemann proof in the first place. He only needed to regain his confidence. Remember, he's also a one-trick pony, a kind of idiot savant for number theory."

"That's not fair! He's a human being

with feelings, too.” I must have protested a little too much.

Rakesh smiled knowingly. “Of course he is—but he’s a new kind of human being. He demonstrates a novel symbiosis between man and machine, neuron and nanocomputer. Smart neurons are compatible with living systems in a way that electronic computers *never* will be. There’s been a large synergistic effect. But that’s only the beginning.”

I realized that my dear Oskar was the start of a Singularity that could change the world. “How far can we go? Maybe we could bloat the genome—triple the DNA data storage to a gigabyte per neuron.”

Rakesh nodded. “That’s good, but not enough. It’s more important to continue what we did for Oskar. We could develop a variety of smart neurons with specialized libraries for art history, differential equations, or cardiac surgery—any topic at all. Imagine being able to buy instant knowledge.”

I was uncomfortable with Rakesh’s entrepreneurial zeal. “Okay, so there’s no practical limit to the amount of data that can be stored in the brain. But that’s *not* sufficient to make you smart.”

Like many engineers, Rakesh’s imagination was already focused on the next generation technology. “Using reverse transcription, the rod-logic CPU could write new data into the DNA of smart neurons in the brain. Instead of read-only memory, we would have a read-write function. That way, new permanent data could be recorded. Natural long-term memories gradually

fade, but DNA memories won’t. It’ll open up a whole new way of learning.”

“I don’t think we’re ready to try that with Oskar,” I said.

“I agree,” replied Rakesh. “Another theoretical possibility is to write data into the junk DNA of egg and sperm cells. Then, when a baby grows, every nerve cell in the brain would be a smart neuron. A person could have billions of nanocomputers in his head. Most basic school knowledge, like multiplication tables or history, could be inserted into your genes—where it would remain for generations, maybe forever—or at least until it was updated. A society of people with a ‘smart genome’ would be unrecognizable to us today.”

That vision made me feel panicky. “But think of the potential for abuse! What if a totalitarian theocracy embedded its ideology in the human genome? There’s enough data storage space in a single cell to record the entire Bible—or the Koran—and it would be replicated in every cell in the body.”

My head was beginning to hurt. “This could be used for DNA brainwashing! It makes the Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will* look like a fairy tale. If rival factions imprint their followers with conflicting ideals, it could mean perpetual war.”

“I doubt it’ll come to that,” said Rakesh. “We’re not robots. An atheist can know the Bible, but choose not to believe it. Oskar still has free will. Anyway, how do *you* think DNA memory should be used?”

I couldn’t ignore the question—the

genie was out of the bottle. “Maybe we should start where a lot of data is needed for a simple skill. How about language translation? I’d like to learn German.”

“Good idea,” said Rakesh, with satisfaction.

“Here it is! I’ve finally finished it.” Oskar held a ream of paper in his hands and smiled broadly, like a proud little boy. “Riemann was right! Will you help me proofread it?”

It was silly of him to ask me—the proof was almost five hundred pages long and I didn’t understand any of it. But on some level he wanted me to appreciate its monumental intricacy and bulk. We went over each line together, the formal axioms and logical statements leading to the theorem. For me, the equations took on a kind of calligraphic beauty, a familiar symmetry of form. It was also incredibly tedious and boring. But I felt impelled to help him—who else would? Besides, I was partly accountable for what he’d become. And I did discover a few typographical errors.

The publication of the proof generated a lot of controversy. Only a handful of mathematicians could follow the logic. Oskar was outraged when incompetent reviewers found fault with it. At first he tried to rebut each criticism. Then, to my surprise, he came to me. “Please. I need your help.” His voice quavered slightly. He handed me a stack of unanswered correspondence.

I scanned the cover letters. “How should I reply?”

“Tell them . . . I don’t know . . . Tell them that, if my proof is correct, it will speak for me. I’m very tired.” The skin under his eyes was pouched and dark, and he looked like he might cry. I realized that he could no longer follow the debate.

The effort to confirm the proof took so long that it delayed any acknowledgement of his achievement. More than two years passed before the Clay Mathematics Institute extended the million-dollar prize. The Fields Medal Committee of the International Mathematical Union gave him a silver plaque. He became a celebrity, with his face on the cover of *Time Magazine*.

But by that time it was too late for Oskar. The smart neurons in his cortex didn’t stop Alzheimer’s from continuing to eat little holes in his brain. I think he tried to hide his ongoing memory loss from me. Maybe he was afraid that I would ask him to leave. Of course I wouldn’t—at least not until he needed more care than I could provide. Each day, I lost a little more of him. For his sake, I concealed any trace of sadness.

He almost seemed disappointed when the million-dollar check arrived. It sat on the desk for weeks—he didn’t know what to do with it. I suggested that he donate it to charity. “Nein!” was all he would say. Then one evening after work I found the check on the dining room table. He had signed the money over to me. When I tried to speak to him about it, he acted like he

didn't know what I was talking about. Maybe he didn't.

He still remembers all the number theory equations. We listen to Schubert and play our old guessing game—I read the first part of an equation and he finishes it. It gives him child-like pleasure to get it right. He seems quite content.

And me? I guess I'm happy too. Oskar is sweet and compliant, a nice companion. He still knows my name. And he still tells me I'm beautiful—although now, sadly, I believe he's totally sincere. Poppy adores him. The three of us get along just fine.

Addendum

DNA is the quintessential data storage medium. Bacteria have been replicating and passing genetic information from one generation to the next for at least three billion years. Genetic data is stored redundantly (the double-helix) and is error correcting. It is potentially perpetual.

Amazingly, our DNA is 98 percent junk, pseudogenes and introns, and this fragmented data doesn't appear to do any harm (although bits may be occasionally active)—much like residual deleted files still sitting on your hard drive. A bullfrog has more than twice as much DNA as a human—and more than twice as much junk. Perhaps the older the species, the more superfluous DNA accumulates.

So why not write new data, or replace old junk data, in the DNA? After "A Little Knowledge" was finished (August 2006), a study titled "Alignment-Based Approach for Durable Data Storage Into Living Organisms" (by Nozomu Yachie et. al.) was published in the April 9, 2007 issue of *Biotechnology Progress*. Yachie reported that they had inserted Einstein's famous equation, $E=MC^2$ 1905, into the DNA of the bacterium *Bacillus subtilis* (nice name!). And, the bacterium happily continues to reproduce itself—and the new data.

So, as before, science fiction anticipates science fact. You read it first in *Postscripts!*



Coming Soon In Postscripts

Next time: our special double all-SF issue, coinciding with the World SF Convention. A whole section of new stories by Paul McAuley, plus all-original tales from Ray Bradbury, Keith Brooke, Justina Robson, Alex Irvine, Terry Bisson, Garry Kilworth, Chris Roberson, Jack Dann, Steven Utley, Matthew Hughes, James Lovegrove, Brian Stableford, Eric Brown, and others. A feast of futures!

One of America's fastest rising young fantasy writers, Sarah Monette is the author of the critically acclaimed quartet of novels made up of Melusine, The Virtu, The Mirador, and Corambis. Another novel is Companion to Wolves, written with Elizabeth Bear. "The World Without Sleep" is the latest in a series of tales featuring the supernaturally connected Kyle Murchison Booth, a museum curator with a difference. For more of his adventures, see Sarah's collection The Bone Key, from Prime Books.

The World Without Sleep

Sarah Monette

1 In the Night City

In the January that I turned thirty-five, sleep became a foreign and hostile country. I had never been more than what one might call a refugee in the country of sleep; one of my earliest memories is of my nurse telling me that if I did not go to sleep, the goblins would get me, and of waiting all that night for the goblins to appear. They did not, of course, but even so I am not sure that she was wrong.

I have always been an insomniac, but in that January "insomniac" itself began to feel like the wrong word. When I slept at all, in sporadic cat naps lasting between fifteen minutes and an hour, my dreams would be vividly senseless, and I would be plagued with images from them for hours afterwards. The other archivists and curators remarked uneasily on my bloodshot eyes and bruise-dark eye sockets; I said truthfully that I often had trouble sleeping, and they left me alone.

I could not sleep between midnight and dawn. It was not even worth the ef-

fort, and I grew to loathe my bedroom, then to loathe the study, the living room . . . Finally, desperate for peace of mind even if I could not rest, on the last Friday in January, I put on my coat and went walking. If I was robbed or assaulted or murdered, I felt vaguely that it would be no more than I deserved.

But this quarter of the city was antique and genteel; not only were there no miscreants abroad, there was no one at all, no one but me. The only sound was the echoing of my footsteps; the only lights were the street lamps. No one else was awake; they slept the sleep of the just and innocent. Like Satan in the Garden of Eden, I looked at their darkened windows and was consumed with envy.

I paid no attention to the routes I took, nor to how far I went. Some part of my mind, better regulated than the rest, seemed always to contrive that I should return to my own front door around dawn, so that I could shower, shave, sleep soddenly for three quarters of an hour, and eat breakfast before going to work. One afternoon in early

February, I found myself doodling the hubristic Gothic outline of the Nicodemus Kent Building on my desk blotter and realized hollowly that I must have walked halfway across the city the night before. And yet I had no memories of leaving my own neighborhood, no recollections of the poorer neighborhoods, the financial district, the massive Mycenaean bulk of the Public Water Utility, which I must have passed to reach the Kent Building. Could I in fact be sleeping even as I walked?

The idea was so unsettling that I very nearly locked myself into my apartment that night. But I could not stand the oppressive familiarity of the patterns made by the shadows on the floors, the relentless ability of my ears to catalogue every strange sound the building made in the deep watches of the night. I decided instead to choose a goal and to pay attention as I walked, to prove to myself that I was not slipping into some unnatural fugue state in my perambulations. I further decided that I would walk to the Public Water Utility; it was an achievable goal, and even in the darkness, it was readily recognizable as itself.

I felt better for having formulated a plan, even a plan as ultimately meaningless as that one. I set out into the nighttime streets, feeling a certain cautious optimism that I could at least contend with this piece of the wider and apparently insoluble problem that beset me.

I became lost.

In itself, I do not suppose this is either alarming or surprising. My sense of

direction is not particularly acute, and in their dark desolation, the streets of the city all looked remarkably similar. Against this stood the fact that I had known where I was going and that it was a walk I had taken before in daylight. I confess to a certain morbid affection for the Public Water Utility, surely the most graceless piece of civic architecture in America. And, paying attention or otherwise, I had become accustomed to the city's nocturnal streets; they no longer seemed unfathomable to me.

And yet I was lost. The buildings did not look familiar; the street signs, when I found them, were for streets named BOULEVARD DE LA LUNE, NYX PLACE, UMBRA ROAD—streets which I had never seen before in my life, and I was born in this city.

"I must be asleep," I said to myself, muttering under my breath simply for the comfort of hearing my own voice. I did not believe it, but there seemed no other explanation, no other method by which I could have walked out my apartment door into a city of such absolute unfamiliarity. If I was dreaming, I reasoned—tenuously and uncomfortably—then I must have been dreaming all those previous nights, and the best strategy for finding my way out of the dream was to do what I had done before. I had an uneasy sense that there was a fallacy somewhere in that piece of logic, but I turned down Umbra Road because standing by myself under the street sign was becoming increasingly nerve-racking, and I knew I was in danger of

beginning to imagine that things were watching me from the shadows.

I decided to keep walking as if I could come to the Public Water Utility, hoping that I might wake up when I arrived there, or that my failure to do so would somehow shake me out of this frightening maze. I knew I would not find it, and so I do not know the right words to express my complete bewilderment when I did.

There it was, looming out of the darkness like a prehistoric temple idol, its entryway looking as always like the lowered head of a bull before the monstrous bulk of the main building. It was incontrovertibly the Public Water Utility.

And yet I was standing on the sidewalk of—I walked to the corner to check the street sign—Artemis Street, and I knew as well as I knew my own name that the Public Works Utility brooded over the south side of Fairlie Road between Jackson and Godolphin. Artemis Street at this point claimed that it crossed Nocturne Street.

I sat down, quite without meaning to, at the base of the signpost. It is one thing to suspect yourself of going mad; it is another thing entirely to discover that your suspicions are correct.

I wondered drearily what would happen if I sat here until dawn. Would I wake up in my own bed? Would I wake up at the corner of Fairlie and Jackson? Would I not wake up at all, but find myself admiring the sunrise from Artemis and Nocturne? Each option seemed more repellent than the last.

It was at that nadir in my thoughts

that I noticed the light. In all the vast darkness of this city, there was one light burning. I surged to my feet and started toward the light.

I walked a block and a half down Nocturne Street and found myself opposite a church. The light came from a lamp hung over its doorway. The church was brick and homely, and as I climbed the steps, I saw it was dedicated to St. Christopher, patron saint of ferry-men, protector against floods, fires, earthquakes . . . and bad dreams. When I tried the door, it was unlocked. I pulled it open and went in.

The interior of the church was a great, gloomy vault. I realized after a moment's bewilderment that it was not fitted for electricity; the only light came from candles, in sconces on the walls, crowning great candelabra on the altar, offered as votives in the two chapels that flanked the nave. I could see stalagmites of wax beginning on the floor beneath the sconces that flanked the front door.

I was still standing, unable either to sum up the courage to penetrate farther into the tremendous darkness of the church or to maintain the resolve to turn and walk out again, when a voice called, "Is someone there?"

It came from near the altar; seeing movement, I realized that what I had taken for a deeper patch of shadow was a man, now in the act of getting to his feet from the first row of backless pews. At first I could not make sense of his shape, but then he moved into the light and I saw that he was winged, marble-white feathers rustling softly from his shoulders to his heels.

"You need not fear," he said, starting down the aisle. "Our doors are left unlocked for a reason."

As he came closer, I saw that he was a young man—probably four or five years younger than I—and that his resemblance to a marble angel in a cemetery did not end with his wings. He had the high forehead with the bar across the supraorbital ridge, the straight, patrician nose, the proportionally weaker mouth and chin, which nonetheless held an expression of great gentleness and sweetness. His skin was alabaster pale; his hair, curly and overlong, was tow-colored. As he passed through a puddle of candlelight, I saw the final, capping, dreadful resemblance: his wide-set eyes were blank, perfectly white, like the eyes of a classical statue whose colors have been washed away by centuries of rain.

"Are you an angel?" I blurted.

His laugh was enchanting, self-deprecating and rueful. "A demi-angel, only. But you cannot be one of my parishioners."

"No, I beg your pardon. I did not mean . . . that is, I am . . ." I hesitated, and decided on the stark truth. "I am lost."

"Lost," he said thoughtfully, as if the word had some deeper meaning of which I was unaware. "Will you come sit down and tell me? The nights are long and lonely here, and I," and his lips curved in a gentle smile, "I am unquenchably curious about travellers in our city."

"I . . . I'm not . . . that is, I don't think I am a, er, a traveller. I'm just lost."

"All the more reason to speak to me," he said. "Perhaps I can help you become found again. I am Clement, the dominie of St. Christopher's."

"My name is Kyle Murchison Booth," I said.

Clement found a pew with a light sweep of his right hand. He sat, his wings wrapping round him like a cloak, leaving space for me; I sat beside him. He smelled of vanilla and nutmeg. His hands, folded restfully in his lap, were as beautiful as his face, long-fingered and smooth. I clasped my own hands, with their knobby joints and chapped knuckles and ink-stained fingertips, between my knees, and told Clement as best I could about my insomnia and my walks and the strange city I now found myself in. He listened without any trace of restlessness or impatience, although his feathery brows drew together slightly as my tale unfolded.

"Do you know, er, the other city?" I said. "Have you heard of Fairlie Road?"

"No," he said.

"I feared as much."

"But it is possible that I can help you all the same. If you will help me in return."

"I will do anything I can," I said, knowing it was rash, but also knowing that I did not have a choice in any meaningful sense of the word.

Clement smiled at me radiantly. "It is not as difficult as your voice suggests you fear. But it is most desperately important. You see, the goblins have stolen St. Christopher's Glass."

"St. Christopher's . . . I'm sorry. I, er . . ."

"It is our relic."

"Relic." I supposed it was foolish of me to be surprised. Clearly the boundary between this nightmare city and the waking world was all too permeable; if random persons such as myself could cross, why not the remains of saints?

"It's a glass ball, about the size of my thumb joint. Warm to the touch. It contains one of St. Christopher's tears, and the sunlight reflected in it."

"It . . . I'm sorry. I don't think I understand you."

"This is the night city," Clement said, his beautiful face sad. "We have no sun. It is why the vampires are so strong."

"Vampires? You, er, do you mean the blood-drinking sort, not some other of which I am unaware?"

"They leave the city at moonrise to hunt. I am told it is terrible to witness."

"I'm sure," I said faintly.

"The city is theirs, you see. The shadows are their thralls, and we cannot travel without protection."

After a moment, I realized that his "we" was the demi-angels. "Are you all blind, then?"

A tactless question, but he did not seem to notice. "Yes. We stay in our churches, where the vampires cannot come, and do what we can to help the shadows." His wings drooped as his shoulders slumped. "Sadly, it isn't much."

"Why can't one of these, er, shadows go after your relic?"

"The vampires would notice their absence," he said, seeming shocked that I had to ask. "They are very strict overseers."

"Ah. And you—the demi-angels—cannot go because of your blindness, and it's obviously useless to ask the vampires."

"Oh, they mustn't know it's gone," Clement said earnestly. "It's the only thing that keeps them in check at all."

He had boxed me in very neatly with the solution he wanted, although I did not think, looking at that beautiful, gentle face, that he was aware of his own manipulation. "Very well," I said, although I could not quite repress a sigh. "I hope that you can at least tell me where I must go."

"Shift ends very shortly, and the shadows are allowed an hour before they have to sign the registers of their dormitories. One of them will show you the way. But, please, I would hear more of your city, if you would tell me."

It would have been difficult to resist his shy entreaty, and I reflected that I would probably get more useful information from the shadows. So, shy myself, I told Clement about the museum, and the neighborhoods I walked in on the weekends; the library, the zoo, the Alethea Wing Parrington Botanical Gardens. I described the Nicodemus Kent Building and the Public Water Utility, and the city's other architectural marvels, both the beautiful and the grotesque, and some that were both. I told him about the Resurrection Hill Cemetery, where my ancestors were buried, and a little about the old, gracious neighborhood in which I had spent my childhood. I described the city to him as I knew it, and both of us became wide-eyed as children with the

wonder of it. I managed to forget so thoroughly where I was and what was being asked of me that I jumped and flinched when the church door opened, and a voice called, "Dominie Clement?" It was a soft voice, a little asthmatic, indeterminate as to sex.

"In the nave, my child. Come here, there's someone I want you to meet."

The patter of bare feet, and I turned to watch the shadow come into the church proper. It was child-sized, very pale, limbs long in proportion to the torso, giving it an unpleasantly spidery appearance. It wore its pale, cobwebby hair scraped into a topknot, which looked incongruously savage juxtaposed with the sober, tidy laborer's clothes. The face was unremarkable next to Clement's beauty, the eyes large and dark and much inclined to blink.

They blinked at me, puzzled and reproachful, and the shadow said, "Oo—Who is this?"

"Is that you, D-7-16? This is Mr. Booth, who has very kindly agreed to retrieve St. Christopher's Glass for us."

The look of alarm had to be due to the goggle-eyed blinking, I decided, for D-7-16—if that was indeed the creature's name—said, "That's very nice of you, sir," and sounded sincere and even eager.

"Mr. Booth is a stranger to our city," Clement said, "so I need you to show him the way to the Goblin Door."

"It'll have to be now, sir."

"Yes, I know. D-7-16 will take good care of you, Mr. Booth."

I looked at the blinking eyes, the sly thin-lipped mouth, and was not so sure.

But there did not seem to be any way I could say so; therefore, I got up—this time the blinking was definitely in alarm, as D-7-16 backed hastily away from my gangling height—and said, "Thank you. I'll do my best."

"Oh, I'm sure you will succeed," Clement said, almost gaily. "The goblins are nasty little brutes, but they're not really *dangerous*."

How would you know? inquired an unpleasant voice in my head, but I bit my tongue and did not say it.

"This way, sir, please," said D-7-16, making urging motions without actually approaching me. "There's not much time."

I wished I had a better option, but I did not. I followed D-7-16.

The night city, as Clement called it, was not less *unheimlich* for having a companion. D-7-16 padded unspeaking on long pale feet, only nodding in a self-important manner at the other shadows we met or passed. They were all indistinguishable to my eyes, with their pale topknots and subfusc clothes and fish-like blinking eyes. And no less so when the street lamps were lit, as they were by other shadows, just as pale and goggling—though I could not tell if the lamps were meant to signify day or night.

I felt terribly tall and awkward and out of place—which differed from my waking life, I supposed, only in that no one here would expect me to feel otherwise. The thought was queerly emboldening. I said to D-7-16, "Do



all shadows have, er, names like yours?”

The blink this time was clearly contemptuous. “That isn’t my *name*.”

“Oh. I beg your pardon. Then, er . . .”

“It’s my designation. Factory D, seventh level, technician sixteen.”

“Oh. And your real name?”

“The vampires have that,” D-7-16 said, sounding scandalized that I would feel it necessary to ask.

“The vampires have your *name*?”

“Shhh!” D-7-16 said, rather frantically. “Never know who’s listening.” But oddly—for I knew it did not like me any better than I liked it—it must have wanted to answer my question, for it said, “It’s why we work for them. Earning our names back.”

“But how did they get your names in the first place?” I was wondering if I had been mistaken in what type of vampires these were. Onomastic vampires?

“Protection,” D-7-16 said. “We give ’em our names when we’re born, and they protect us from the dragons. And we can earn our names back working in the factories—as adults, of course.”

I firmly put aside the temptation to ask about shadow child-labor laws. “And, er, what happens when you do?”

“The dominies have a system. We give them part of our wages every month, and whenever anybody buys their name back, the dominies take money out of the kitty and buy ’em passage on a ship to Heft Averengh.”

I was about to ask if that happened very often when D-7-16 stopped short. “If I go any farther, I shan’t get back in

time to sign the book. Just keep following Clair, though—” and it jabbed a long skinny finger at a sign proclaiming this to be CLAIR STREET “—and you can’t miss it.” And it bolted like a rabbit, not so much as pausing to wish me good luck.

But when I turned to continue in the indicated direction, I saw why D-7-16 had been in such a hurry and cursed it as not only a rude and sullen rabbit, but a cowardly one as well.

It must have smelled the vampire coming.

I cannot describe the vampires of the night city in any way that will truly convey the experience of meeting one. To begin with, the miasma that surrounds them if one gets too close—a stench of blood both fresh and very old, compounded by a cloying reek of roses that I guess to be the scent of the vampires themselves—is like nothing I have ever encountered, before or since.

They are somewhat like the demi-angels in shape, being tall and well proportioned and winged. And they are pale-skinned, pale-haired: albino.

But their wings are the naked leathery span of the bat, and their faces, too, have nothing that is human or beautiful about them.

Round faces, almost chinless, with a nose that is nothing more than nostrils, and a lipless inverted V slash of a mouth, the sharp teeth plainly visible with every word spoken. Their eyes are round and bright, very red and very old.

I yelped at finding myself face to face with such a creature, the yelp only not a scream because the stench of roses and

blood choked me; the vampire winced, its hands going up as if to protect its ears, and said in a lovely, perfectly modulated mezzo-soprano, with only the slightest trace of a lisp, "I beg your pardon. I did not mean to startle you."

Somewhat incoherently, I begged pardon in return, chiding myself inwardly for being surprised that such an ugly creature should be female. But I could not help it: I *was* surprised, as if her sex ought to make her exempt, as if something that hideous could only be male.

She said, "You are a stranger here, are you not?"

"Yes."

Her head tilted, and her mouth moved in an expression that I thought was intended as a smile. "And let me guess. Dominie Clement has talked you into going after that tiresome relic for him."

The expression on my face made her laugh, and if her voice was beautiful, yet her laugh was the shrieking, tittering noise her bat-like physiognomy suggested. The passing shadows, all of whom were carefully on the other side of the street, covered their ears and walked faster.

"But please," said the vampire, collecting herself. "I forget my manners." She extended her hand, very long and very white, and the fingers plainly tipped with claws, not nails. "This is the correct observance? And we tell each other our names."

"Only if I won't have to pay to get mine back," I said.

"Your name is entirely safe," she

promised, and for some mad reason I believed her.

It required a considerable effort of will to take her hand. But her skin was warm, her palm furry against mine, and she was very careful of her claws, so that I felt only the slightest tickling scratch against my wrist. "Kyle Murchison Booth," I said.

"Mirach," she said in return, and I hoped I hid my relief adequately when she released my hand. "That is a most charming ritual."

"I, er, that is, I'm glad you find it so."

"And it means we are not enemies," she said triumphantly, "so you need not fear any longer that I will bite you." For one heart-stopping second, she bared her teeth at me, as sharp as if they'd been filed, and I knew she could have torn my throat out in a single snapping mouthful of blood and skin and gristle. And then she relaxed and stepped slightly away from me, and after a moment I was able to relax, too. Infinitesimally.

"Come," said Mirach. "Walk with me."

I was not certain whether it was invitation or command, but it seemed wiser to obey, regardless. I followed the vampire through a wrought-iron gate, out of which she must have emerged to intercept me, down a long, wide spiral of stairs circling a great empty space like a ballroom in which no one had ever danced, and then through another gate and onto a brick-paved promenade beside a river which, after one glance, I tried not to look at too closely. There were others strolling along the river-

walk, but they were vampires, and they did not approach us.

Presently, Mirach said, "The dominies still think we don't know, don't they?"

"Er, yes . . . how *do* you know?"

"This is our city. Very little happens in it that we are not aware of. And the dominies are transparently bad liars."

I thought of Clement's beautiful, expressive face, and nodded my understanding.

"They also trust the shadows to keep their secrets, and shadows do not keep secrets, Kyle Murchison Booth. They whisper to each other all day long in the factories, whisper whisper whisper like mice in the wainscoting, and what they whisper to each other, sooner or later, one of them will whisper to us. An increase in status, a bonus for the week . . . they fear us, and they will tell you they hate us, but they whisper their secrets to us all the same."

"You don't seem, er, terribly perturbed about the loss of the relic."

"Why should we be? And, yes, Kyle Murchison Booth, I do speak for my siblings in this. It is distasteful to us, this relic, and goblins love bright things. They mean no harm and will do no harm."

"Then you've, er, come to stop me?"

"I came to *meet* you. The dominies are not the only ones who are insatiably curious about travellers from far lands. And, no, I shall not prevent you from going through the Goblin Door."

I struggled with it, but in the end said humbly, "I don't understand."

"Let us sit," said Mirach, indicating a

wooden bench beside the promenade. I was not entirely comfortable with the proximity to her this plan entailed, but she had promised not to bite me, and therefore I felt I had no valid grounds for complaint. I sat.

She sank down gracefully beside me—like the pews in the church, the bench was backless—and after some moments of breathing carefully through my mouth, I began to acclimate to her appalling scent. I do not know if she could tell I was on the verge of asphyxiation, or if she merely needed time to order her thoughts, but it was not until I was breathing more normally that she began to speak.

"I said that the dominies are bad liars, and they are. But they are very skilled at something which is not lying, but which obscures the truth just as surely.

"What a dominie does not wish to see is not seen."

"But—"

"I am not speaking literally, although we have sometimes wondered, we vampires, if their physical blindness is a punishment for this other, willful blindness. We are predators, Kyle Murchison Booth. We see clearly whether we wish to or not. But the dominies were blind when we met them. We do not know if our story is true—or merely a story."

"What is it that, er, the dominies do not wish to see?"

"This city," said Mirach and gestured with her long, white, horrible hands. "They imagine that it is we who rule, the shadows who toil for our pleasure, and they themselves, the dominies, our

helpless, passive captives, who do what they can to help the shadows and resist our evil. Yes?"

It was a not inaccurate summation of what Clement had told me; I nodded.

"The truth is that without the dominies, the shadows would have revolted against us long ago."

I gaped at her; like an animal's her face was expressionless except when she remembered to contort it, and her round red eyes gazed back at me somberly.

"It is the dominies who teach the shadows to be patient, the dominies who assure them their service will be rewarded. The dominies taught the shadows how to dream, and it is that above all that keeps them obedient."

"You are cynical," I managed.

She shrugged magnificently, a gesture that involved her wings as well as her shoulders. "We are vampires. What else could we be?"

"But you don't tell the dominies." For I did not doubt that the vampires could make the demi-angels see this truth, if they chose to.

"We love the dominies. Though we are cynics. Though they call us monsters. We would not make them unhappy for all the worlds we know. And thus," and she thought to smile, although the expression was no less disturbing the second time, and I wished she had not, "if Clement wants to send you clandestinely to retrieve his unpleasant little toy, we shall not stop you."

"Um," I said. "Thank you."

"It seemed unkind to let you con-

tinue fearing us and our potential intervention," she said, answering a question I had not succeeded in articulating. "We decided we could trust you not to hurt the dominies."

"Thank you," I said, with greater assurance. However they had decided I was not a practitioner of pointless cruelty, I was ridiculously glad to have the vampires think well of me.

"Very well then," said Mirach, rising in a single fluid motion. "I will escort you to the Goblin Door. I would accompany you further, but if I did, you would never see so much as a single goblin fingertip. They remember the days when we used to hunt them."

I opened my mouth to ask what the vampires hunted now, then thought better of it. I was afraid that if I asked, she would tell me.

Other vampires watched as we walked, their eyes reflecting the lamp-light in flat red disks, and Mirach murmured their names to me: Sadalsuud and Taraapoz, Suhail and Nashira and Menkalinam.

"Why did you meet me, and not one of them?"

"We have demesnes—parishes—just as the dominies do, although they would be appalled to learn that we have borrowed their word. Clement is a dominie of my parish; thus my interest was judged greatest. My brother Al-haior was most displeased. He has actually been to your world once—or to what he thinks was your world—and he had a great many questions he wished to ask."

“Er,” I said. But the mention of “your world” had reminded me, and I asked: “Do you think the dominies can truly send me back? To, er, my world, that is?”

“If they cannot, we can take you,” Mirach said, clearly regarding the matter as one of no importance, and I stopped in my tracks as if she had shut a door in my face. “*You* can take me? Then why—?”

“Please, Kyle Murchison Booth,” Mirach said, her face screwed up in a wince, “moderate the loudness of your voice.”

I apologized, but stuck to my point: “If you can return me to my world, why am I going on this . . . this treasure hunt?”

“Because Clement wants his relic back, and I cannot retrieve it for him myself.”

There was something terribly stark in the way she said it, an acknowledgment of the hopelessness of the vampires’ love for the demi-angels, and at the same time a resolute dignity that rejected pity. I apologized again, and she waved it away, the graceful gesture of her left arm echoed by an equally graceful gesture of her left wing.

“We are exploiting you,” she said, and I knew beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt, that if I asked her what she preyed on, and if she reveled in its death, she would answer me with truth. “You have reason to be upset.”

We had reached the end of the promenade, ascending back to street level by means of a corkscrew stair, iron and rusting. Mirach let me out through

a turnstile and said, “There, across the street, is the Goblin Door.”

I would not have known it without her guidance, and I wondered again just how eager D-7-16 truly was to have St. Christopher’s Glass returned. It was the sort of door any small commercial establishment might have, wood-framed glass with brass fittings, and a neat brass plaque saying PUSH. I noticed as we approached that the lower portion of the glass was smudged and smeared, as if with the fingerprints of small children—also that, indubitably, Mirach cast a reflection. Her mirrored image was, if anything, more hideous than her physical self, for it looked like a wax-work, some Gothic marionette given animation without life.

I turned my head with a jerk, almost a wince, and Mirach said softly, “You cannot travel through mirrors if you can meet your own eyes in them.”

“Is that how you move between worlds?”

“One way,” she said, with a hard carelessness that told me further questions would be futile. “But your way lies through the door, Kyle Murchison Booth, not the mirror. Someone will be waiting to guide you to St. Christopher’s when you return.”

For a weak, childish moment, I wanted to beg her to be here herself, but I throttled the impulse grimly and said merely, “Thank you.”

I did succumb to the urge to extend my hand again; her head tilted, and she said with great interest, “It is appropriate at parting also?”

“Yes.”

“I am charmed,” she said, and clearly was. We shook hands; it was easier by far to touch her than to look at her, though I had never imagined finding myself in a situation where I could say that truthfully. But her touch was like the touch of an animal, not like the touch of another person.

Then she turned, drifting across the street with her easy, unhurried stride, and I took the deepest breath my nervousness would allow and pushed open the Goblin Door.

2. Through the Goblin Door

I had had a nanny until I was five years old. I remembered her scent more clearly than anything else: a warm sweetness of rose-water and cornstarch. She had seemed a giantess to the child I had been, though doubtless I would tower over her now. She had been wide-hipped, soft-bosomed, her hands small and chapped. Her name was Martha Mulcahy.

And I remembered her stories about goblins. They were her method of discipline; as an adult I could see their crude manipulation, the meretricious effects she achieved by playing on a child’s gullibility. But that knowledge, that adult awareness, did very little to dull my childhood fear. The goblins ate naughty children’s eyeballs, Martha Mulcahy had told me. They were attracted by the sound of children crying, and would pinch them black and blue. And, of course, they stole children who would not go to sleep. What they did with the children then, Martha Mul-

cahy had never said, but my imagination had had no difficulty in filling in the gaps.

And all those stories, her cautionary tales and my own fevered imaginings, were crowding back now. Neither Mirach nor Clement had seemed to consider the goblins a threat, but of them, one was blind, reclusive, and naïve, and the other was a vampire and doubtless had a skewed perspective on the whole notion of “threat.” Though I was sure they had both been truthful according to their lights, I did not feel their opinions could be trusted.

The Goblin Door had opened onto a marble foyer, a trough worn down the center of the floor between the door and the head of the stairs with their flanking Corinthian columns. I was finally free of the reek of vampire; the foyer, and the stairs as I started down them, smelt of cool stone and dust, slightly of water and more strongly of the earthy musk that had to be the scent of goblins.

The stairs were broad and shallow, with the same trough worn down the middle. I descended carefully, holding onto the banister, and realized with a sinking sensation of doom that I should have asked Mirach for some sort of light.

At the bottom of the stairs, I stopped, unable to pry my fingers off the reassuring marble weight of the banister, and there I stood, as if turned to stone, while around me the darkness settled and deepened. I knew I had to move, even if it was only to go back up the stairs and beg someone for a flashlight

or a lantern or a torch, but I had reached the end of my capacity for action; I stood and clung and quailed hopelessly at embarking on any course I could think of.

After a time, I saw a light. It had turned a corner, I thought, to come into view, and as it grew nearer, accompanied by a strange snuffling, shuffling, tapping noise, and great lambent green-gold eyes, I saw that it was a little tin lantern with what looked like the sort of cheap candle used on children's birthday cakes. It was at the height of my thigh, the eyes being slightly higher.

All at once, the lantern stopped, and the shuffling and tapping stopped, and the eyes became very wide and still with alarm, and a growly little voice whispered penetratingly, "There's a *bloke* on the stairs!"

A babble of whispers and little outcries, and another voice said, "S it a domino?"

A third, palpably frightened: "S it a vamp?"

"Nah," said the first voice. "Dun' got no wings, does 'e? Can't be a thing what got wings if you don't got wings. Stands to reason."

"Awright then," said the third voice. "Should we go closer, d'you think?"

This question occasioned a great deal more muttering and shuffling, and the snuffling of their breathing became more pronounced. At last, as it seemed they were not going to reach a decision on their own, and as with the best and most timorous will in the world, I could not construe them as a danger, I said, "I beg your pardon, but are you goblins?"

"Oooh!" they all said and went back a step en masse.

After a moment, one of them whispered, "'E ast if we was goblins."

"Whaddo we tell 'im?"

I was becoming accustomed to their Greek chorus method of conversation; I said, "I shan't hurt you. I promise."

"Easy to say," one said, and for a moment the green-gold eyes were full of menace. Then another said, "Nah, 'e's a nice bloke. Look at 'im!"

They all did, shuffling closer; I retreated half a step involuntarily, forgetting that I was still standing on the stairs, and nearly fell, saving myself only by sitting down hard.

My small interlocutors earned my instant and eternal goodwill: they did not laugh.

They had come close enough now that I could see them in the light of their little tin lantern. They were stocky-bodied, short-limbed. They were as goggle-eyed as the shadows; their faces were broad, wide-mouthed, pug-nosed. Their ears were pointed, wide-spread; their hair, black and coarse, they wore in long braided scalp locks like Red Indians. Their hands were small in proportion to their bodies and oddly delicate. I looked at their feet and understood the tapping sound I had heard; they were cloven-hooved, like sheep, and I realized—as, daring, they approached closer still—that the strange shape of their heads was not due to the poor light. They had horns lying along the curve of their skulls, like the mountain sheep displayed in the Parlington's Hall of Natural History.

They were all clothed quite tidily, if shabbily, shirts and trousers cut down for their small size, and vivid red suspenders that, by the way they tended to stand with their thumbs tucked behind them, were clearly their pride and joy.

“E *looks* all right,” one said.

“An ’e ain’t a vamp,” said another, “so if he *ain’t* all right, we can handle ’im.”

I guessed there were twenty or so of them, clustered around me now like homely children around a performing dog, so I was inclined to agree with that assessment.

“Okay, then,” said the one holding the lantern, whom I surmised to be their leader. “We’re goblins. What of it?”

“I’ve come to, er, ask you to return St. Christopher’s Glass.”

Frowns of what looked like genuine incomprehension. “Wot’s that, guv?”

“The, er, relic of St. Christopher’s. A little glass ball with—”

“The shiny!” one of the goblins said, in tones of the greatest enlightenment, and was echoed in a jumbled mutter by the others.

“But we don’ have the shiny,” said their leader.

“I was told you’d, er, taken it.”

“Thass not right, guv!” the leader said indignantly, and the chorus picked up the theme: “S not true! . . . ’S a lie, innit? . . . We din’ do that!”

“Oh,” I said, feeling foolish and distinctly at a loss. “Do . . . er, do you know who did?”

Wide-eyed, solemn, they shook their heads. “Shouldn’t go round stealing the shiny,” somebody muttered from the

back. “Ain’t right,” somebody else agreed.

“We wouldn’t steal the shiny,” the first goblin said, clearly still miffed. “Not ours. Don’ want the dominoes mad at us.”

“Or the vamps,” another goblin said, and they all nodded fervently; I noted with interest that the goblins understood the true balance of power in the city above them.

“Musta been a shadder,” said a goblin standing on the other side of the banister, and made me startle, for I had not realized any of them had crept that close.

“Musta been . . . sorta thing they’d do, innit? . . . Sneaky, they are . . .” Their Greek chorus was in consensus, and I wondered if they were right. I had no doubt that they were telling the truth to the best of their knowledge and ability. They struck me as creatures who would have to practice in order to tell a lie.

But assuming that the goblins were telling the truth left me in a difficult position. I knew, without any need to test the hypothesis, that Clement would not believe the goblins so readily, and the resulting impasse would not get me any closer to finding St. Christopher’s Glass and being able to return home.

There was a tug at my sleeve. The goblin holding the lantern, green-gold eyes grave, said, “The shiny’s gone?”

“Er, yes. Someone stole it from the church.”

“Dominoes must be unhappy.”

“Dominie Clement is very, er, distressed.”

They shuffled from foot to foot, little hooves tapping and scraping at the stone. "So," said the first goblin, "if we found the shiny, it'd make the dominoes happy?"

And the Chorus chimed in: "Would it make 'em like us? . . . Would they like us like they like the shadders?"

I felt a pang of empathy; I knew all too well how it felt to want love and have no idea how to earn it. I said carefully, not wanting to mislead them, "I'm sure Dominie Clement would be very grateful. And perhaps he would, er, reconsider his opinions."

They nodded, and I hoped they understood how little I was promising. "We'll find the shiny," their leader said. "An' bring it to the church." And they pattered away.

" . . . Thank you!" I called after them, rather disconcerted by the speed at which they moved once they had made up their minds about something, and turned to labor back up the stairs through the great breathing darkness beneath the night city.

As Mirach had promised, there was a vampire waiting for me when I reemerged from the Goblin Door. In fact, there were two, glaring at each other like rival tomcats. I wondered if the vampires' division of the city into parishes was simply an imitation of the demi-angels as Mirach had implied, or if perhaps vampires were as territorial as the cats these two resembled.

They both started forward when I

came through the door, and I had to curb my instinct to retreat. I found myself with my back pressed against the door's cold glass, so I was not entirely successful.

Both vampires checked their stride, looking uncertainly from me to each other. "Greetings, traveller," said the one to my right in a stentorian bass. "I am—"

"Oh, no, you don't," the other cut in, tenor, strident, almost shrewish although the vampire was clearly male. "Mirach sent *me*, and I'm not going to—"

"Don't be ridiculous," said the first and (I thought) elder vampire. "Mirach and I are kindlings—" at least, I thought that was the word he used "—and she would never—"

"But she did!" the second cried in vindictive triumph. "She told *me* to come meet him, so you can just *go away!*"

They were facing each other now, almost snarling. "Er," I said, and broke off when they both turned to stare at me accusingly, red eyes round and shining. "Er. Who are you?"

The elder began, "I am Alhaior—"

"And I am Dafira," the other cut in defiantly. "Mirach sent me—"

"A mistake," said Alhaior. "I would be delighted to escort you to St. Christopher's. Do you have the relic?"

There was a certain unworthy satisfaction in saying, "No," and watching the two vampires do double-takes like cinema comedians. "The, er, goblins do not have it."

Alhaior merely stared at me, but

Dafira, quick-minded, said, "Then who does?"

"I, er, I don't know."

"Well, *we* don't have it."

"No. I, er . . ." I decided even as I spoke not to mention the goblins' self-appointed quest. "I thought perhaps . . . that is, Dominic Clement may know—"

"How do you know the goblins do not have it?" Alhaior demanded. I had already noticed how the depth and sonority of his voice made his every utterance majestic and authoritative. In this instance, he sounded very much like a cross-examining lawyer.

"I . . . er . . . they, that is, they told me so." I sounded feeble-minded to my own ears, but both vampires seemed to consider that quite adequate testimony and to take it most seriously.

Alhaior's tongue traced his upper lip nervously, a gesture which unnerved me so badly I could not look at either of them. "But if the goblins did *not* take the relic . . ."

"I imagine," Dafira said, "that that is why this gentleman wishes to speak to Dominic Clement again."

I nodded, not looking up.

"Then I shall take you," Dafira said. "Alhaior, why don't you tell Mirach and the Wisdom of this new development?"

Still staring at the scuffed toes of my shoes, I felt the clash of wills between them. The balance of power had shifted; Dafira was sure of himself, and Alhaior gave way. I felt him leave more than I heard him, and the reek of vampire diminished noticeably.

There was a silence between Dafira

and me; then the vampire said, almost shyly, "Mirach said you might be willing to share your name with me. I swear I will nor hold nor use it."

I forced my head up. To my eyes, Dafira looked no different from Mirach, any more than either of them was distinguishable from Alhaior. Their individuality was all in their voices, Mirach's elegance against Alhaior's gravitas against this abrasive earnestness.

"My name is Kyle Murchison Booth."

Dafira did not attempt to smile, but he bowed to me over his folded hands in a Japanese fashion. "I am honored. Shall we proceed to St. Christopher's now?"

I acquiesced and followed him on a route very different from the one Mirach had taken. Dafira went up, leading me via fire-escapes and jury-rigged bridges from roof to roof across the night city. After negotiating the third rope and plank bridge with the steady-ing help of Dafira's hand—like an iron armature under the shirred velvet of his pelt and I almost did not notice his scent any longer—I asked, "Do you, er, fly?"

His wings flexed and spread as if woken by the question. "We do," he said slowly, choosing his words with care, "but rarely within the city. For the dominies cannot—not without our guidance, which they will not accept—and we are . . . fearsome in flight." He furlled his wings sharply, almost as if he were trying to hurt himself, and I remembered abruptly, as if from a con-

versation held years previously, Clement saying how terrible he had been told it was to see the vampires leaving the city to hunt. And since all the demi-angels were blind, and it was clear Clement did not talk to the goblins, he could only have been told by a shadow. The shadows told the demi-angels, and the demi-angels, cruel in their innocence, told the vampires. And the vampires did not fly within the city.

Pursuant to the train of thought thus started, I said, "Have matters always been so, er, fraught between you and the . . . the dominies?"

"There's St. Christopher's," Dafira said, pointing at a nearby spire, and I thought he was avoiding my question. But after a moment, he said, "No. Our relationship has never been easy, for we cannot change our nature, any more than they can, and thus we hunt and they disapprove, and it will always be so, but it used to be that they would come to the doors of their churches to speak with us if we knocked. It used to be that they would walk with us in the city, even if they would not fly."

"When did the change occur?"

"I don't know." He supported me carefully down a final fire escape, almost as steep as a ladder, and we emerged from an alley between two brownstones to stand on the sidewalk directly across from St. Christopher's. "Clocks, whether elaborate or simple, do not keep time in this city, and time itself . . ." He made a gesture, his hand closing into a fist and then spilling open again, as if unable to hold that which he sought to keep. "It cannot be measured.

The only variation we have is the arrival of visitors like yourself, and even at that, I cannot tell you whether the last one appeared two days ago, or two hundred years."

"Have the shadows and the goblins been here as long as you have?"

"The goblins, yes. The shadows came later . . . I think."

I asked the question I had not gotten to pose to D-7-16: "Do any of them every actually leave?"

"Oh, yes," Dafira said, almost cheerfully. "They take passage on the trading ships to Heft Averengh, once they earn their names back."

"But, er, I beg your pardon, but if you have no method of keeping time, how do you know when they have done so?"

His eyes widened; I saw his pupils expand and contract like those of a cat about to pounce, and noted to myself the stupidity of disconcerting a predator. He turned his head away sharply, refusing the instinct that told him a threat must be fought and killed and eaten. He said, his voice uncertain, a little muffled, in telling contrast to the lethal certainty of eyes and teeth and clenching hands, "I don't know. I *thought* they left. The dominies have such elaborate plans . . ."

"Mirach told me the dominies taught the shadows how to dream. It, er, follows that they have learned to deal with . . . that is, a dream does not lose its strength for never being realized."

"Oh," Dafira said, his fingers now pressed against the triangular slash of his mouth. "You think . . . time doesn't

pass here, does it? We just go round and round and nothing ever happens because nothing ever *can*.”

“But something *has* happened,” I said. “Someone has stolen St. Christopher’s Glass.”

Dafira could not enter the church. I stood beside him in the portico, and we took it in turns to knock, until Clement finally opened the door, saying with bewilderment and a touch of irritation, “The church is always open.” And then his nose wrinkled as he caught Dafira’s scent.

“Except to those who cannot come in,” I said and was startled at my own waspishness.

“Mr. Booth! I did not expect you so soon. But why . . . ?”

“Matters have become, er, complicated.”

“Complicated? Do you have the relic?”

“No, because the goblins aren’t the ones who stole it.”

“The goblins aren’t . . . Of course the goblins stole it!”

“You sound awfully certain for one who did not witness the theft,” Dafira said. He had regained his composure, and his eyes were bright with interested malice.

“I expected a remark like that from a vampire,” Clement said witheringly, and I had to intervene before they descended into an unbecoming exchange of personalities.

“The goblins did not steal the relic,” I said as firmly as I could, “and I have

discovered a number of other questions that need answering.”

Clement tilted his head, his beautiful face perplexed but willing. “What do you want to know?”

“Come out and, er, sit down, dominie. I feel that this may take some time, and you are likely to have other visitors before we are finished.”

Clement hesitated, apprehension and uncertainty visible in every line of his body, in the awkward half extension of one wing.

“There is nor trick nor treachery,” Dafira said abruptly, harshly.

“Very well,” Clement said.

The portico was flanked with backless benches. Clement settled awkwardly on one; Dafira, back stiff, wings twitching as if they wanted to mantle and he would not let them, perched on the edge of the bench opposite.

I sat down next to Clement, for I did not want him to feel that Dafira and I were allied against him. And my gesture did seem to lessen his unease, for he said, “I do not understand, but I do not believe you would lie to me. Do you believe you can retrieve the relic?”

“I, er, hope so,” I said, thinking of the goblins. “As I said, there are questions I must ask.”

“Ask them,” Clement said.

Invited so directly to speak, I stammered and fell silent. Dafira, having waited politely for a few moments, said, “You were asking me if any of the shadows have ever succeeded in buying back their names.”

“Well, of course they have!” Clement said indignantly.

“Have they?” Dafira asked, leaning forward. “Have any of your parishioners done it?”

“Well . . . no. But I’m sure—”

“Do you know, personally, of any shadow who has taken passage for Heft Averengh?”

Clement opened his mouth to respond, but Dafira said, “*Personally*,” with great emphasis, and the demi-angel subsided again.

“I don’t either,” the vampire said after a moment.

“But what are you saying? That you’re exploiting your workers? We’ve been saying that all along!”

“I have another question,” I said hastily, and then had to think of one. “Er. That is, what do your factories produce?”

“I beg your pardon?” vampire and demi-angel said together.

“The factories where the shadows work. What do they produce?”

“I have no idea,” Clement said, as one who was above such crass concerns. I looked enquiringly at Dafira, who blinked, clearly surprised that anyone would need to ask, and said, “They manufacture night.”

“They . . . I beg your pardon.” I felt as if I had been hit in the head with the cognitive equivalent of a brick. “They manufacture *night*?”

“Of course,” Dafira said, still as a missionary explaining good hygiene and Sunday church-going to an unwashed savage. “We are nocturnal, and a very little sunlight will prove fatal to us. The sun blinds us, and burns us, and the daylight dragons who hunt us find

us laughably easy prey. So we hired the shadows to make night in our factories.”

“Do they know that’s what they’re doing?” Clement said.

“It isn’t a secret,” Dafira said, tilting his head worriedly.

“You mean that they knew,” Clement said in a low, terribly even voice. “All the time that they were pleading for our sympathy at how harshly their masters treated them, they knew. They *knew* that the work they did ensured that those masters would retain their power.” The demi-angel came to his feet, his wings beating so wildly that I was obliged to crouch down on the floor to avoid being knocked senseless, and his voice rose into a shriek: “They *lied* to us! Selfish conniving *beasts*!”

I discovered Dafira was on the floor next to me. “I’ve never seen a dominie lose their temper,” he said, sounding rather awed.

“Can you, er, do anything?”

“I shouldn’t think so. But I can’t imagine this will last long. He’ll exhaust himself, if nothing else.”

Indeed, the frenzy of wings was already slowing, and I could hear Clement’s breath laboring in his chest beneath his howling rage. And then, abruptly, it was over; the demi-angel sagged back onto the bench. Dafira and I stood up cautiously, but Clement merely buried his face in his hands and wept, his wings wrapped protectively around his shoulders. Dafira took my elbow and tugged me down the steps.

“Mirach said she trusted me not to be cruel,” I said.

“You were not cruel. You asked a

question Clement should have asked for himself long ago.”

“It looks like cruelty from here,” I said, gesturing at the bitterly weeping demi-angel.

Dafira tilted his head. “You are asking questions which we have not thought to ask ourselves, vampires as much as dominies. It is not surprising that you are causing disturbances, but neither is it your fault.”

“Is it not?”

Dafira tilted his head the other way, round red eyes unreadable. “We have found, in the past, that no traveller comes to this city without a reason. In general, those reasons have been their own, burdens they carried with them whether they knew it or not. But perhaps you have come here, not on your account, but on ours.”

“You, er, ascribe to me an ability I am quite sure I lack.”

The round eyes blinked considerably. “And yet you have already made me consider a question I would never otherwise have thought to ask. Does our manufac—”

But what Dafira’s question was, I did not then learn.

I felt the vampires before I heard or saw them. They were silent as owls; when I looked up, searching for the source of the crawling oppression I felt, they were there, great pale shapes against the endless night. As I watched, they dropped lightly to the sidewalk around us one by one, a series of bat-winged Samothraces. I assumed that one of them was Mirach, but there were at least three female vampires among

them, and I had no hope of telling them apart. And then their massed miasma hit me, and as I choked on it, the panic-white awareness of them as predators sent me to my knees, a foolish rabbit surrounded by foxes.

There was a perturbed muttering and shifting among them, and I quite clearly heard Mirach say, “Why is Clement weeping?”

“I told him the truth,” Dafira said dryly.

“About what?”

“About what our factories produce. The gentleman wished to know.”

“I thought his business was recovering the dominie’s relic.” Her voice was cold, laden with threat. I could not catch my breath, could not stop making dreadful undignified noises like a cat afflicted with a hairball. Could not defend myself, explain myself.

Dafira said, “It is not so simple. For if the goblins did not steal the relic, the shadows must have. And there are other matters.”

I realized that the softness brushing my hair and neck was the membrane of Dafira’s wing. He had put himself bodily between Mirach and me. I had not and would not have expected such a gesture, would never have expected a vampire to be my champion.

“*Other* matters?” Mirach said, as if she felt the matters already on the table were more than sufficient.

Dafira asked her, as he had asked Clement, “Do you personally know of any shadow who had succeeded in buying back their name?” And, raising his voice slightly, “Any of you?”

There was the faintest uneasy shuffling, and I managed finally to control my breathing. I did not, however, dare to raise my head, but remained as I was, sheltered behind Dafira's wing like a child behind his mother's skirts.

The silence stretched, twisted. No vampire spoke, though it was clear that each of them *wished* to; like Clement and Dafira before them, they could not. No one knew of a shadow who had sailed to Heft Averengh; no one knew of a shadow who had earned back its name.

"And that would be the answer," Dafira said softly, "if we asked every vampire, dominie, and shadow in the city. It has never happened. *Never.*"

"But what does that signify?" one of the other vampires said. "We haven't *prevented* them from doing so."

"We quite intended them to do so, in sooth." A third vampire, older, not as stentorian as Alhaior, but with a mellow, resonant voice, "and thus the fact that they have not is disturbing, if nothing more."

"As is," said a female vampire who was not Mirach, "the fact that no one has noticed."

"Including the shadows themselves," said another vampire, and then they were all talking together, theorizing and exclaiming and arguing.

I got very carefully to my feet, and Dafira murmured, "Are you well?"

Are you warm, my daughter? Are you warm? "Quite well, thank you. I, er . . . I apologize for . . ."

"Most sentient creatures react that way to a blood of vampires. Only sapi-

ent creatures are foolish enough to try to apologize for it." His tone was teasing rather than offended, and I managed a weak smile in appreciation of the distinction he was making. Then another vampire caught his attention; he turned away, and, not wishing to remain where I was, I mounted again to the portico and reclaimed my seat beside Clement.

"It is I," I said quietly.

"What's happening?" Clement whispered.

"The vampires are, er, arguing." I thought of what it must be like for him, surrounded by the reek of charnel roses and the babel of voices and unable to see for himself what they were actually doing. "Do you, er, want to go back inside?"

"They won't hurt me," he said confidently, perfect faith transmuting to perfect arrogance. Although I knew it was wrong to feel sympathy for the vampires, I could not help it. The dominies had trapped them as neatly as any predator, and they had not even the reprieve of death to hope for. I wondered if any of the vampires—clear-sighted as they were—had yet realized that. I said nothing in answer to Clement, merely sat and waited for the vampires to come to some resolution.

I was still waiting when there was a clatter of tiny hooves and a triumphant bellow of "We got the shiny!" and a throng of goblins boiled out of the neighboring building's cellar, a shadow struggling in their midst.

The vampires reacted like a flock of pigeons beset by an unexpected cat;

they scattered and sought higher ground. Two of them ended up in St. Christopher's portico, and it was at that moment I realized I had lost track of Dafira in the confusion and had no hope of finding him again unless he chose to approach me.

The goblins, oblivious to the effect they were having, surged to a halt in the middle of the street; above their babble, I could hear the shadow protesting stridently but ineffectively, until one of the goblins cuffed it across the back of the skull. It said, "Ow!" and fell silent, sulkily rubbing its head.

With the streetlights lit, it was easy to identify the goblins' leader; trousers that had seemed merely dark by the light of the little tin lantern were revealed to be bright purple, and it was that goblin who stood forward from the rest and shouted, "Where's the bloke wiffout wings?"

Immediately, all the vampires were staring at me, politely appalled by the company I chose to keep. I felt myself blushing, but there was nowhere to hide, nothing to do but stand up and say, "I . . . er, I'm over here."

They thronged around me like small children or dogs, both of which make me terribly nervous. But the goblins were purposeful; their purple-trousered leader said, "Cough it up, shadder," and the others jostled threateningly, not quite butting but clearly ready to. And the shadow, a spindly creature even more exophthalmic than D-7-16 and with a look in its pop-eyes that boded trouble, dug unwillingly in its pockets and held out on its fishbelly palm a

lump of glass, roughly spherical, with a mote of brightness dancing in it, a mote I might have thought a mirage of my own eyes if it had not been for the vampires, who had gathered close, shying violently, arms and wings both coming up to shield their vulnerable eyes. There were even one or two yelps of protest, high-pitched as the cries of bats, and I distinctly saw the look of malicious satisfaction that flitted across the shadow's face and was gone.

I closed my own hand over the glass as quickly as I could, flinching away from the clammy touch of the shadow's fingers. The vampires began cautiously to straighten; the glass was warm against my skin, smooth and uneven. I turned; Clement was standing, wings half spread, expression hopeful, frightened.

I said carefully, "The, er, goblins have found St. Christopher's Glass for you, Dominic Clement. A shadow had it."

And as Clement stretched out his hand and I gave him the relic, being careful not to expose the vampires to it again, the purple-trousered goblin said, "Tell 'im 'oo you are," and the chorus chimed in: "Yeah . . . Give 'im your number . . . Speak up, shadder, don't be shy." I turned back and saw the goblins blocking the shadow's attempts to sidle away. It looked more than a little panicked, and its pale pop-eyes blinked up at me beseechingly.

I found myself unmoved, and merely raised one eyebrow in my best imitation of my terrifying prep school Latin master.

The shadow quailed quite gratifyingly and blurted, "E-9-35."

The vampires hissed, open-mouthed feral displeasure, and I clenched my hands until my fingernails bit into my palms to keep from succumbing to panic again. A female vampire came forward. I thought it might be Mirach, but her voice when she spoke was high and sweet, and cold with fury. "You are of my demesne," she said, and the shadow looked quite ill with terror. "How did the relic come into your possession?"

It shook its head wildly, its mouth compressed so tightly it all but vanished. The vampire's face did not change, but I read incredulity as well as rage in the movement of her shoulders and wings. She took a single step forward; the shadow shrank back, cowering against my legs and whimpering. I jerked away in disgust, and the vampire's hand shot out, closing in the shadow's collar, dragging it forward. It let out a shriek and began babbling, a torrent of words at first indecipherable, but gradually resolving into sense.

I did not fully follow the complexities and ramifications of the shadow's explanation—although it was clear from their grim nods that the vampires did—but I got the general gist. It seemed there had been dissension among the shadows. Although they had not recognized the root of the problem any more than the vampires had, they had been becoming increasingly discontent, and had been unable to agree on how to proceed. I gathered, although E-9-35's rhetoric became obfuscatory at this

point, that most of the shadows favored the rational, reasoned approach of appointing a spokesman and petitioning for an audience with the Wisdom of the vampires, which seemed to be their ruling council. But this course of action—again for reasons I did not fully understand—was very slow, and some shadows, mostly low ranking technicians like E-9-35 itself, had become impatient. They had thought negotiations might proceed more swiftly and more in their favor if they had some leverage. And thus they had stolen St. Christopher's Glass.

It had been D-7-16's plan, E-9-35 insisted, and I was no longer surprised that D-7-16 had so cheerfully led me off on a wild goose chase. D-7-16's plan, executed by a whole cadre of shadows, and the relic given into E-9-35's safekeeping while they tried to figure out a way to use it. But since they could not come up with a plan that would not reveal their own guilt, it had been seeming increasingly likely that the relic would never be used at all.

The shadow's voice faltered and trailed off; the vampires were closing in around it, eyes bright and opaque and implacable, and I thought, shivering, that revenge was a concept natural to predators. The female vampire hauled the shadow closer, her forearms cording and her mouth opening. But I was distracted at that moment by a tug on my sleeve.

I looked down; the purple-trousered goblin looked up at me and whispered hoarsely, "D'you think the domino will like us now?"

I said to the goblin, trying to sound kind instead of merely squeamish, "Let's find out."

Clement had withdrawn into the corner of the portico, his hands closed tightly around St. Christopher's Glass, his wings spread like a screen.

"Dominie," I said, "the goblins, er, wish to know if you will like them now."

Clement's white-blind eyes were falsely bright with tears. He said, sounding genuinely surprised, "Do the goblins *wish* me to like them?"

The heat and mass of small bodies was all around me, the weight of their yearning almost as palpable.

"Yes," I said for them. "They do."

Clement slipped St. Christopher's Glass into his sleeve and said, "I have been wrong about so many things. Perhaps I have been wrong about them as well." He sank gracefully to his knees, wings fanning wide for balance and surrounding us all with the scent of nutmeg. "Come," he said, and his smile was breath-taking. "Let me meet these goblins who wish my friendship."

They pressed past me, though I noticed they were careful not to crowd Clement. Their leader said, "Ta *very* much, guv," and then I was on the outside of the newborn community of goblins and demi-angel. I had to remind myself sharply that I wanted to return to my home, not to be adopted by the goblins of the night city.

The vampires had moved away with their victim, and matters in that quarter were ominously silent. I sat down on

the steps of St. Christopher's to wait, and wished wearily that there were any point in waiting for dawn.

The lamplighters had come around to extinguish the streetlights, averting their eyes with obsessive care from the clustered blood of vampires, before anyone, goblin, demi-angel, vampire, or shadow, remembered my existence. But finally a single vampire approached the church; when he spoke, I knew him for Dafira, and I tried not to notice the darkness staining his mouth and chin and spotting the collars of his shirt.

"We have decided. We shall destroy the night factories and give the shadows back their names."

"All at once?"

"If we try to take our time over it, it will not happen at all," Dafira said grimly. "We may be short-sighted selfish fools, but we have at least learned that much from experience."

"Ah. . . Er, yes."

"Will you come with us? We must explain to the dominies and the shadows, and we thought perhaps you would like to watch the destruction of the factories. It should be quite spectacular."

It was kindly meant, and I could not deny that I was curious. "But then you will take me home?"

"Yes," Dafira said without hesitation or hedging.

"I will trust you," I said, and shook hands with my second vampire.

“Nowhere to Go” was written during the early stages of Barry’s mother’s battle with Alzheimer’s Disease. “Throughout the story, I have tried to capture the mood of Nova Scotia,” he tells us, “especially the rural region where I grew up (Mosherville, Hants County). I am a fan of artist Alex Colville, and the painting mentioned in the story is one of my favorites by him. I would like to thank my good friend Charlotte Vale Allen, whose talents as an author and editor have proved invaluable to me over the years. I also want to express my gratitude to Thomas Ligotti, who has encouraged me as a writer and expressed his favorable opinion of this story.”

Barry lives in Halifax. A collection of his stories appeared as an audiobook in 1999. You can contact him at www.barrywood.net.

Nowhere To Go

Barry Wood

For twenty minutes Bob stood staring at the bread knife on the kitchen counter. I don’t want Maggie to suffer anymore, he thought. He touched the cold blade with his fingers. He wondered what an executioner must feel just before taking a life.

Maggie’s moans broke the silence of the house and Bob’s concentration.

“I’ll be right up,” he called, picking up the tray holding an egg sandwich and a glass of milk laced with sleeping pills.

Once upstairs, seeing her body on the bed, his cold heart made him feel guilty. The room smelled of sickness and medicine. Bob broke a piece of the sandwich and placed it gingerly in Maggie’s mouth.

“Eat,” he said. Her sunken cheeks were unmoving. For more than a month, she had hardly eaten anything. “You eat like a mouse.”

Bob caressed Maggie’s hair. Sharon, the hairdresser, was booked to arrive early tomorrow. Sharon had a house

key and after unanswered knocks, she’d unlock the door. Maggie always took great pride in her appearance and her body, and kept her hair a remarkable red.

Beads of moisture clung to Bob’s bald head. The room was warm. Smothering. Outside the window on his left, cold January wind slapped the trees.

Bob kept his room downstairs much cooler. For many years, he and Maggie had used that room to entertain friends in front of a snapping fire in the fireplace. The Andersons had showed slides of their travels and the Richards had shared their secret of growing beautiful flowers. Everyone had been amused by Maggie’s quick mind and bright green eyes.

Bob now slept, smoked, read, and drank coffee in that room.

In a much smaller room, he had written his novels. A desk, a chair, two typewriters, and stacks of paper were the furnishings. He loathed computers.

Since Maggie first got sick, he hadn't set foot in that room again.

Locals gave Bob cold nods. He has an easy life, many thought. Too bad we don't have his money; we wouldn't have to work.

No one called him "Bob" except his friends. Maggie called him Bobbie. He used to receive a dozen fan letters a week. Now he received one or two a week. Readers wrote to him in care of his publisher and Maggie used to read them after dinner. Bob had replied in handwriting to many. Not anymore.

Every day after lunch while Bob worked, Maggie had taken her walks along the train tracks and paths through the woods. Bob could see her coming up the lane through the transparent yellow curtains and have time to walk to the kitchen and turn on the coffee. Maggie always had stories about squirrels, clouds, or perhaps an odd-shaped tree or a gorgeous flower she had happened upon. Bob enjoyed the break from writing. Although Maggie never had a passion for writing, he always told her she had a writer's eyes.

Bob had grown up in Mosherville, Nova Scotia on a sheep farm. He only had one brother, Roger, who liked men and drank with navy guys in Halifax. Roger had moved to Australia in the 1970s. Every few years Roger sent a card. The last one had been written in blue ink: "I'm sitting at my kitchen table as I write, looking out at the huge gum trees that line my street, and listening to the native birds in the trees of my garden. Occasionally even a Kookaburra

breaks into his unique laughter, high up somewhere above our house. We have a family of about thirty bats living in a nearby tree, but they only swoop and squeal at night. It's rather eerie!"

Roger was their sole beneficiary as Bob and Maggie had no children.

Maggie had grown up on a milk farm in the Annapolis Valley. Bob and Maggie met in their early twenties at a dance in Wolfville. At the time, Bob had been working as a teacher.

At Christmas, Maggie had always baked a turkey using chopped onions and celery, and plenty of summer savory in the stuffing. The Andersons and the Richards were invited. Mrs. Anderson used to bring two baked pies, usually pumpkin and apple. Mr. Richards presented his fruitcake topped with sweet-sour icing. Holding up a long-stemmed glass filled with red wine, Bob had toasted his wife and friends.

Bob never wrote during the Christmas holidays and he'd go walking with Maggie. He recalled one particularly harsh winter when he and Maggie, standing in deep snow, watched a starving deer skid across a frozen river to munch on hay donated by Old Sam Matthews.

Now he looked down at Maggie's body and put another tiny piece of sandwich in her mouth. "You're doing well," he said. His eyes heated. No one can compare with you, he thought. "You're doing well, darling."

She lay on the bed, her thin, limp arms resting on the comforter. He remembered how strong she had been

when he had taken her to see Rita MacNeil perform in Cape Breton to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary. Maggie had stood after Rita's first song and clapped until her palms were stinging.

At the altar fifty years earlier, Maggie had looked absolutely stunning. A veil covered her face. Sunshine streamed through the stained windows; the smells of candle wax and flowers filled the church.

With that summer following the publication of *A Little White Lie*, a best-selling mystery involving incest, Bob's privacy abruptly came to an end. Forbidden in conversation, incest was devil's work in print—no matter how subtly disguised. In addition to having a homosexual brother, gossip spread rapidly.

Now his mind returned to the present as he helped Maggie drink all the milk and used a napkin to wipe her mouth. She pursed her lips, and said, "Good."

He glanced at the bookshelf filled with books by Lucy Maud Montgomery, Maggie's favorite author. On the wall hung a large Alex Colville print of a horse running on tracks toward an oncoming train.

That's how I feel, he thought. Nowhere to go.

Maggie's bible and rosary beads sat on the night table. Our Father Who Art in Heaven, he thought. I have no more freedom than she does. God helps those who help themselves and God helps those who can't help themselves.

Crying had been a daily activity when he'd first learned of Maggie's condition. He had walked deep into the woods and sitting on a log he'd covered his face with cupped hands, and bawled.

The doctor had recommended putting Maggie in a nursing home. "She has maybe six months, a year at the most. It's best for you—and for Mrs. Waterman."

Bob had refused flatly, going to the window and peering out. "I'm taking her home. That's where she belongs." How could you possibly understand? he had asked, but not out loud.

"Home help can be arranged for, Mr. Waterman," the doctor had said. "It's exceedingly difficult caring single-handedly for someone twenty-four hours a day."

Bob had held the steering wheel tightly driving home; Maggie sat quietly beside him. She waved at two girls skipping on the sidewalk.

"I'm so tired, Bobbie," Maggie had said. "I'm so tired."

"I'll look after you," he had said. "Don't worry, darling. I have everything under control."

That had been six months earlier.

Now he looked at Maggie's face; her eyes had closed. He stroked her face until she stopped breathing. What had seemed like ten minutes had actually been three hours. "God forgive me," he whispered.

He kissed her on the cheek, tucking the sheet around her neck. He'd now go down and drink his own milk laced with sleeping pills. ☒

"I wrote 'Something Borrowed, Something Red' at Clarion '06," Will Alexander tells us, "playing with the idea that changelings change into different things depending on their age when it happens. I have approximately two-dozen people to thank for helping me workshop the story, but I'm sworn to secrecy on the specifics (particularly goatish specifics)."

Will teaches English to college students in Minneapolis, writes reviews for Rain Taxi, and is currently working on a novel set in the same world as "Something Borrowed, Something Red". His stories have appeared in Zahir and Weird Tales, and will shortly appear in Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet and Fantasy: The Best of the Year 2008 (edited by Rich Horton). He has been a runner-up for various awards, including the Pushcart and Calvino prizes. He may yet win one of them.

Something Borrowed, Something Red

William Alexander

Maru circled the cabin, searching for her goat. She looked downhill to the line where trees were taller than stones, and uphill to where stones were taller than trees. She checked every favorite grazing spot, and there was no goat in any of them. She came back to the doorway and pulled off her boots before going inside.

"The goat is gone," she told her son. "The last one we have. The tether was broken, do you know what that means?" Her son was on a pile of pillows. He did not have a name yet. He was staring over Maru's head at the bird-shaped charm by the doorway, and sucking on two fingers to try to learn what the two fingers were.

"Goats are easy to live on," she said, moving around the cabin and watching

her son to see if he would watch her, if he was listening. He watched the bird-charm. "Goats turn moss and mountain grass and discarded pieces of tin and anything else you might drop on the ground into milk and cheese. And meat, if the goats are still young enough to be chewable." She lifted him up from the bed and held him with one arm, then wrapped her shawl around them both and fixed it in place with a shoulder pin. "You can live a long time on goats and a small garden, if you keep them away from the garden. I told your father so when we came here."

He looked at her, and sucked two fingers. She pulled him out of the shawl and swung him up above her head. He laughed, and kicked. His legs were thin. She tucked him back inside, and kept his thin legs covered.

Maru checked the hearth to make sure she would be able to revive the coals later. She packed up a knife and a sack and a length of rope. She took a red ribbon out of a wooden box by the bedside, and she gave it to her son. It had been a part of her wedding braid. *Something sung and words unsaid. Something borrowed. Something red.* He put it in his mouth. She locked the eastern window and the western window and wound up the bird-charm above the door. Its crank was rusted over, but it still turned. The wings bobbed up and down, ticking. She shut the door behind them and pulled on her boots by touch, unable to see her feet around the baby and the shawl. She felt pregnant again with the weight of him, and told him so. He sucked on the ribbon and tried to figure out what ribbons were. She made sure he wasn't swallowing the end.

The ground was hard. The air broke into smaller pieces when she breathed it. Winter should have been over, but spring had yet to notice.

They found the goat in the late afternoon. They found it by smell. It was hanging from a branch by its tether chain. Its mouth and eyes were open. Its throat and stomach were torn into scraps, and only the spine and a strip of hide kept the two halves of goat connected to each other. The guts had spilled into a pile underneath, already bloated. There were no flies. It was too cold for flies. The gut-stench slicked the inside of Maru's mouth like an oil when she covered her nose.

She backed away. "Happened at night," she said to her son. "Do you know what that means?" She took him in one arm to unwind the shawl, and put both on the ground well uphill and upwind of the goat-gore. He waved his ribbon in a quick frenzy, and then put it in his mouth, and then tried to wave it again while one end of it was in his mouth. She pulled it out of his mouth, and left the sack and the rope nearby. She kept the knife.

"Tied up already, and gutted," she said. "That's an improvement over the last time, don't you think?" Maru had had seven goats when winter started, and four when she birthed her son. Now she had this one. She glared at its eyes and nose and open mouth. "Always comfort a thing before killing it," she said. "Goats especially. Your father taught me this. Goats take fear badly, and this one. . .this one was not well comforted. Leaves the meat hard to chew, and harder to swallow."

Shapes crawled quiet through the branches of the downhill trees behind her. She ignored them. It was sometimes best to ignore them.

She cut the spine, letting the hind legs fall in among the guts. It was a mistake. Hoof punctured stomach, and bile spilled over the frozen ground. Her eyes stung from the smell. She set the knife down, and wiped her hands in a patch of snow, and moved her son further uphill and upwind. He waved his ribbon. She wrapped her shawl around her mouth, and tossed snow over the

guts and the spilled bile until she could stand to be nearby, and picked up her knife. Branches rattled high over her head. She ignored them. She put the edge between two ribs, and told her son how to go about cutting a rack of goat.

She stopped cutting when she was halfway done. She put the knife down, and stretched her arms a little. It was difficult to lift them. She knew that she should be hungry, having eaten one of the last pieces of cheese for breakfast and nothing since, but the smell of the offal at her feet made hunger an impossible thing.

"I don't think I can cut it down," she said. "Not today. Not even one rack. But it may soften if we leave it to hang, and if frost keeps away the flies. It'll be cold tonight, and there's no smell from the meat. Just from the guts on the ground." She sat beside her son, and laid her aching arms carefully across her knees. "I wish I could hoist it higher," she said. "I wish it wasn't dead. I wish it wasn't our last goat." He was asleep. Maru watched him, and she did not look up at the branches or at anything in the branches. She opened her mouth and closed it, twice.

"I'm going to give you a name," she whispered, touching his forehead with a bloodied fingertip. "Robb was my older brother's name. He came to my wedding. Few did, but he came. Now Robb is your name, too." She smoothed his wisps of hair, and then wiped her hands against the side of the sack and smoothed his hair again.

The tops of trees shook overhead. Maru scooped her son and her shawl

into her left arm, and took the knife and the rope and the sack in her right, and she hiked directly home without running or looking behind her or above her. Once inside the cabin she locked the door and wound the bird-charm.

Robb was a very thin child. He had already lost every fold of fat he had been born with. He only ever suckled at the tips of each nipple, taking in just a trickle of milk. When he woke that night Maru gave him a little from one breast, and he bit down hard on the other before even getting that much. She left him in the bed, stoked the coals into a fire, and warmed a clean rag with kettle-steam. Then she closed her eyes, held up the rag and squeezed milk into it. She stopped four times to breathe before she could finish. "There," she said. "Suck on that." He did, happily. He was a happy child for such a horrible eater.

Wooden shingles clacked on the eastern side of the roof, and then on the western side. Maru checked the locks on the door and on both windows.

"Have I told you about tinker-changelings?" she asked. Robb sucked on his rag. "There are none nearby, not on this mountain, so don't worry about them. They live in wagons, always moving. They can never stay in one place for longer than a day and a night. That's what your father told me."

She heard clatter overhead, near the chimney, and stoked the fire under it. "Nasty things, and easy to offend, so it's very, very important to *politely* refuse

whatever food or drink they offer. They're especially likely to offer to children. They are children, really. They're the children they take and Change."

Once the kettle boiled she made sweetbark tea, and poured it into a porcelain cup that had been one of the very few wedding gifts. "You shouldn't worry. The tinker wagons never pass through here, so you shouldn't worry about it. You really shouldn't."

Someone knocked at the door.

Maru stood up. She stoked the fire and lit her last beeswax candle. It smelled like honey. She wished she had honey left for her tea. The knock came again. She wound up the charm, and opened the door.

"Hello," her husband said. "Invite me in?"

"No," Maru said. "I would really rather not." She raised the candle and looked in his pale grey eyes before he flinched and blinked and took a step back. His eyes had used to be brown. He stared at the bed with his pale eyes shimmering.

"He looks well," he said. "He looks healthy. He looks warm. The rag he's mouthing on is cold, though. Cold, with a clean-sour milk smell. Cold as anything your mother ever said."

"Your father was worse," Maru said.

"Not disputed." He smiled. "I still hate to see him mouthing on a rag."

"Please go," she said.

"I brought you a gift. I hope you like it, there aren't many left on this mountain." He held a rabbit, light brown with its throat torn and shredded. She flinched when he lifted it up, and

beeswax spilled across her fingers. She wondered if he had comforted it, and decided that he would not have bothered. Rabbits are difficult to soothe.

"Thank you," she said. "Please go." He was too far away. She could not reach for the rabbit without stepping outside. She could not reach her husband without stepping outside. His skin would be cold, she knew. If she reached for him, over the threshold and away from the light and the bird-charm, his skin would be cold. She had only touched him once, after the Change, to confirm what she had already known.

"I worry about you." He moved his neck in a way that a neck should not move. "Both of you. Does he sleep well? You don't look as though you've slept."

"Please leave the meat," she said. "Please." She shivered. The outside air broke into pieces when she breathed.

"Can I hold him?" he asked.

"No," she said, and shut the door. She took the cold rag from Robb's sleeping hands and rinsed it in the well bucket before curling up beside him.

The next morning she found rabbit bones, ribs and legs and a spine, all stripped and stuck into the ground like seedlings.

Her husband had not done this. It would have bored him to do it.

She locked the eastern window, the western window and the door. Then she drew signs on the outside wall with a burnt birch twig. She brought a gear-work sling with her, and several stones.

The goat was no longer a goat when she found it. The meat was gone, stripped away. The rest had been tied together in the shape of a bird, goat-headed. It hung from the tether chain like a gearwork charm, and breezes flapped the goat-leg wings gently up and down.

Maru stared at it. She opened her mouth and closed it again. Robb waved his bright red ribbon.

“We have some cheese left,” she said. “Just a little.” She turned around and trudged uphill.

They followed her through branches, and when she reached the cabin door they dropped behind her to the ground. She turned to look.

She could see five of them clearly. There were more behind them that she could not see. Some walked upright. All of them had heads too large for their muscled bodies underneath, and eyes too large for their faces. They were bald, or wisp-haired, and two had deep scarlet stains on their hands and heads.

“No tinker-changelings here,” she said to Robb, pulling back the sling and holding it as far away from her bundled son as she could manage. “Infants become something else.” She fired. The stone flew high above them. It was supposed to frighten them. They charged instead.

She fumbled at the door, dropping the sling, and once inside she squatted to pick it up. The things scrambled over the stones in front of her. She struck one across the face with the sling handle before dropping it again, and knocked

another down with a swing of the door itself. She shut the latch. There was shrieking outside, and Robb was shrieking, too, and it sounded almost the same. She put him in the bed, wound the bird-charm above the door, and drew her knife. Then she took the rag from the well bucket to hold inside her blouse. Her milk was responding to Robb, and to the cries outside. It hurt.

“We knew. . .” she said, trying to remember how to breathe. Nails scratched at the corners of the door. “We knew there were changelings in the mountains, of one kind or another. We didn’t know there were so many. We didn’t know how catching it was. And I still don’t know what their rules are. Others have rules they follow, rules that they mostly follow. Your father always said so, and now he has his rules and he follows them. But I don’t know about these mountain things. If you leave milk outside for them they’re just as likely to ignore it as they are to smear it on the door, or themselves. I don’t know their rules. I’m sorry. I wish I knew.”

The locks held. Maru put her knife down, picked up Robb and tried to comfortably cover up his ears. She hummed a song she couldn’t remember the words to until the outside din quieted. Robb fell asleep, sobbing.

Maru put him down in the middle of the bed and went to the cupboard. She opened stone jars, counting the lumps of cheese and pickled vegetables and strips of dried rabbit. She counted them again. She tried to guess when the first

thaw would come, and how much the garden would bring, and how soon it would bring it. She counted again.

The sling was broken. She could sometimes bring down a bird or a rabbit with the sling, but it was broken. She could try traps, but she had never been very good with traps; they rarely worked, and when they did work they caught nasty and inedible things more often than not.

Maru gnawed on one small strip of rabbit and wondered what starving would be like. She wondered how much of her body would wither away to keep the milk flowing, milk Robb would hardly drink anyway. She wondered how she would look. She wondered how she looked, now. Her husband had broken their only mirror. She wondered how much she had already changed.

She counted again. Then she took what she counted and wrapped it up in rags. She put two smoldering coals in a box full of sand, and put the box in a tin cooking-pot, and tied the handle of the pot to her belt with the red wedding ribbon. She slung the wrapped food and a skin full of water on her back, and bundled up her sleeping son in front of her. She picked up her knife and kept it in her hand. Then she wound the charm and locked the door behind her, because it was what she always did.

The door was splinted and grooved on the outside. Maru looked down at the ground and up at the trees, calm and slow. Nothing moved.

“Five days to get down the moun-

tain,” she whispered to Robb. “Or six, maybe. Then one more day to the first of the town roads.” Robb stirred, and tried to rub his face. He sobbed, once, because he had fallen asleep sobbing.

Maru scraped the side of her knife against the stone. It made a harsh, metallic sound, demonstrating what it was she carried. She started walking downhill.

The day was half-over already. She walked all afternoon, picking her way carefully over rocks and roots, unable to see her feet. Before dark she found a stone shelf, almost a cave. It had an overhanging slab to protect them from snow, or rain, or things dropping down out of trees. Maru set her burdens on the ground and stretched. Robb didn't like being on the ground. He complained, but he did not actually cry. She wished he would cry. He might be too weak to cry. She picked him up again, leaving the food to gather firewood. It took a long time to find enough.

Sunset bruised the sky an angry purple-grey. Maru lit her fire with the coals she had saved. She counted branches, and counted them again. Mostly pine. Dry and clean smelling, but they burned quickly. The wood needed to last until dawn.

Something sang in a high voice, without words and without any rhythm. It was far away. Something answered it, further away. Neither voice came any closer.

Robb fussed more than he usually did, and swallowed only trickles of milk. Maru kept trying. She rocked back and forth, shifting her weight, searching for a comfortable position on the stone. Robb flinched at every night noise, losing his grip or biting down too hard.

"We'll visit your Uncle Robb," she told him. "He'll take us in. He probably will."

Her husband stayed at the very edge of the firelight, standing with his back to them. The light was too much for his eyes, she knew. It was almost too much for the skin of his back. He stood there a long time, saying nothing. Maru added wood to the fire. Sap boiled out of the greener branches.

Robb slept badly. Maru slept not at all. She stood, and stretched, and strapped on her various burdens. She walked downhill, stumbling twice, and found a place with a good mountain view.

The backs of her eyes hurt, and they kept closing by themselves. She tried to calculate distances, but her eyes refused to cooperate.

"This is going to take longer than a week," she said. "This is going to take very much longer than a week." She needed sleep. If she slept during the day, the small changelings might find them. If she slept at night, her husband would.

Robb chewed on his knuckle.

Maru turned around and went back. She counted steps and she counted veg-

etables and she counted strips of dried and shriveled rabbit as she walked home. It was easier to see the ground in front of her, walking uphill.

"Don't worry," she told Robb. "I'll think of something. Don't worry about it." She kept saying that, over and over.

Something sang overhead. Maru hummed a tune of her own to drown it out. She heard things dropping down out of the trees behind her. She ignored them. This was sometimes best.

"Where does your father go, during the day?" she asked Robb. "Maybe he has a cave. Maybe he buries himself in snowdrifts, or fallen leaves. Do you know?" Robb nuzzled at the cloth covering her breast, and then settled for sucking at two of his fingers. He was hungry. He always was.

She fell, and wrapped both arms around Robb before hitting the ground. Then she scrambled to her feet and kept walking. Her forearm stung. Robb cried, softly. He did not put much effort into crying. "You aren't hurt," she told him. "You're just startled. I'm sure of that. I'm sure you aren't hurt." She walked faster, and stumbled, and caught herself this time. She ate the last piece of cheese, the very last. She did not look behind her, not even when she could hear them close by, not even when she reached the cabin and paused outside the door. Rabbit bones and gears from the sling crunched underfoot.

This was where her husband stood, where he always stood. Maru imagined his grey eyes. She wondered what she looked like, seen through those eyes.

She undid her shoulder pin, shrugged off her shawl and swaddled Robb in it. She kissed him on the forehead. He laughed, even though he was hungry, even though he was such a terrible eater.

Maru untied the ribbon from her belt and put it in his hand. Then she left him on the doorstep. She did it quickly.

"They'll feed you," she whispered, going inside. "You'll feed yourself as one of them." She tried to say goodbye, but the word refused to come. She opened her mouth and closed it again, twice, trying to remember how to shape the word. She shut and latched the door.

It was well after nightfall when her husband knocked. Maru had been sleeping, fully clothed and fallen sideways across the bed. She rubbed her eyes, and wound the charm, and opened the door. Then she turned away to clean the scrape on her forearm. Her husband watched her rinse it out and wrap it with a clean strip of cloth.

"I saw them go," he said. "You should know that. I saw them at dusk. Strange to see, with their muscled little baby-shapes. Our son screamed as they took him, but they had already carried him far without biting off his toes, one by one, or else knocking him against a tree. They must intend to Change him. That's comforting."

"Thank you for letting him go," she said.

"I did not let him go," he said. "They were fast, and well ahead of me. They went. I tried not to let them. He would have been better off with me."

"I doubt it." She stoked the fire. Her husband took a step back from the light. "I wish you hadn't killed the goats," she said.

"I was thirsty," he said. "I wish you hadn't given up our son."

"He was hungry." She came to the doorway. She had no candle. There were no candles left. "I'll leave in the morning," she told him. "I'll make better speed, this time."

"I may follow you," he said, gently.

"Please don't."

She took a step toward him, away from the fire in the hearth and the charm above the threshold. She stepped outside with him. She smiled. He did not.

"I borrowed your eyes," she said, daring him to touch her, to kiss her or to string her up from a branch. "I borrowed your cold, grey way of looking at me, when I left him. You can have them back, now."

He shook his head. She took another step, but he was gone already.

The moon was out, the cold light bright enough to cast shadows. Maru could see clearly; there was no need to wait until morning. She went inside for her bundles of food and her box of coals. She picked up a porcelain cup, and put it down again, and wound the bird-charm before locking the door behind her. ☼

“The theme of fictional cities is a well-explored one in SF,” Jetse de Vries tells us, “but still I couldn’t resist trying to imagine one that was different from all the ones that had gone before. Having been able—often through the day job—to visit such staggeringly beautiful coral reefs as Ningaloo, Cozumel, and the Great Barrier Reef (if only small parts of them), one part of the picture fell in place. Add spicy ingredients like a hot-blooded investigator who’s dumped in a place that might be too hot to handle even for her, surreal streaks in eye-popping surrounds, creatures that get curiouseer and curiouseer, fired by mysteries below the superficial in myriad ways, then stir a humongous soup that girdles a world and you’ve got ‘City Beneath the Surface’.”

“And,” he adds with a sly smile, “Heavy metal maniacs will know where I stole the title from. So I’m dedicating this one to the memory of Criss Oliva.”

Jetse is a technical specialist for a propulsion company by day, an Interzone editor by night, and a short story writer whenever he can wrestle off some time. His stories have appeared in Nonymous, TEL: Stories, DeathGrip: Exit Laughing, Hub, and Clarkesworld Magazine, among others, and been read on Escape Pod. He lives in the city of Hieronymus Bosch.

City Beneath The Surface

Jetse de Vries

I: Ningaloo Quarter

M eet your contact in the Purple-Ringed Octopus, Cherry Hall recalls from her updated memory, a popular nightspot. The upload was patchy, and she’s thankful for small mercies, like the functioning 3-D map. Without it, she’d be lost like a hillbilly in a Metropolis, like a city slicker in the Amazon jungle.

With slow strokes of her powerful tail she moves through the tropical seawater almost effortlessly. Obvious land—correct that—seamarks tell her she’s swimming through Ningaloo Quarter. For one, there’s the unmistakable DN-Arch, the local *Arc de Triomphe*: a curved structure representing the illustrious double spiral spanning Star Alley. For another, there’s *Shellbenge*: a

ring of giant molluscs older than the city itself. Not to mention the eponymous Star Alley: its coral streets are littered with all types of echinoderms: Blue and Rose Sea Stars, Vermillion Biscuit Stars (their perfect pentacle shape adorned with white-rimmed red cells), Yellow Feather Stars, blood red Robust Feather Stars, Sea Urchins and the almost invisible Sea Cucumbers.

But even these distinguished attractions hardly stand out from the general exultation of vibrant colours, dazzling shapes, hypnotic patterns and sheer eye candy overload that live in every quarter of Equator Atoll Reef, or the Coral City as it is known across human space. Enchanted by this iridescent whirlpool of impressions, Cherry knows she must be in the right street—for lack of a better word—but she just can’t spot that

bloody nightspot. And it's hot, damn hot.

"Spare some change for a poor Butterflyfish?"

A creature that seems more of a sore spot in this underwater extravaganza than herself: with fading colours, fins tattered at the edges and a decidedly limp posture, this Butterflyfish has seen better days. But beggars, in a city as fabulously rich as this? Or are appearances deceiving? In any case, Cherry doesn't know—the botched upload, again—what currency is used here, let alone if she has some to spare.

"Sorry, buddy, I'm new here. What's the local money?"

"Equal Fractals."

"Equal what?"

"Fractals. Especially patterned by the Gorgonian Corals—our banks—and uniquely self-similar so they can't be counterfeited."

"I see. Can't help you, then. I've only got Interstellar Credits."

The Butterflyfish's lips curl up: "No problem, these are also very welcome."

"Well, for a few Icreds, could you tell me where I can find the Purple-Ringed Octopus?"

The Butterflyfish opens its mouth wide in expectation. Slowly it dawns on Cherry: "I drop the Icreds in there?"

The Butterflyfish nods. After swallowing the cash he says: "You just passed it. See those swirling, purple-and-grey banded white tentacles with polyps? And that black cloud right in the middle?"

Cherry looks in the direction pointed out by the fish's snout. "Yeah. I thought that was a sewer."

"Oh no, that's the Purple-Ringed Octopus alright. You enter through the ink cloud, which is just an innocent, biodegradable dye."

"OK. Well, thanks, ehm . . ."

But the Butterflyfish is gone, disappeared in a passing school of yellow, black-and-white banded Masked Bannerfish. *Oh man, this would never have happened to me in a normal city*, she thinks, *I'd have that lowlife against the wall before he'd taken one step*. But this is too much, too soon, too fast, even for her. Not only is this pixie-sized mermaid the strangest body she's ever been uploaded into, but this place taxes the senses of even the jauntiest space-hopper, as well. She's hot—not yet adapted to the climate, it seems—and her re-integration kinks provide a dark undercurrent to the vibrant, multihued spectacle of the Coral City. They should've sent some Old Earth marine biologist, not Cherry Hall the state investigator.

Of course, she was shortly briefed before she was transmitted through the EPIT-link. Nevertheless, even a minimal adaptation period would have been nice. No chance, though, with an urgent case in a short-handed agency. Of the colleagues preceding her in this place, some never returned, some went mad, and the few still barely functioning could hardly report anything useful. A contagious affliction, an unrecog-

able disease surreptitiously affecting visitors. Initial infection numbers were low, but are rising exponentially. Cause unknown, potential for disaster high and rising. Time to employ a top gun.

So it was straight into the pre-grown body and dumped into this sweltering ocean with hardly a breath to spare. Still struggling to suppress that inborn breathing reflex and simply enjoy the flow of oxygen-rich water through her gills, she tries to swim in a more graceful—and hopeful ladylike—manner, and keeps gazing at all those wonders around her: so how in Fate’s name can they expect her to be sharp on the case?

Oh well, at least she’s found the Purple-Ringed Octopus. Swimming through the black cloud, hoping she won’t run into anybody, she enters the coral club. The moment she passes through the cave’s mouth the whole background seems to shift subtly. *Damn re-integration kinks*, Cherry thinks and shrugs it off. The variety of sea creatures inside remains baffling to her unaccustomed eyes, but luckily they sit still. All are floating around tables of flat stones placed on pillars of Hard Coral. Red Brain Corals on the floor, white Mushroom Corals on the ceiling and yellow Vase Corals—bioluminescent, lighting up the place—hanging on the walls. Next thing: how to contact her contact. *Don’t look for him, he’ll find you.*

“Hey, what’s a nice mermaid like you doing in a place like this?”

Prize-winning entry in the ‘worst-pickup-line-of-the-year’ contest, Cherry

thinks as she turns around to see a blue-spotted crimson Coral Cod.

“Yo, Puce Boy, get a better rap. Snap it up or snap it shut.”

“With such looks, honey, be happy somebody raps at you at all. Now, care for a U-treat?”

“Treat yourself and spare me the pleasure. I’m looking for someone snappier.”

“Yet I insist. There’s this D-pandemic, you dig.”

Uh-oh, the code word. “On second thought, I may dig in.”

“Cool, I’ve arranged a spot.”

He leads Cherry to a little round table in a private corner.

“Charlie the Cod, at your service. Well, agent Hall, name your poison.”

“So shoot me, but how do you drink submerged in water?”

“You don’t. We shoot the poison straight here, in careful doses. You see those Sea Urchins, on almost every table?”

“Those long-spined shells that give a hedgehog an inferiority complex? I thought they were part of the décor.”

“No: they’re the real deal, the straight stuff.” He waves to a passing Coral Crab with his right fin, “A Black-and-White, please, and a pair of CWs.”

“On its way, Sir,” the crab answers, snapping its big claws merrily.

Carefully carrying a Sea Urchin with both black and white spines in its right pincher, and accompanied by a pair of small silvery white fish with a black band running over the full length of their sides, the crab returns.

“On your tab, as usual?” the crab inquires, setting the Urchin on their table.

“Of course.” Charlie answers, “The spines are tipped with intoxicants,” he explains to Cherry, “White for an alcohol shot, black for a marihuana trip.”

He pricks his lower lip on a white spine, shaking softly in appreciation. “Get up, do it,” he urges Cherry.

“With my lips?” frowning her left brow.

“Your fins, your gills, your tail: whatever. Spreads through your body like wildfire.”

Reluctantly, she touches the tip of a black spine with a webbed finger. A soothing surge of intoxicating calm flashes through her body like a mini nova from a water pipe.

“Wow!”

“Good, eh.” Charlie says as he takes a few hits from a couple of black spines, “Nifty mixes here, smooth and slick. Plenty better than your outfit.”

“My new body? Had no say in that, yo.”

“Wrong colour, baby: black. Makes you stand out in every crowd.”

“Hey: my native colour. Black is beautiful.”

“Down here it’s not. Only bottom feeders like Snake Eels, Sea Cucumbers and Stingrays are that drab. Then these strange wild growths, these useless half-domes . . .”

“My tits? Back home most men go apeshit over them.”

“Well, they leave this male population quite cold. Our breeding habits are

triggered by colours and pheromones, only if the time is right and aimed purely at procreation. We’re not obsessed with sex like you surface dwellers. To us, your tits are a liability: they kill your streamline and look like malignant growths rather than great ornamentation.”

“Listen here, Charlie: they sent me down here so *pronto* I didn’t have time for acclimatisation and shit. Enter the new body and go for it. Best compromise: a mermaid. In a full fish body I’d lose days just getting used to it.”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just showing you the ropes.”

“OK. By the by, why are those fish swimming in and out of your gills?”

“Cleaner Wrasses: they remove parasites and fungi. Without them I’d become infested. This place has the best. They’re expensive, but hey, on the company’s account, tonight.”

“No kidding. Now what’s going on down here?”

Right on cue, a deep rumble sounds, and the whole place begins to shudder. The Black-and-White Sea Urchin on their table begins to rattle. It’s quiet again just as quick.

“What’s up?” Cherry asks.

“Just a slight tremor,” Charlie says, “don’t pay attention to it.”

“Hmm. Again: what’s going on?”

“Some strange phenomenon dubbed the D-pandemic. Haven’t you noticed? No? You will, sooner or later. However, it’s elusive, nobody can get a grip on it. Only Crazy Harry knows more, they say.”

II: The D-pandemic

Great start, Cherry thinks, the morning after, *drunk like a fish and stoned as a shrimp on the first night. Oh well, at least I won't notice transition syndrome and re-integration kinks through this hangover.* Sacrificing grace for speed, she heads for the Sponge Segment. In her slowly recovering state of mind, the customary cacophony of colours and shapes has temporarily lost its lustre. So, while cruising, she looks at less spectacular scenery. Like that greyish piece of coral, a serene spot in this sea of intransquillity. A lone, red Squirrelfish glides before it and—

—its mouth opens and becomes bigger than its body—

—a roaring tiger jumps halfway through the gaping jaws—

—another tiger leaps from the first tiger's screaming maw—

—arching towards a naked woman, lying relaxed on a flat slab of rock—

—a bayonet sticking from her right biceps, while she's looking at—

—a white elephant with impossibly long sticks of legs, carrying—

—a stony glass pyramid on a green cloth on its back—

Jesus wept, what the fuck? Cherry closes her eyes, rubs her temples and looks again: the exploding daydream is gone, and the Squirrelfish appears normal once more. *That settles it*, she thinks, *no more drugs on the job. With sex out of the question, I sure hope there's some rock'n'roll left.* The afterimage of a ripe pomegranate keeps haunting her, but she continues on her way.

Arriving at the Sponge Segment, her senses seem to have recovered a bit, although she's still feeling hotter than hell. The view is something else, indeed: round Yellow Sponges rife with holes like Swiss cheese, pink Sponge Chimneys like hollow fingers grasping for food, and a ruby Ascidian Colony encrusted with bright white pockmark openings mimicking embroidered jewellery. A school of green Damsel fish, quickly crossing over, complements the sponge assortment nicely, but Cherry is looking for something less vibrant. There, under those emerald Staghorn Corals, some remarkable rock? Or a cement-encrusted pig's head? No, it's Crazy Harry the Stonefish.

He seems to be asleep, and Cherry comes closer to nudge him. Before she can touch him, though, a raspy voice cuts through the water:

"Don't touch me! Suicidal, or what?"

"Good morning to you, too. Mr. Harry, I presume?"

"The Stonefish, you bubblehead. Stay away!"

"Playing hard to get, yo?"

"No, baby, I'm deadly, a killer!"

Oh please, Cherry thinks, *don't let him be really crazy.* Then parts of her fragmented memory upload hit home: the bricks on a Stonefish are spiked with a deadly venom. Only Sea Snakes have more powerful poison.

"Oh fuck! Sorry about that. I'm Cherry."

"And I'm crazy."

"I have some questions."

"And I have no answers. Only madness."

"You've heard of the D-pandemic?"

"The City won't have it."

"It won't?"

"Impossible daydreams, trippy visions, surreal hallucinations."

"The City is just a city: a place to live."

"You wish! It's more than the sum of its parts."

"Aren't you a part, too?"

"I stand apart. I stand alone. Against the madness."

"The madness seems to be winning."

"But there's a catch. In the place that never sleeps."

"You could use some more. You make no sense."

"The catch. The phrase. Classical mistake. Something special."

"This is going nowhere. I asked you about the D-pandemic!"

"It comes and goes: you come, I go. Goodbye." The stony fish turns around and disappears between the sponges. With a lot of effort Cherry restrain the impulse to stop him: his poison is very fast-acting. *Check one: arm myself with antidotes.* she thinks, *Check two: what the fuck did he mean?* Because Cherry can't escape the feeling that—through the bizarre exchange—he was trying to get something through. But why so mysterious? *He must think we're being watched. But by whom? I better take the next step unobserved.*

Cherry heads for the local HIR-embassy, still feeling flushed by the hot sea water, and thinking about "the place that never sleeps". Something that's always accessible: do they have some kind of Internet here? Another gap in her

briefing info. In the safe room of the embassy, she searches the database for a local web.

There is one, a biological infrastructure weaved throughout the coral. Based on fractal geometry and cellular automata, it's slow but quite powerful. The embassy has a connection to it, and through a firewall Cherry surfs the underwater web.

She needs to get used to the different structure and its sluggishness. But it is very robust—even the occasional mini-quake doesn't affect it—and once a cache of information is dragged up, it's deep and dense. *Wait a second*, Cherry realises, *there's a cache. In the place that never sleeps.* So would this Crazy Harry have some home page somewhere? Cherry surfs onwards, and eventually chances upon a link to "Rants and raves: Harry goes mad". It contains heated arguments about local matters that seem quite irrelevant to Cherry. Now this Stonefish is really crazy or it's another diversion tactic. Then there is this administration link that is password protected.

The Catch. The Phrase. Something special, Cherry thinks, with a subtle emphasis on the s's as if they were capitals. Password protection, alliteration: she tries Charlie the Coral Cod, Stupid Stonefish, Madness and Mayhem but gets nowhere.

Shit, am I losing it, or what? she thinks, exasperated, *Wait a minute: Classical mistake. What about that ancient classic movie: Mad Max?*

The link opens to a page with a zipped info pack and instructions:

download and open in a safe place. Cherry downloads the pack, checks it for viruses and such, transports it to her stand-alone laptop, and opens it:

**The Coral City
and the D-pandemic:**

A narcissistic emergence in denial,
discarding problems in a veil of
vanity.

It's one of the most surreal and sharp pieces she has read in her investigative career. Astute observations and insightful analyses of the Coral City's history interchanged with paranoid rants and wild speculations. Making perfect sense at one point, drifting off into madness in the next.

Parts like:

“... the symbiotic links between the Coral Reef and its inhabitants developed to a point where a kind of group entity came into existence, powered by fractal interactions, strange attractors and fast-linking turbulence. Order out of chaos: an emergent identity called ‘the City’...”

With subsequent sections carefully analysing the development of “the City” from dormant semi-sentience to a strange state of self-awareness, shedding new light on the development of the coral reef to the dominating entity of the tropical zone of the ocean-wide world. Its shortly punctuated equilibrium after First Contact and its quick establishment of the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn farms effectively bordering its north and south

perimeters when it found out that Agave Seagrass was a hot commodity for its interstellar visitors, exported off-planet via the Space Elevator on Equator Atoll (with its renowned coral characteristics).

Fine work, but alternated with fragments like:

“... at a certain point it became narcissistic. It was not content being the greatest, it had to be the most beautiful as well. An excessive Vanity Fair needing an ever-increasing horde of admirers, it will do anything within its power to keep up appearances...”

Suggestions of disenchanted species of the temperate zones who are excluded, by way of trade barriers and fiercely guarded borders from the Coral City's riches, and apparent first witness accounts of the strange hallucinations of the D-pandemic (... inhabitants and visitors alike experience the same bouts of strange visions, twisted depictions of things that cannot be. They last only for a short while, but are very intense and unsettling...), are interspersed with unfounded theories (... a substance on the loose inducing these hallucinations. Maybe it's a pollutant from the Seagrass processing factories or something akin...), descend into paranoid conclusions (... that would be admitting that there is a problem, and the City's egomaniacal pride won't let it. So the whole thing is denied and swept under a coral carpet, hoping it'll solve itself...) and hysterical rants.

Interspersed with enigmatic hints that Delphi the Green Turtle—the

Jaded Oracle—is the only source of unbiased information, although she speaks in riddles.

Signed with:

“Crazy—still stoned
after all these years—Harry.”

If gills could sigh, Cherry thinks, the water around me would be bubbling. Then again, her intuition tells her to use some of that info, warbled as it sometimes is, to her advantage.

Maybe I should query some citizens, very openly, and let it look like I'm on a dead track. A little paranoia goes a long way in her line of work. *And carry a sample phial with me, in case another vision overwhelms me: see if it contains traces of strange substances.*

She interviews the usual suspects: mayor Bill Cody, a huge, fat, black-spotted white Barramundi Rock-Cod; Heather Slambam, head of Coral City's PR-department, a sly Lionfish with the odd, vile insinuation; and D.D. Williams, director of the Visitor Centre, a multi-coloured Harlequin Tuskfish, his appearance alone a living ad for the Coral City. Neither questioning leading to new insights. While the frequent approaches by these ragged, begging Butterflyfish—that almost magically disappear as soon as she dares to give some small change—and that constant threat of an underground rumble don't improve her temper, either. On top of that, the heat remains stifling: but shouldn't her body be used to these tropical circumstances?

When returning from another fruitless interrogation—Captain Blowhorn of the CCPD, a yellow Trumpet Fish—she swims through the back streets of the O'Malley Alley. This is a quiet part of town: just a small school of silver, yellow-finned Moses Perch sheltering under Plate Coral ledges, a few Blue Tang atop some Branching Coral and a lone Thick-lipped Wrasse digging up invertebrates. A good place to let her senses come at ease. Still, something is nagging at her, a feeling of being watched. Almost as if something's hiding in plain sight.

One moment, she's languidly floating along the quiet alley, the next she shoots like a torpedo to a certain part of the scenery that wasn't there a minute before. Bracing for impact, her hands do not crash into solid rock but grip a more yielding material: flesh. What first appeared to be a green piece of hard coral abruptly turns into a burning crimson cephalopod. Caught red-handed, it tries to confuse its captor by enveloping both in a black cloud, but it takes a lot more than that before Cherry Hall lets go of her quarry. As the ink disperses, she asks:

“Why are you following me, ink boy?”

“I wasn't following you, I was just hiding from my creditors.”

“I've got no time for such bullshit, fuckwit. See this tail here? It'll use your big head for a punch bag if I don't get some answers *pronto*.”

The squid turns an ashen yellow, a

slight shiver runs through all ten of its tentacles, and it says:

“Well, OK.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Bud the Cuttlefish—I mean—I’m one of the Buds.”

“One of the Buds?”

“We’re a brotherhood: there’s CoolBud, IceBud, LightBud, DryBud and WiseBud.”

“A nice little family. That’s all of you?”

“Unfortunately, the oldest Bud got drafted.”

“And you?”

“I’m the junior: RoseBud.”

“Figures. Why are you following me?”

“We’re told to keep an eye on you and report your activities.”

“To whom?”

“Our client.”

“Don’t be such a dumbfish. Who is your client?”

“I don’t know. WiseBud runs our operation.”

“You can tell your boss, this WiseBud that if I get my hands on him I’ll have his rings cooked for starters, and that—”

Cherry’s anger seems to literally shake her surrounds, as another mini-quake rumbles through the coral and its fishes. Distracted, she loosens her grip and gone is the shadowing cuttlefish. Cherry, furious at herself, looks around madly but the colour-changing squid—a master of mimicry—is invisible to her once more. *I should be angry, driven, relentless. Normally I have such a slug for*

breakfast, she thinks, Stupid tail, I miss the itch between my legs that gives me my edge.

The next day, she heads for Mon Repos, a relatively barren hilltop in the outskirts of Anemonia where Delphi the Green Turtle rests at night. Slowly, she’s becoming used to all the Coral City’s splendour—while wondering how this seems to be the only city she knows of with no slums—and sometimes she’s able to pick up things that are somewhat out of the ordinary. That Staghorn Coral, shouldn’t it be viridescent instead of this bleak grey? That fish: what’s a mackerel doing here? What’s more—

—four round pocket watches float into view—

—one hovers atop a branch of blackened staghorn coral—

—and becomes soft and drapes itself over the branch—

—the other three watches become soft as well—

—gracefully flexing with the flow—

—while the lone mackerel remains very straight—

—a strange shape enters the scene, like a ghostly sheet of a human face—

—as the solid bottom disintegrates into rectangular blocks—

—and some of the blocks become long, pointed cones—

—that shoot off into the distance, heading for the surface—

—as if piercing the world, as two cones lodge themselves—

—in the lonely, stiff mackerel—

Jesus, another one, Cherry thinks, while squeezing the air out of her sample bottle, hoping it catches some traces. *If it's contagious then it's anybody's guess what havoc it'll wreak in the HIR. The amount of tourists that have been here is enormous, it'll spread like wildfire.* She blinks several times, pressing her eyelids hard, shakes her head and looks again: that wasn't a mackerel, but a Barracuda that had strayed from its school. Noticing it's being noticed, it speeds back to the school passing overhead.

Nice dilemma: I pay close attention to my surrounds for signs of Bud Inc., she thinks, and this increases the number of D-pandemic fits. She continues onward for the Jaded Oracle, in a semi-random route, and gets no more hallucinations, nor any signs of shadowing cuttlefish.

In the meantime, night has fallen and in the right shadows, Cherry is as invisible as any semi-sleuthhound squid. She arrives at Augural Hill, thankful for the somewhat less repressive heat of night, fairly sure she wasn't followed. An enormous turtle sits on its crest, looking out over the suburban stretches below. Wary, both reluctant and curious, Cherry approaches the dappled green head with its black, enigmatic eyes.

"What do you want, little one?"

Cherry's pixie-sized mermaid body has been grown to Coral City's average, and to a 3-yard turtle she appears quite small indeed.

"I have a question."

"Only one?"

"Yes."

"That's good, because I will answer only one. With a little fable."

Cherry thinks a while and says:

"What is the chain of events that leads to the hallucinating visions that both the Coral City's inhabitants and its visitors are suffering?"

Delphi answers, very slowly, with soft sentences placed apart by odd pauses. Most creatures would have great difficulties following it, and it is definitely inaudible for any hiding snoopers. However, Cherry—as any state investigator—has enhanced hearing and a very sharp memory that effortlessly records the Jaded Oracle's sayings:

—

"Once there was a little Cuttlefish that was the pride of his family."

—

"His colours were brighter, his patterns more elaborate than anybody else's."

—

"He knew it all too well, and showed off at every opportunity."

—

"Then one day he saw a beautiful squidette from another neighbourhood."

—

"He tried to impress her even more than the rest, and put on his flashiest show."

—

"But he got overheated, and all his vivid colours faded to grey."

—

“Now he’s just a plain cephalopod, victim of his vanity.”

“When his shame becomes too big, he hides in his own ink cloud.”

“It’s a spectacular sight, because unlike the black of his brothers,”

“his ink has all the colours of the spectrum, outshining everything else.”

Nothing more after the last pause. The giant tortoise remains unmoving, even through another earthly tremor. *It’s an analogy*, Cherry thinks, *the Cuttlefish standing in for the Coral City*. But the point remains unclear to her. Since there is nothing more forthcoming, she says her goodbye.

“Thank you so very much, Delphi.”

“No thanks, little one.”

“Anything I can do for you?”

“Realise . . .”

“Realise what?”

“ . . . that I’m not omniscient.”

Fair enough, with a riddle like that. The gargantuan turtle has closed her big eyes, indicating the session is over. Cherry leaves, with a feeling that she gained another piece of the puzzle. If she could just decipher it, and fit it in with the rest. One vision, though, she can’t shake off: even though they became fluid, these watches kept ticking, loud and clear . . .

of her little sampling bottle through her analysing equipment. A long list of normal ingredients for tropical seawater in a coral reef environment: plankton, microbes, traces of faeces, an assortment of pheromones, the lot. But there: a few vestigial hints of anomalous substances: lysergic acid, phencyclidine and dimethyltryptamine. Hallucinogenic drugs, and what a combination! Her secret database on the use of drugs in diversion notes the following about the mix of these three substances: *‘This combination triggers the critical paranoia threshold, and unleashes images from the subliminal’*.

Somebody is using that powerful combination to overwhelm people with visions from the subconscious. But who? The Coral City? But why? She reconsiders the Oracle’s fable: the Cuttlefish lost its lustre when it got overheated. Well, she did feel hot all the time but thought it was due to her lack of acclimatisation. Suppose, she thinks, that it really *is* warmer than normal. What is the influence of too warm seawater on a coral reef? Her database has the answer almost immediately: coral bleaching.

The pieces fall into place. Before she got her attacks of the D-pandemic, she was looking at discoloured coral. So every time the City thinks people see its less alluring parts, it overwhelms them with a psychedelic shot, unleashing personal bouts of madness, unravelling the mind’s hidden depths. That a lot of these visions appeared strangely alike, Cherry figures, is because this classic

Back into the safe room of the HIR-embassy, Cherry runs the contents

painter has probably found his way into the collective subconscious.

Anyway: the whole affair is a side effect of global warming and a vain City. So for Cherry it's the same old lesson: a budding civilisation that needs to meet its energy demand in an ecologically friendly manner, lest it smother in its own shit. However, that's for the HIR's smooth talking diplomats to explain, she only needs to report her findings.

III: Non-global warming

Later on, Cherry tries to make a preliminary report but gets stuck. She requests data on the planet's climate, both from her interstellar empire's satellites orbiting this water world and from the libraries and meteorology stations of the Coral City itself. Using analysing software to correlate the incoming statistics, she soon finds that there are no signs of global warming. The average yearly temperature variations are well within the expected range. This doesn't make sense: why is the coral bleaching, then? Because it *is* bleaching: camera recordings, insensible to hallucinogens, show this beyond doubt.

OK, software: highlight areas of the planet that have temperature changes, colour code: red for warmer, blue for colder. On the world map several areas light up in light blue, indicating a minor temperature drop over the years. One area lights up in deep red: Ningaloo Quarter and its immediate surrounds in the Coral City. Which makes—in a way—even less sense: there are no in-

dustries or natural phenomena that could cause such a sharp rise in that area.

Of course, Cherry could let the HIR's scientists research the very local warming phenomenon. But she hates loose ends. Furthermore, she's being traced by too many parties. Not only the Bud party, but these beggars bothering her on the weirdest of moments: too much coincidence. On top of that, a semi-sentient city that *knows* when somebody is watching its bleached parts shouldn't need help in keeping an eye on her: it can do the job much better by itself. There is still something fishy. She goes for a swim, hoping it clears her mind.

Inevitably, she heads for Ningaloo Quarter, and can almost sense her surroundings getting warmer. Half of the feeling is probably psychosomatic, but still. From the corner of her eye she notices a piece of the environment, well-nigh perfectly matching its colour against the background, keeping up with her. Not in the mood to make a big deal about it, she waves to one of the Buds and shakes him off like she's already done several times with his brothers. She's got bigger fish to fry. This gets her near the Sponge Segment, Crazy Harry's lair. This time, the Stonefish is awake, and about as approachable as usual.

"Go away, you know I'm crazy."

"Yeah, and mad to the max as well."

This reference to his password silences Crazy Harry, if only for the shortest of moments.

“Can’t talk to you normals, without a filter.”

“What kind of filter?”

“Filtered coffee, plankton espresso, Sargasso tea.”

“Sounds good.”

“Follow the leader.”

Cherry follows Harry to the Anemone District. Of course, anemones are abundant in the Coral City, but AD houses some of the most spectacular. With their squat cylindrical bodies, anemones attach themselves on hard surfaces and their vibrant ring of tentacles provide a home for several creatures, most prominently the Anemone Fish. Harry heads for a large purple one, with long tentacles and white tips.

“Don’t touch the tips, full of—”

“—lethal stinging cells. So this café here is an Anemone Fish only affair?”

“Accessible to those in the know.” Harry swims around the great anemone, its tentacles softly swinging in his wake. “Pete,” he calls out, “Pete, where are you? Harry here.”

Subtle movement from within the purple anemone: a crab, almost invisible through its crimson-spotted armour.

“Harry, old stonehead. Out for a cuppa?”

“Yeah: you serve the best. Can I bring a friend?”

“No worries. Is it the mermaid out there?”

“Yes.”

“You do have peculiar taste. But come in.”

Around the crab, the tentacles of the anemone open up. Cherry follows Harry inside the purple maze. They position themselves near a table-like pillar and the long tentacles close above them. Once inside the Anemone’s protection, Harry’s paranoia seems to ease a bit.

“Cherry, meet Pete the Porcelain Crab; Pete, meet Cherry the Black Mermaid.” Harry’s restless eyes still scan his surrounds, “Is it safe?”

“Safe as can be,” Pete answers, nonplussed, “whaddya want?”

“Double espresso, as usual.”

“Mocha, if you have it.”

“No problem.”

As Pete leaves to prepare the coffee Urchins, Harry begins: “Finally, a fellow *cognoscenti*. You got to my *pièce de résistance*?”

“I did,” Cherry says, searching for a diplomatic answer, “it’s . . . interesting. Sharp in places, but sometimes overstating its points.”

“Overstating its points? This City is mad, and will sacrifice us all to maintain its illusions of grandeur!”

Look who’s talking, Cherry thinks, but says: “Harry, it’s not the Coral City that I’m worried about. It’s vain, maybe excessively so, and tries to hide the spots of coral bleaching in its most-visited quarter. There’s something more going on, and I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Coral bleaching?” Harry asks, and Cherry brings him up to speed.

“Can’t help you with the local warming phenomenon,” Harry says, “I’m not a scientist. But the Buds are bad news:

slugs-for-hire, working mostly for the Underworld Syndicate.”

“Underworld Syndicate?”

“The local mafia: mostly involved with smuggling illegal workers through the Great Barrier.”

“The Great Barrier?” Cherry asks, feeling more foolish by the minute.

“The border sealing the Coral City and its surrounding Seagrass farms off from the rest of the world. Or rather vice-versa. Stinging Coral cordons, dense stretches of Piercing Hydroids, Cone Shell minefields with Sharks patrolling the perimeter.”

“But why? Theft? Doesn’t Seagrass grow in the temperate zones, as well?”

“Exactly: officially it’s for keeping thieves out, but practically it’s to keep the competition away from off-world trade access: the space elevator.”

“Very interesting: nobody in the HIR is aware of this barrier. Very poor business ethics, reflects quite negatively to the interstellar community at large.”

“But the City guards its riches, come what may, and deals very harshly with those that try to reveal its dark secrets. I’m already taking a mad risk telling you this!” Harry’s quiet evaporates, and he’s scanning his surrounds like mad again.

“Cool down: the HIR does not interfere with a planet’s internal affairs. Revealing this will hardly cause a fuss, a small tourist boycott at most. The Seagrass trade will not be affected: it *is* a sought-after commodity, and *will* find its way to its eager customers. That’s the way it’s gone for ages.”

“Too bad: this City, for all its splendour, is rotten to the core. How’s it gonna change if nobody forces it?”

“You—the natives—will have to do that yourselves. The HIR gives advice, but does not meddle with what it sees as internal affairs.”

“Even if the world you’re dealing with is basically a totalitarian state?”

“In general, a military intervention is far too costly for both sides. The HIR provides free information to less advanced cultures and waits ’till progress takes its course.”

“And in the meantime the lower classes suffer.”

“Like those ragged Butterflyfish?”

“Nah, the begging Butterflyfish aren’t poor, they’re only looking the part. Idealists that donate the collected money to the good cause. Naive bug-gers!”

“Oh?”

“The only way to get that money to the temperate zones is via the Underworld Syndicate, who take their cut. But their biggest business is supplying the Seagrass farms with dirt-cheap illegal labour.”

“So your local mob also has a stake in maintaining the status quo?”

“You bet your sweet tail!”

“About time I paid them a visit.”

The next morning, Cherry crosses the Crablands on her way to the Genolan Caves. It’s darker there, but once her eyes have adjusted her vision is good. Slanted rays of light shine

through the semi-darkness, and their dispersion illuminates the Coral City's underworld. It's not quite as drab as she expected, with bright red Hermit Crabs waving their heavy-bristled arms from their shelled homes, Painted Crays scuttling over the undergrowth, and Shovel-Nose Lobsters, almost perfectly camouflaged with their brown, thatch-like coverings, scavenging for the Coral City's decaying wastes.

She did hope it would be somewhat cooler here, but the heat here is as stifling as in the City. Somewhere on the right there should be the entrance to the dreaded caves, but on the left appears—

—A strange, long, deep hall—

—black panels on the right—

—walls full of paintings and sculptures on the left—

—slanted beams of sunlight shining through—

—the spaces between the panels—

—an indistinct dark figure painting—

—a grey portrait on a black panel—

—superimposed the bust of a woman, in flying colours—

—her face, hair and clothes all movement—

—of red, yellow, blue and alabaster—

—a lonely hand grasping at nothing—

—in vain, as streaks of absolute blackness—

—invade the surreal scene—

Jesus wept, Cherry thinks, *A nocturne in the deep, this is getting out of hand.* With a mental sigh she shrugs the hal-

lucination off and heads to the right. She carefully checks the cage opening and its surrounds but it doesn't appear to be guarded. Strange, and after a long pause to ascertain there's nobody tailing her, she enters the cave.

Inside, it seems pitch dark but after her eyes adapt there are things to be seen. Like the fact that every square meter on the bottom is occupied by large stingrays. Most seem asleep, and hardly stir through another rumbling quake, but not all.

"Hey, can't a tired fella have his *siesta* in peace?"

"It's strictly members only here, dumbfish."

"Or should we call you lunch?"

"Easy, fellas, it's just a lost tourist. Lady, this place is strictly off-limits for foreigners. So be a good lass and leave."

"Well, they did tell me I could find Dean the Stingray in here."

"You're using the wrong channels, lady. Now begone before we change our minds about lunch."

"OK, I guess I'll have to push my interstellar merchandise somewhere else."

"Interstellar merchandise?"

"Yeah, a couple of long-range stunners, a few sonic grenades."

"Well, maybe the Dean can spend a few minutes with you, after all. Come this way."

Cherry follows the stingray as it moves deeper into the caves. It takes a lot of twists and turns through dark and rumbling corridors. The heat is stifling and the tremors seem louder, too.

Eventually they end up in a small cave that is in fact only separated by a single, small passage from the large entrance cave. The diversion tactic is useless as Cherry has a 3D-map of the ultrasonic soundings of this area imprinted in her memory.

“Hello Dean, I’m bringing—”

“—a lady with an interesting offer. At least I hope so, for her.”

“News sure travels fast around here.”
Let’s act impressed. “Can we talk in private?”

“Gene and Bean are my left and right fins, my ears and eyes. So speak.”

“I propose an exchange of information.”

“Information? What about those weapons?”

“Of course, I don’t have the real weapons. Much too easily detected in the spaceport. I do have blueprints that would enable you to produce them locally.”

“Very interesting. And what would you need in trade for that?”

“Certain specific information. My employers were severely underpaid in a particular deal involving a faction called the Free Dolphin Union.”

“That’s outside the Coral City. Why don’t you pay *them* a visit?”

“Of course I can’t and you know it. The whole planet is an ecological sanctuary. Any illegal planetfalls would be detected by the HIR’s satellites. That’s also why your syndicate is doing such thriving business. So please don’t insult my intelligence.”

“The people of the FDU are a pain

in my alimentary canal. They staged a worker’s revolt in some of the Seagrass farms. Didn’t stand a chance, of course. Since then, we don’t deal with them: they’re bad for business.”

“But they still are one of the main recipients of the Butterflyfish beggars.”

“Those beggars are so green. Their money almost always ends up in the wrong hands.”

“Wouldn’t you know it. However, in this case, money didn’t go from the Coral City to the FDU, but rather directly from the Butterflyfish beggars to—let’s say—an interstellar trading emporium with a branch in the City. First they bought some geological survey data—that was freely available on the HIR’s infonet, by the way—and then followed it up with an actual order. They made a small prepayment for a certain type of mining equipment. That equipment was dropped from orbit, disguised as an incoming meteor, right on the agreed spot. However, the final payment—a very substantial sum—was never made.”

“That’s too bad, but that’s all in the game. However, my syndicate was not involved in this.”

“Indeed, otherwise I wouldn’t be here on my own. Now I’m looking for more info on the FDU. You have dealt with them before, and you still have lots of other contacts, needless to say. Are they still involved with worker’s revolts and such?”

“They are, but they’re hopelessly ineffective. Experts at endless meetings, organising loud protests, and writing

slogans and pamphlets. Since that one uprising they've been quite calm."

"That's all? Staging a revolt in such a well-guarded City is no small feat. There must be more to it."

"Well, there's a splinter group called 'The Kraken Wakes', a pathetic lot. They stormed the Great Barrier, but only caused minor damage. There was this lone kamikaze dolphin, wanting to launch itself—loaded to the gills with explosives—into the DN-Arch, but the weight of the explosives slowed him down so much he was easy meat for the shark patrol. They've been quiet of late, as well."

The Kraken Wakes, Cherry's mind starts to race, *there's some connotation here. Not that old novel, something even more ominous. Wait a second: Krakatau!*

"That's not much to go on. Anyway, here's an info pack for the stunners. If you have any more info, drop me a line at Cherry@gorgonmail.com. Then you might be in for the sonic grenades."

"Wait a minute: how do I know this info of yours is any good?"

"You don't. You try it out and if you like it you know how to contact me."

"That's no good. I think we rather keep you here until we've checked the value of your goods."

"Then you better catch me first," Cherry says as she speeds through the connection to the main entrance cave, a niche so well-hidden that Dean's seconds never thought to guard it. With Gene and Bean hot on her tail she enters the large cave and swims for the exit with all her might. However, the shouts

of her pursuers alarm the dozing stingrays that try to intercept her, and some succeed in stinging her with their whip-like tails.

Knowing she's been getting a very rich dose of venom the stingrays leisurely follow her, sure in the knowledge that she'll drop down any second. Cherry, though, doesn't slow down and is gone before they realise it. *I'm so chock-full of antidotes that your stings are almost a relief*, Cherry thinks as she's safely out of reach, *But I've got more important things on my mind than you suckers*. Barely slowing down, she heads for the HIR-embassy.

Back in the safe room she obtains the data as fast as she can. *The heat is increasing, fast. Much too fast*. Her brain storms, *The Coral City is releasing tons of hallucinogens, I had to swim whole parts with eyes closed, going on dead reckoning and GPS feed*. Geological surveys: specifically those of the crust beneath the Coral City. Heat signatures of volcanoes and lava flows. There: the main hill of Ningaloo Quarter is mainly hollow, with one offshoot running deep into the crust, very close to the asthenosphere. Separated from a main lava flow by a thin wall only. A wall that could easily be pierced by some specific deep drilling equipment, just the type of equipment that "The Kraken Wakes" had acquired . . .

Cherry pushes all the alarm buttons she can think of, requesting an emergency evacuation of Ningaloo Quarter and its surrounds. But the rumbling in

the distance tells her she's already too late . . .

IV: Red Leviathan

From the depths of the City, a Leviathan awakes. His arousal is accompanied with a deep, subsonic rumble that splits ears and cracks coral. Fissures appear on unsuspected fault lines, showing the blood red glowing beneath. The water seeping into the ruptures immediately begins to boil, and through the thunder of breaking rocks, the cries of dying coral, and with an aura of superheated steam bubbles the head of the Red Leviathan emerges.

The gargantuan head shakes violently, frees itself from the last pieces of rubble and blackened coral. His mouth is open in a continuous scream, a deafening roar that has all but the bravest souls swimming for their lives. A wild mane of long hair and a full beard flow down from the Leviathan's head, a crimson glory of thick locks slicing through the living mosaic of coral colonies, ultimately dividing into thin rivulets scarring everything they touch.

The shoulders break free, and monstrous hands throw great boulders in all directions. The steam formation becomes explosive and emits shattering shockwaves from its burning epicentre. The waves of destruction emanating from the fully unleashed Leviathan make it impossible to look directly at

the towering monstrosity arising from ground zero. Perhaps by now his humongous feet are making their all-crushing stand, perhaps by now his abomination of a mouth has broken through the water's edge and is spewing vile amounts of ash and noxious gasses in the crisp, clean air.

However, for the few interstellar land-dwellers that man the bottom side of Ningaloo Quarter's space elevator, those sights are hidden behind the on-rushing tsunami. The immense, soaring wall of water crashes ashore, crushing all life and dislodging the bottom of the space elevator from the land. Slowly, ever so slowly, the lowest parts of the sky-splitting structure impact on the tropical island. A sinusoidal shockwave passes through its length, and at the very top the violent lash dislodges the space elevator from its anchor in geostationary orbit. However, due to the greater orbital velocities of its higher parts it does not come down in a single place: its disintegrating components fall on the exact equator in the rotation direction of the planet, the top pieces glowing white-hot from the friction of re-entering the atmosphere. Satellite images show an expanding circle of tsunami waves, its centre pinpointed by a line of white-foaming splashes of impacting space elevator debris, and a dark plume of pure filth, rising slowly but inexorably . . .



Jeff VanderMeer remarks, "I've always wanted to write about my childhood growing up in Fiji, but have never been able to. Finally, I found that by re-imagining tales about islands, I was able to write about Fiji, in an odd way. I also wanted to try my hand at different types of folktales. 'Island Tales' grew out of that desire. Some of these stories I grew up with as a kid."

Jeff's latest books include The New Weird, co-edited with his wife Ann, The Situation, out from our very own PS Publishing, and the Steampunk anthology from Tachyon. The Church also just completed a song cycle based on his novel Shriek: An Afterword, and he plans to be able to announce a Torture Squid graphic novel shortly.

Island Tales

Jeff VanderMeer

1. The Sky King's Turtle

Once, Lekebai, who lived in Samoa, was fishing out at sea when a storm overturned his canoe and brought him, half-drowned, to an island of rock. The rock rose to form a mountain circled by clouds. Not a tree or bush could be found on the island. For days, he lived on rainwater and fish trapped in tidal pools.

Lekebai missed Samoa. His family would think he was dead. But there seemed no way for him to return. Weak with hunger, Lekebai decided to climb the mountain and see what he might find there. However, above the clouds he found only more rock. Despairing, he sat down to weep.

After a time, a voice spoke to Lekebai. It said: "Why are you weeping?"

Lekebai looked up and saw the Sky King standing there.

"I am weeping because my home is in Samoa and I cannot return there."

The Sky King laughed and said,

"Returning to Samoa is easy. My turtle will lead you home. Just remember two things: keep your eyes shut during the journey or you will never see Samoa again and give my turtle a coconut to bring back with him. As you can see, we have no coconut trees here."

So saying, the Sky King brought Lekebai to the giant turtle, which rose to the surface of the water like a small island itself.

The journey lasted three days, and all during that time Lekebai did not open his eyes. "You are home," the dolphins sang. "Open your eyes." But he did not listen. The sea gulls scolded him: "There's a storm coming. If you don't look, you will drown!" But he kept his eyes shut tight. Even when little fish nipped at his toes and told him to open his eyes or the sharks would eat him, Lekebai refused to look.

Finally, Lekebai felt sand under his feet and knew he was home. He opened

his eyes. Samoa! Lekebai ran up the shore into his village. His family and friends were overjoyed to see him. They cooked him a great feast. Only as dusk arrived and the flames of the fire died, did he remember that the Sky King had commanded him to do two things, not one.

Lekebai ran back to the beach, coconut in hand, but the turtle was not there. At the next village, he was horrified to find that the turtle had been cooked for dinner.

"You have killed my friend!" he told them. "This turtle brought me back from the island of the Sky King. Now the Sky King will be very angry."

The villagers wept, fearing the Sky King's wrath. They buried the turtle deep, a coconut beside it, in hopes of appeasing the Sky King.

But the Sky King sees all. He sent a small bird to Samoa. This bird did not harm Lekebai. Instead, it touched a boy named Lavai-pani. After the bird touched Lavai-pani, the boy did not grow up. He remained a boy even as his friends became men and married and had children.

Many years later, Lekebai died, but Lavai-pani lived on, as young as ever. The old men in the village still whispered about the death of the turtle, but only Lavai-pani remembered where it had been buried, and he told no one.

Eventually, however, the King of Tonga heard the story of the Sky King's turtle and decided that he must have its shell. He told his sons: "Bring the shell

to me and we will make many fine fish hooks from it."

The King's sons sailed to Samoa. They searched everywhere, but they could not find the turtle's grave. When they returned, the King was furious.

"Go back to Samoa," he said. "Bring me the turtle or you are no longer my sons."

Fearful, the King's sons returned to Samoa. They asked everyone where the turtle had been buried. Hearing their questions, Lavai-pani said, "I will show you."

At first, they did not believe him, but what choice did they have? They couldn't return to their father without the shell. So they followed Lavai-pani to the place where he said the turtle had been buried and dug for three days.

On the fourth day, they found the shell and bones of a huge turtle. Of the coconut, there was no sign.

Quickly they returned to the King with the shell. "What?!" he shouted. "There are only twelve pieces of shell here! What happened to the thirteenth piece?"

The sons had kept the thirteenth piece for themselves and made hooks out of it already, but they dared not say this. Instead, they said the people of Samoa had kept the thirteenth piece for themselves.

The King commanded them to bring back the thirteenth piece or never return.

Heartsick, the King's sons set out across the ocean with their wives and

children. They could not go to Samoa and they could not return to Tonga. For days, they sailed, until, needing supplies, they landed on a remote island.

On the beach, the Sky King greeted them, for they had come across the same island as Lekebai many years earlier. In return for the thirteenth piece of the turtle's shell, the Sky King allowed the sons of Tonga to live on his island. The coconuts they brought with them seeded the island and soon it was a tropical paradise.

And that is how people came to Kandavu, one of the Fiji Islands.

2. Kama Pua'a—The Pig Child

Kama Pua'a lived on the island of Oahu a long time ago with his father and mother, the king and queen of Oahu. As soon as he was old enough to walk, he drove them crazy with his antics. Kama Pua'a wasn't tall and he wasn't big, but he was very solid and very stubborn. He would run through his father's fields chasing the livestock and pulling up the crops.

As he ran, he would sing a song: "I am Kama Pua'a. I am Kama Pua'a. I can do whatever I want!"

His father the king would laugh and say, "That's true. That's definitely true."

When his son was still chasing the livestock and pulling up the crops at the age of ten, he would still laugh at Kama Pua'a's song, but his teeth would grind as he laughed.

When his son reached the age of twenty-one and still he ran through the

fields pulling up crops and chasing livestock, the old king no longer found it funny. His livestock were a nervous wreck. His crops, which had to feed the entire island, were sickly and small from years of such treatment.

One day, he stopped Kama Pua'a right in the middle of his song and belted, "Enough! Enough. You CAN'T do whatever you want. As of now, you are no longer welcome on this island. You must find somewhere else to go."

Kama Pua'a stared at his father. And blinked. And blinked again. Then he said, "Okay. I'll go. I'm bored anyway. I'll find another island to run and sing on."

So he did. He moved to Maui, which was ruled by the fiery goddess Madame Pele. Maui was a beautiful place, with many palm trees and deep green forests. Kama Pua'a liked it better than Oahu, which, after years of his running through the fields, had gotten less green and less beautiful.

Kama Pua'a worked on the island tending to Madame Pele's livestock. He knew a lot about livestock from running through them and scaring them for almost twenty-one years. For awhile, he did a good job of taking care of the livestock.

But Kama Pua'a still loved to run and still loved to sing his song. He had never really grown up. So one day, it was just too tempting. He put down the stick he used to keep the livestock in line—and he ran. He ran right through

the bellowing, mooing cows. He ran right through the chickens. He ran right through the pigs. In fact, he ran right through the pigs' muddy pen, singing at the top of his lungs, "I am Kama Pua'a. I am Kama Pua'a. I can do whatever I want!"

Now, two things were true on the island of Maui.

First, the goddess Madame Pele loved her pigs. They were prize-winning pigs. She loved those pigs like they were her own sons. Every day, a special servant went down to the pig pen and bathed them in expensive bath oils until they gleamed like white gold. Every night, Madame Pele would come down to the pen and read the pigs bedtime stories until they fell asleep. Some people even believed that the pigs were former boyfriends that Madame Pele had turned into pigs in a fit of rage, because . . .

Second, Madame Pele had a terrible, terrible temper. She was made of fire, and fire runs hot and burns cold. It travels where it will, and can erupt at any moment should it desire. Compared to her, Kama Pua'a's parents had no temper at all.

Madame Pele had great eyesight. From her home in the volcano overlooking the pig pen, she could see everything that went on there. When she saw Kama Pua'a running through the pig pen frightening her pigs—when she heard him singing his ridiculous song—Madame Pele lost it.

"KAMA PUA'A!" she screamed. "KAMA PUA'A! LEAVE MY PIGS

ALONE! LEAVE MY PIGS ALONE AND STOP SINGING THAT STUPID SONG!"

Her voice sounded like thunder and lava and a tree trunk breaking all at the same time. The force of her voice bent back the palm trees and flattened the grass. It confused Kama Pua'a so much that he began running in circles in the pig pen.

Madame Pele grew so furious that her eyes turned red and tiny blue flames darted out of her ears.

"That's it," she said in a calm voice—a calm voice so deadly that small children on other islands heard the whisper of it and began to cry from fright.

She pointed a finger at Kama Pua'a and said, "Not only are you pig-headed, you are pig-faced. Not only are you pig-faced, but you are pig-finned. And not only are you pig-finned, but you are pig-named! Calm shall you be. Silent shall you be. Pig-like shall you be."

With those words, Kama Pua'a found himself hurled into the ocean by an unseen hand. He began to gasp for air as he sank . . . but what was this? His arms had turned to fins. His lungs had become gills. His legs had become a tail. His face had sprouted a snout. He gulped water—and it tasted good!

Kama Pua'a swam through the seaweed, the first pig fish—the fish with a pig's snout—or "Humuhumunukunukuapua'a" in the Hawaiian language. He had forgotten his song. He had also forgotten how to run. But now he could swim as much as he liked without hurting anyone.

Madame Pele never got as mad again as she got that day. Kama Pua'a's parents were sad that he had been turned into a fish. But when they saw him in the water one day, so silent, so calm, it was hard for them not to think it was a good thing.

Many times, Kama Pua'a's father the king could be found down by the water, talking to his son the pig fish. The king smiled a lot now. He could tell stories to the pig fish for hours and never be interrupted.

Besides, pig fish taste very, very good.

3. Maui And The Magic Hook

Maui didn't mind being the smallest of the Hawaiian gods. Although he wasn't as strong as his brothers and sisters, he made up for it by being clever. If he couldn't out-muscle the other gods, at least sometimes he could outsmart them.

Still, in one area Maui's smarts couldn't help him: he couldn't fish for beans.

Or, rather, as he liked to say to his pet lizard Nanaue, "I *can* fish for beans. That's just the trouble. I can catch beans. I can catch *empty shells*. I can catch *seaweed*. I just can't catch anything worth catching."

"Like a fish?" Nanaue would ask. Nanaue was green and small, with a pink throat and busy eyes that glanced this way and that, looking for flies.

"Yes, like a fish. Just once I'd like to catch a really impressive fish. Or maybe even something bigger than a fish."

As it was, all of his brothers and sisters teased him. It had gotten so bad that Maui didn't even bother going fishing with them anymore.

"Maybe you could try something else," Nanaue would say. "Like, challenge them to a coconut-eating contest. You're very good at eating coconuts. I've seen you. You just gobble them down like they were made of air. I must say, I sometimes find it hard to believe you stay so thin when you eat so many—"

"Be quiet, lizard," Maui would say, grumpily. He might be good at eating coconuts, but he didn't want to become famous for it.

Finally, Maui couldn't take it any longer. He went to his father and mother who lived in the clouds and told them about his problem.

"No one respects me. What should I do?" he asked.

His father said, "You shouldn't worry about what people say."

His mother said, "Nonsense! It's just the hook you're using. Try this one."

She handed him a hook made of mother-of-pearl. "This should do the trick," she said. "After all, we don't want you to become known as the God Who Eats Coconuts." And smiled at Nanaue, who turned a deep red color.

Maui glared at Nanaue, but took the hook.

The very next day, he went out fishing with his brothers and sisters.

"Fishing?" the oldest brother said. "Isn't that a bit out of your league?"

“Shall we use you for bait?” the youngest sister said, looking up at him with her big dark eyes.

Maui said nothing. He just got into one of the outrigger canoes and motioned the others to follow him.

Nanaue stood on Maui’s shoulder, boldly breathing in the sea salt and spray. Maui always fashioned a little globe of magical air around Nanaue’s head, so that if he ever fell overboard, he wouldn’t drown. It made Nanaue glow like a little lantern.

Once they were far enough out in their canoes, Maui and his brothers and sisters threw out their fishing lines and hooks. Soon, everyone but Maui had caught a fish.

Nanaue frowned. “Maybe you’re not far enough out. If the hook’s really good, maybe it’ll only catch a really big fish. One that lives really far out.”

“Yes,” said Maui’s second youngest sister from a nearby canoe. “Maybe you need to go so far out that you wind up where you started.”

All of Maui’s brothers and sisters laughed.

“That’s it,” Maui said, shouting. “I’ve had it. We’re going to row farther out. I am going to catch a fish.”

Suddenly all of his brothers and sisters were quiet. It didn’t do to make even a small god angry, especially not a brother that, despite everything, they did love.

“Let’s help Maui fish,” the second oldest brother said.

And so they did, going out farther, their canoes close together.

When they were as far out as they’d

ever been before, where the ocean was so old that it was wrinkled with little waves, Maui cast his line.

“Please, hook, work your magic,” he said.

“Yes, please,” Nanaue said. “It takes a toll on me, too, all these insults. I do not want to be known as the lizard who befriended a fishless god.”

For many minutes, the sea remained quiet. The fishing line lay still.

Then a wind came up and Maui felt a tug on the line. A monstrous tug. A tug like the biggest fish in the world.

“I’ve got one!” he cried out. “I’ve got a fish!”

It was pulling so hard that Maui fell forward. Nanaue almost fell off his shoulder; he only managed to hold on by biting into Maui with his tiny teeth.

“Help me, brothers and sisters! This is the biggest fish any of us have ever caught!”

So they brought their canoes close together, and they all pulled and pulled at the line.

Still, they were not strong enough.

“Nanaue,” Maui said. “Get off my shoulder and pull on the rope.”

“Me?” Nanaue said, surprised. “My muscles are the size of mosquitoes. How can I help?”

“It might be just enough.”

So Nanaue pulled on the rope—and, now, slowly, they were able to begin to reel it in.

“We’re doing it!” Maui cried out. “We’re going to bring this fish in!”

Soon, the top fin of the fish came into view. It was long and brown and made of earth.

"That's no fish!" Nanaue said. "That's land."

The hook was so powerful that it had hooked onto the land below the ocean and brought it to the surface.

"No, it's not. It's a fish!" Maui said. "Keep pulling."

"It's not a fish," the third youngest sister said. "It's land. Even your lizard knows that."

"Keep pulling!" Maui insisted.

More and more land was coming to the surface. Soon, a whole continent would be above the sea.

"It may not be a fish," Maui admitted. "But it's something important. It's not seaweed or an empty shell. Pull!"

But his brothers and sisters had had enough. They all stopped pulling. In fact, they all got back in their own canoes and started back toward their home.

Leaving Maui and Nanaue to try to pull the land up from the sea.

Soon, all but a few islands had submerged into the sea.

Maui and Nanaue stood in the gently rocking canoe. The sun was setting now. The islands were round blocks of shadow. The great big piece of land was gone.

"I guess you could say it was kind of like a fish," Nanaue said. He was still glowing from his little bubble of air. Soon, he was the only thing Maui could see.

"No, it wasn't a fish," Maui said. "But it was important. If my brothers and sisters had more courage, I would have created a whole new continent."

"Well, you made some great islands," Nanaue said. "You certainly did well enough that I think I'll stick around a little longer."

"Thanks," Maui said, and sighed. "I guess that's better than nothing."

Nanaue glowing on his shoulder, he began to paddle after his brothers and sisters.

And that is how the Islands of Hawaii came to be.

4. Why The Sea Is Salty

A long time ago, villagers on the island of Jojo in the Phillipines used to get their salt from a friendly giant named Damaso who lived on an island very close to them. Naguey the merchant used to make a deal with Damaso for the salt, even though he hated doing it. Damaso was more popular in the villages of Jojo than he was, even though Naguey brought them food. Without salt, none of his food tasted good to them.

Back then, the ocean had no salt in it. The ocean tasted just like the rivers and lakes. So Naguey had to get his salt from the giant.

Damaso's island was very different from Jojo. It had no name, and it had seemed to just appear across from Jojo one day. Some people said it was actually the back of a giant turtle that had been covered with trees over the years. They said that Damaso was a wizard or other strange being. Naguey knew that Damaso was not a wizard—he was just a very large, very tall, very strong giant.



Every two weeks, Naguey would take a few boats out to Damaso's island for the salt. The boats were filled with food for the giant. The giant ate a lot of food, but, then, the villagers used a lot of salt. Naguey didn't like Damaso's island. It was different than Jojo. Jojo had forests with birds and animals in them. Damaso's island had only trees and a garden the giant had made.

Naguey always had a scowl on his face. He couldn't help it—as a child, a wild boar had leapt out of the bushes and collided with him where he lay playing, injuring his mouth. His mouth, scarred, always curved downward. He would always scowl. He had no choice. Naguey also had a narrow face and almost no hair.

Damaso, on the other hand, always smiled. Damaso was so friendly it made Naguey sick. The giant wore a huge broad-brimmed hat to keep the sun off of his face. The giant had a round face and large brown eyes with dark eyebrows. His hair was thick and long—so long it would almost have reached to the shores of Jojo. He wore a nice white shirt and black pants. He never bothered wearing shoes—it had been hard enough to find giant-sized clothes. Finding giant shoes would have been too difficult.

"Hello, Naguey," Damaso would say, taking off his hat. "It is great to see you! I hope your business is doing well."

"Hi, Damaso," Naguey would say. "Business is okay. Where's the salt?"

Naguey never liked to stay around long and chat, while Damaso always

wanted to talk. Naguey supposed that was because Damaso lived by himself.

So Damaso would help them load the salt onto the boats and off they would go, back to Jojo, Naguey muttering to his crew the whole about how happy Damaso seemed to be.

"What's he got to be happy about?" Naguey would say. "He lives alone. I have a wife. He has an island without any animals on it. I've got lots of livestock."

For years, Naguey would go to the island and Damaso would deliver his salt in return for goods. For years, Damaso would be friendly and cheerful. Usually, Naguey would be close-lipped and morose.

Then, one day, a great storm came out of the East and settled over the island of Jojo. For more than two weeks, there was rain and lightning and high winds.

Looking out of his window toward Damaso's island, Naguey would say to himself, "I wonder how Damaso's doing. I wonder if he's still smiling now."

Because of the high winds and rain, Naguey could not travel over to Damaso's island. The villagers of Jojo could not have their salt. Damaso could not get the food he needed. Naguey knew he probably had enough stored away, though. "He's a happy giant," he said to his wife. "He's probably not a stupid giant."

After the third week, the people of Jojo had gotten used to the wind and the rain. But they hadn't gotten used to

having no salt. So Naguey agreed to go out to the part of Jojo that was closest to Damaso's island and see if he could talk to the giant across the water.

"Hallo, Damaso!" he shouted across the water. "Are you there?"

After a few minutes, he saw the familiar sight of the giant walking onto the beach of his little island.

"I am here, Naguey!" Damaso shouted over the water. "I hope you are well! I hope your business is doing well!"

"Actually," Naguey shouted back, "my business is doing terrible. I need salt!"

"Well, come get some salt then, by all means," the giant shouted. "I've got plenty of it. Mounds and mounds of the stuff. And I am running low on food."

"But we can't," Naguey shouted. "Our boats will capsize—we'll all drown."

Damaso thought for a second, then shouted, "Are you sure?!"

"Am I sure," Naguey muttered to himself. "Am I sure? Didn't I just say it?" To Damaso he shouted, "I'm sure. But how about this—why don't you bring the salt over. You're so tall and big, you could straddle the space between our two islands. My men could walk over you to your island and get the salt."

Damaso thought for a second and said, "It could work, I guess."

Damaso planted one foot on his island and took one massive step so

that his other foot was on the shore of Jojo. Naguey's men climbed over him and began to fill up their empty sacks with salt. Damaso really had to strain to keep from falling over, but he kept smiling.

"So, Naguey," he said, "have your people survived the storm pretty well? Are your homes okay?"

"Sure, Damaso, they're fine," Naguey said. "Just keep upright so my men can get across."

But Damaso began to wobble. "Is there someplace else I can put my foot?" he asked. He was trying so hard to balance, he couldn't look down.

Naguey looked around. There was an ant mound nearby. He smiled, which meant he frowned, because of his lip.

"Yes, there is," he said. "Move your foot a little to the left."

"Okay."

The giant did as Naguey told him to do. Now he could keep his balance a lot better, but Naguey's men were taking a long time—they had decided to put a lot of the salt on his shoulders first and then take it across to Jojo when they had enough for many years—and suddenly there were little shooting pains in his foot.

"Is there something biting me, Naguey?" Damaso asked, still not able to look down. The pain was increasing.

"No. Nothing." Inside, Naguey was laughing. All it would cause Damaso was a little discomfort—surely ants couldn't hurt a giant? Besides, maybe Damaso would stop smiling for once.

Now men with sacks of salt were

crawling all along Damaso's legs and back. But the pain had gotten too intense. The giant moved his foot and began to lose his balance. Naguey's men dropped their sacks and ran for safety—some back to Damaso's island and some back to Jojo.

"No, no, no," Naguey said. "You can't fall. All of that salt!"

"I'm dreadfully sorry," Damaso said, wincing. "But I think I'm going to have to fall. I wish I didn't have to, but I don't think I can stop myself for much longer. That pain in my foot is too great."

And so saying, Damaso fell into the sea, amid the wind and the rain, taking all the sacks of salt with him.

When he regained his footing, he walked up onto the beach next to Naguey, who was looking out at the sea in shock. Naguey's men were safe, but all the salt was gone. Hundreds and hundreds of sacks of it, dissolved into the ocean.

Damaso sat down on the beach next to Naguey, who was like a mosquito next to an eagle. Damaso looked at his bitten foot and then looked at Naguey.

For the first time ever, Naguey saw a frown on Damaso's face, a look of sadness.

"Ant bites," Damaso said. "My foot was in an ant mound."

The look he gave Naguey was one of betrayal.

Seeing the frown on Damaso's face, a strange feeling came over Naguey, one of shame. He was not happy to see that frown after all. He had grown so used to Damaso being happy that seeing him sad made him sad, too. He almost started to cry when he thought of how mean he'd been to Damaso over the years.

Naguey stood and looked up at Damaso. "I'm very sorry about the ants. It's my fault. I'm sorry."

As soon as he said this, it was as he was saying he was sorry for so many years of treating Damaso so badly. A weight lifted from him and he almost felt . . . happy.

Damaso smiled. "That's okay, Naguey. I understand."

Naguey tried to smile back. "You should come over to my house for dinner. I don't know if we have enough to feed you properly, but I would be honored if you would come over."

Damaso smiled. "Why, I'd like that very much."

From that day forward, the only sign of Naguey's former envy of Damaso was the fact that the sea, which had once tasted like tap water, tasted like salt for ever after.



Robert Weston tells us, "I find it relaxing to travel by train in a foreign country, especially one in which you don't speak the language very well. While the train clacks away, you can tune out other people's conversations and settle into a novel or guidebook. At the same, however, it's easy to become hypersensitive when fellow travellers come aboard and you're suddenly able to make out their every word. A while ago, I had this experience on the bullet-train from Osaka to Hiroshima. A pair of tourists took the seats across the aisle and began discussing the renowned longevity of the Japanese. Their conversation took a quick turn and became an emphatic exchange on the merits of herbal medicine, naturopathy, non-Western healing, et cetera. Elsewhere, the conversation would've been commonplace, but at the time, having grown accustomed to a degree of detachment, I felt like the whole train ride was ruined. It was while I was listening in that the premise for 'Salve' came into my head. So evidently, understanding those around you isn't all bad."

Robert's fiction has appeared in Kiss Machine, On Spec, Fugue, Crimewave and The New Orleans Review. He has been nominated for the Journey Prize in Canada and the Fountain Award in the United States. His first book, an innovative novel for children, will be published by Penguin in autumn of 2008.

Salve

Robert Weston

The conductor has the sort of veiny, bulbous nose you don't see too often, let alone on one of the automatons. The little venal system looks so authentic he might someday have a stroke. It's all raised up like a topographical map, like something hanging on the wall of a dermatologist's. He holds his head up high, looks imperious. Clearly, it's some sort of rosacea upgrade. Something to set him apart. Something to remind you of W.C. Fields. Not that W.C. Fields had much to do with the railway.

He squats down like a golfer, claps a fatherly hand around Brexler's elbow. "Home for the holidays, hey, little guy?" Brex squeezes my thumb and the waterworks begin.

"Sorry," I tell the conductor. "Stranger-danger and all that."

Brexler's wailing and stamping. The conductor rises off his haunches, business as usual. "Tickets, please." I hold up my palm so he can scan my wrist. With the other arm I pluck Brexler up off the platform. While the scanner *blip-blips*, the conductor eyes the B-man suspiciously. "Kid's a little touchy, hey? Can't you give him something for that?"

"My wife's into the whole organic thing, so." I use this excuse often, careful to omit the divorce.

"Ah," says the conductor. Brexler wriggles on my hip like a fish. I've really got to clamp down so we can get a clean scan. Finally, the green light

blips over his tender flesh. More bawling.

On board, the voice of a lady says: "Step away from the doors, please. Doors closing. Winnipeg, next stop. Winnipeg." In a few breaths, we're there.

Johanna has her old floater idling at the curb. The air is crisp but heavily saddled with a chronic and malingering smog. She waves at us, "Hello, hello, hello!" and brandishes a pair of hard-wearing beanies, complete with propellers. "Put these on," she says. "I brought them for you special. They're amazing." Johanna reads every fashion rag.

"I'd rather not."

Brexler, meanwhile, is leaping up and down, swiping madly at the beanie. He's like a taunted cat. Poor kid. You'd never find me so hastily enamoured with headgear. It's one of those moments I honestly want to give him something, settle him down.

Johanna biffs me one on the shoulder. "See? The B-Man's got the right idea. How come you didn't turn out more like your son?"

"Can't it be the other way around?" While I'm looking mournfully down at my kid, Johanna takes the opportunity to plunk the beanie on my head. "It suits you." She thumbs a dial above my ear and the propeller shifts, descends in front of my face. It whirs so close I can picture it shearing off something vital.

"Pretty neat, huh?" Johanna beams at us both, like she just discovered an infrared propulsion system. "Clears the

smog, see?" She helps Brexler squeeze into his youth's edition. It's a tad too big. As always, he appropriates the thing instantly; it's a tool of warfare. It's a helmet and he's a soldier. "Byeew! Byeew!" he yells at me. "You're dead!"

The barefaced jingoism irks one of the hefty, orange-coated automatons. He creeps over, waving a matching orange baton in our faces. "Holy Christ! What's the matter with you people?! Move it, move it!" he says. "This here's the Kiss-n-Ride!"

Todd's on one of the holiday drugs, one of the cheaper ones. His cheeks are supposed to be rosy, but the approximation looks closer to carbon monoxide poisoning. His nose, meanwhile, is like a faucet. Makes me wonder if perhaps it was something he snorted. Hardly inconceivable for Todd, in which case it's definitely el-cheapo. Then again, could be part of the effect. Something to rekindle the brisk chill of winter. Something reminiscent of frost. Whatever the case, the drug's working its magic. Todd's got Brexler on his knee, bobbing him up-and-down like a jockey, singing Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells! at the top of his lungs.

My father's upstairs. He hasn't come down yet. My mother hollers at the ceiling. "Ed-waaard! We're starting!" Her semi-articulated oven mitt clinks against each of the hot, hot dishes. She looks at me. A little accusatory. As if it's my fault. "Simon. Go fetch your father."

The escalator is set to syrupy. Gliding up, silent and dead slow, it hits me that my folks are getting old.

The bedroom door hangs open. “Dad?” I say, pushing it all the way. He wasn’t listening, evidently, because there he is, naked and bent over at the waist. His balls are puckered up and only slightly darker than the rest of him. The rest of him is stark white. I step back into the corridor, well out of eyeshot. More loudly this time: “*Dad?*”

“What it is?”

“We’re eating.”

“So?”

“So you have to come down now.”

“Simon?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Mina with you?”

“Uh, no. She’s still in Dubai. She’s pretty busy these days.”

“Ah.”

“So you coming?”

“You remember my purple robe? With the monogram? You haven’t seen it, have you?”

“Where would I have seen it?”

He groans noisily. He sounds like an old disposal unit. “Here it is!”

“Okay, then,” I tell him. “Everyone’s waiting.”

Downstairs, the plates are set. Everyone has their own bird, none of them bigger than a grapefruit. There’s plenty more for seconds. I return to the table alone. My mother gives me a look. “Don’t worry,” I tell her. “He’s coming.” And eventually, he complies. The monogrammed robe splits up the middle when he sits down.

My mother frowns. “Edward, really.”

He levels his gaze at her. He’s ruinously solemn. Through his teeth, he says, “Allergies. This is all I have in cotton.”

“Oh, Edward.”

“Very merry!” cries Todd, raising his eyebrows suggestively, grinning like an elf.

We eat in silence. Everything reeks flawlessly of nutmeg. Everything goes down easy; there’s almost something obsequious to the meal. We take a break before dessert and Johanna coaxes me outside for a cigarette break. The balcony overlooks the nighttime haze, as lustrous and throbbing as an electric current.

I suck in my first puff and Johanna biffs me one again. It’s her new motif. “If only Mina could see you know, hey?”

“Yeah.”

“Dunno why she doesn’t let you smoke.” She pauses to admire her cigarrillo. Mother-of-pearl is back in. She holds in a breath, exhales. “It’s not as if these are like cancer sticks. You’d be stupid *not* to smoke these. I can lend her a pamphlet, if you want. It’s very well-written. It won a prize.” She pauses to think. “I might have a copy in the glove compartment.”

I hold up my hand and wave it off to the side. “Don’t even bother.” Then I roll my eyes, implying the utter hopelessness of trying to convince my wife of *anything*.

Jo’s been on something for empathy lately. It makes her disarmingly astute

when she feels like letting it flow. In spite of my façade, she has detected malaise. “Hey. What’s the matter?”

I look out at the haze. It moves like an animal, like a muscle, like a languidly contracting fist. “Mina’s not in Dubai. It’s just what I tell people. Everybody’s in Dubai these days.”

“Oh, Simon.” She places her palm on my shoulder. “You’re heartsick.” She opens her purse. “I’ve got something for that.” She clatters through the bag. It’s nothing but pillboxes and patches of time-release gauze. She finds what she’s looking for. “Betacardiozilotrene. Oughta do the trick. Go ahead and take the bottle. God knows I got a ton more at home.”

I wave my hand. “I’ve gone off. I’m off it all. I’ve been dirty for a while now. I guess on account of Mina.”

“Hm,” says Jo. “Don’t know why I didn’t see it before. But hey, you’ve gotta take something.” She rattles the vial.

“I feel pretty good, Jo. I’m not kidding.”

“You won’t convince me.”

“Honest.”

“What about Brex? How’s he doing at school?”

“Yeah. Not stellar.”

“I thought I noticed something different about him. You can do this to yourself if you feel like it, but don’t fuck around with the B-man. These’re his formative years. Look at him in there.”

We can see through the glass. He’s punching Todd in the belly over and

over, literally thrashing the snot out of him; it’s dribbling down his shirt and gumming up the B-man’s angry little fists. Todd, meanwhile, is humming something. Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree, sounds like.

To Johanna, the snotty pummeling is evidence. “See? You have to act. *Especially* if Mina’s out of the picture. If that’s the case—and I’m sorry to hear it—then I don’t think you have a choice.”

I shrug. “I could put him on something. Sure.”

“And then you need to think about yourself. You need to start thinking your future.” She draws me into a hug. It’s graceless and awkward, as if I’m a cactus. As the embrace subsides, she slips the betacardiozilotrene into my sport coat.

Behind us, Mom taps the glass. “Pudding time!”

Inside, we sit down to custard and ice cream and fruitcake and chocolate-coated mints. Mom cajoles everyone into joining hands. Soon, miraculously, we’re all singing Good King Wenceslas. Even Brexler is smiling demurely. A faithful cherub. Later, after the come-down, it’ll dawn on everyone that Todd pestled-up the last of his stash in order to spike the sweet potatoes. For the time being, however, the room glistens with good will. We’re belting out carols. Everyone—Jo, Todd, Brex, my folks—we all raise a mug, our broad grins framed by bright, rosy cheeks and cold, runny noses. ☒

Rhys Hughes tells us that his favourite science fiction is the kind that manages to satirise the genre while also making a serious contribution to it. "John Sladek was one of the true great masters of that trick," the author continues, and he'll get no arguments from us on that score. "In Sladek's work strange things happen to strange people in strange places in strange ways for strange reasons," Rhys reminds us, "but ultimately the reader must always confront themselves in the real world." In the following piece, then, Rhys has emulated Sladek remarkably well, not just in terms of comic timing and ironic twists of imagination, but also in blending suitable satire with surprising seriousness.

Flecks From The Isle Of Chrome

Rhys Hughes

Final Demand

“Had a nice day at the radio telescope, dear?” asked Gregor Pontoon, as his mate sauntered into the kitchen.

His strong hands were busy with the washing up, so he left them to it and embraced her with his stumps.

Sonja Peterson accepted this as her due and filled her pipe. There were tired highlights in her hair. The mood henna was flicking gold and orange to the frontiers of her perm.

She lit a briar as shiny as her skin and took a lungful of pungent smoke. Carcinogens were back in style after a three week absence. These circular fashions were spiralling tighter, choking society as surely as the synthetic nutmeg mixture in her bowl choked Gregor. He shredded the grey cloud with a sneeze and pouted.

Sonja's voice was a deep rumble, yet

alluringly feminine. “Nice? I think not. Dashed cutbacks taking their toll. Where will it end? Me on the street and you in the workhouse.” She flopped onto the rubber sofa and snorted. “What's for tea, chum?”

Gregor spilled a tear. “Krill. But don't worry, we'll pull through. Bloomer can win the election. Funding will be resumed. I see a light at the end of the tunnel. It's bright.”

“Do you?” Sonja rolled her eyes and leered maliciously. “Probably a hovertrain coming to crush our bones. It's no use, I intend to be upset. The telescope has to be rotated manually. We can hardly afford to settle our electricity bills.” She placed her pipe in the ashtray and reclined, boots gracing the genuine footstool.

Gregor prostrated himself before her. She patted his head while he struggled to articulate a confession.

“It came this morning! I didn't know

what to do. Been frantic with worry all day.” He indicated a pocket of his apron with a nod and she reached in and drew out an envelope.

The letter was printed on rough paper, probably pulped from one of the trees recently stolen from their garden. The Power Companies liked to do things cheaply. Her chainsaw dreams now made sense, the drone that had troubled her sleep. Gregor’s chattering teeth irritated her and she slapped his cheeks as she read the note.

“A final demand,” she announced.

“Threatened with disconnection,” Gregor hissed. “What shall we do? I’ve raided the piggy. Not nearly enough.”

Sonja sighed. “Our only hope is that contact is made soon. Just one signal would set us up. Even Trueman wouldn’t dismantle the project with hard proof of intelligence out there.”

Gregor shuddered. “That nasty man doesn’t want to meet aliens, he’s scared of the philosophical implications.”

While he mused in silence, his hands finished the dishes and hopped out of the sink like lovelorn spiders. They crawled along the floor to a chair in the corner and took up Gregor’s sewing where he had left off. He watched the needle miserably.

“Perhaps I should have automated only one,” he mumbled. “They use a huge amount of energy. Good job we didn’t bother with the lingam. Be in the workhouse already—on the treadmills!”

Sonja was suddenly sympathetic. “Don’t think about it. Tell me what

you’ve been doing today. Did you plug into your Home Economics course? I want to know what the examiners said.”

Swelling with pride, Gregor smacked his lips. “Submitted my project today. Six years of calculation it has taken! Finally worked out the total amount of money in the entire world.”

“Clever chum! What’s the answer?”

Gregor recited from memory: “194,237,262,443,584,913,876,251 marks and 72 cents. The examiners agreed there was no reason to doubt such a handsome sum and I won a prize.”

Sonja was enthusiastic. “What was it?”

The face of her mate fell. He flustered about the room, glowering at the artificial dust. “A new apron.”

Sonja beckoned for him to sit on the sofa by her side. He did so, adopting a rather prim posture. She squeezed his knee and he squirmed on the rubber. His stumps flapped aimlessly.

“Don’t look so dashed sour. I’m the provider and I’ve got the huff monopoly. Don’t encroach on my immaturity.”

He nodded resignedly. “I’ll pray for a message tomorrow, dear. What constellation are you listening to? Not fussy old *Vulpecula* again? Don’t trust that one. Go for *Sagittarius*.”

“I might take you up on that. Now let’s find out what’s happening elsewhere. Other people’s problems always cheer me up.” She whistled for a pair of news bees. They emerged from the wall hive and launched across the room, aluminium wings shimmering. Gregor

watched them with distaste. He still pined for holovision. Settling on his lobe, one of the insects danced current affairs into his mind.

Sonja absorbed the news and refilled her pipe. Albania was planning to declare war on Milton Keynes. The king of Oxfordshire was going to be burnt at the stake for heresy—he had denied the existence of the boat race, suggesting it was a metaphor. Philip Pew, pedicurist to the stars, had been charged with varnishing a live gerbil. Utah had sent back Tower Bridge with a standard rejection slip.

There was also a snippet about herself: Sonja Peterson, leader of Project Premonition, forced into the defensive over her failure to pick up signals from extraterrestrial intelligences. On a lighter note, pipes were out again. She emptied her bowl in the ashtray and threw the briar at the nearest wicker disintegrator.

The international stories were followed by political broadcasts. As the Isle of Chrome Republic geared up for elections, propaganda became a common hazard. Trueman was first on, claiming the conservation of energy as his prime policy. He wanted to cut power to half the buildings on the island. Bloomer, sounding unsure of himself, protested that some sort of amnesty for debtors was more appropriate.

Before the end of the transmission, Sonja's bee stiffened and fell into her lap. Gregor's insect did likewise. His sewing hands also ceased to work, leaving the room almost motionless. Then

the lights failed and blackness flooded through the windows.

"What's going on?" Gregor stumbled in the dusk, knocking into Sonja as she also rose. "Have we been disconnected?"

She nodded, though he couldn't see her gesture. "They don't mess around. We've been plunged into the primitive!"

Gregor struggled to restrain his panic. "But what can we do without power? How will we manage to control ourselves?"

On an erotic impulse, Sonja snatched him up and carried him to bed. "We'll take that duty in turns," she said.

The following morning, Gregor sauntered into town to obtain candles. The junk shops in Ventnand were always willing to barter modern crafts for old—his cardigans, a dozen knitted in the last week alone, would fetch an equal number of tallows. As he walked, the rising sun bathed his face in pink sweat. At least this was one source of free energy. No President would dare proclaim sunlight as wasteful.

Sonja had departed on her bicycle before dawn. Already she would be at work, listening to the song of hydrogen in the endless void. Looming above the town, on the rim of Maliface Down, the island's highest point, the dish of the radio telescope reflected the sun's disc like a chalice catching the blood of a sacrifice. Gregor shuddered at the simile. There was nothing he could do to

prevent his own martyrdom on the altar of the impending elections, except pray for his mate's success. His fate was in Sonja's hands, which was just as well, considering that his own, lacking power, were useless.

On the edge of the main street, a small rally was in progress. A dozen supporters of President Truman, black silk shirts buttoned to the neck, shouted slogans denouncing excessive consumption of electricity. A short man with glistening eyes stood on the steps of a shop selling high wattage domestic appliances. Gregor recognised him as Giotto Pucker, the Prefect of Police. He was ranting in his customary fashion, flicking his fringe with the tip of his titanium truncheon. As always, the motions of his lips did not quite match his words.

"Citizens of the Isle," he cried, "I ask you again: how much longer shall we endure the parasites in our midst, who having wasted our energy refuse to pay their bills on time? Do they not see that they are playing into the clutches of our enemies? Just across the Volent lies Gumpshire. How dearly she would like to sink her fangs into our chalky coasts! This is obvious! Yet Bloomer and his brood of weaklings deny the danger. What are they but traitors to the Republic?"

The crowd surged enthusiastically, though this was mostly a ritual response and their eyes wandered from the speaker. Thus Gregor found it more difficult to slip past unobserved than he anticipated. And somehow, despite the modest size of the mob and the gener-

ous width of the street, the gathering managed to entangle him.

Black shirts, many unwashed, pressed against his body. He waved his stumps and tried to force a way to freedom.

Giotto Pucker paused in his tirade. He noticed Gregor and pointed a righteous finger at him. "What do have we here? A new recruit? Or one of Bloomer's agents, an infiltrator?"

Gregor was buffeted by the throng and thrust forwards. He collapsed at the feet of the Prefect of Police, who pulsed over him like some toad from prehistory. "I'm an innocent househusband," he insisted. Prodded by a kick, he sat in the dirt and waited for the truncheon to descend. When it did not come, he added: "I'm not just a face without a brain. I study Home Economics in my spare time."

"Do you use an electric oven?" Giotto Pucker spat the question with such wrath that Gregor almost swooned.

"It's a different type of Home Economics," he croaked, but howls of outrage at his temerity convinced him to humour his interrogator. "Well, it's the proper way to do cakes."

The Prefect of Police smirked. "How would you like to bake one for President Truman's victory? With black marzipan instead of yellow. To help prove you're not a supporter of Bloomer! I can't see any reason for you to refuse this honour. Unless..." He winked and hissed: "We treat spies badly, don't we boys? Castor oil!"

Gregor swallowed dryly. "But I haven't got arms to stir the mixture and my oven doesn't work any more."

"Why is that, comrade? I hope it's not because you neglected to pay your electricity bill? Followers of Bloomer think they can escape with a caution after defrauding the Power Companies! Trueman won't allow horrid behaviour of that sort when he gets back in. If any of his followers try that scam, they'll be exiled from the island. You're one of his troopers now: his official cake designer. You're not telling me you've broken the cardinal rule already? How unfortunate!"

"Oh no!" cried Gregor. "You misunderstand me. My arms and oven need a few minor repairs, that's all. I'll be happy to accept the commission. I'll bake the best cake in the Republic!"

Giotto Pucker nodded. "That's more like it. Now as you're here, why not assist us in our devastating attack on the physical manifestation of everything that Bloomer stands for?"

Gregor was noncommittal. "Depends what it is."

The Prefect gestured towards Maliface Down. "That obscene folly. Drains away quarter of our power, it does. What for? Mythical messages from unimaginable distances? We're going to dismantle the whole thing with spanners and pipecutters."

"Maybe they'll still catch a signal," whimpered Gregor. "I mean, they're trying lots of different frequencies."

"Defending Project Premonition? Most irregular for a Trueman voter!

You don't have any personal interest in it, do you?" While Giotto Pucker scrutinised his features, Gregor hoped for inspiration. Agencies existed on the mainland which dealt inspiration by the gram, but the service was expensive and only licensed to sculptors. Swinging his truncheon, Giotto muttered: "If you're a househusband, you must have a mate! Perhaps she's a radio astronomer? If so, I'll have to take you as a hostage. I haven't blackmailed anyone for a month."

To avoid a polygamous relationship with a harem of bruises, Gregor resolved to confess everything. Suddenly, inspiration did indeed strike and he blurted: "Of course I'm not defending the Project! To be frank, I agree with Trueman that space is probably devoid of sentient beings, but while the Project is a waste of funds and time, the telescope itself is not. It can be used for a noble purpose. Consider the sun: just think of all that free energy! Power without bills! Grand publicity for Trueman's campaign were he to utilise it . . ."

"Yes, but I don't see how the telescope can help."

Gregor sighed and rolled his eyes. "It's a parabola! Position it to face the sun and the rays will be reflected and concentrated at a single point. Why permit me to bake an election cake in an electric oven when a less hypocritical method can be arranged? With a little planning, we can use the dish to cook a myriad meals!"

Exhausted, he slumped, but Giotto

caught his apron strings and dragged him to an upright posture. Flinging his arms about Gregor, he wept tears which left chalky deposits on his collar. The househusband wondered what Sonja would say when he outlined his ruse to save the telescope. Would she applaud his cunning or depreciate his cowardice? Probably both, he decided.

The Prefect said: "How could I doubt your loyalty? The sun is the ultimate key to our difficulties!"

The mob cheered and Gregor found himself raised aloft on shoulders. It seemed that every black shirt wanted to hold him. But this was no celebration: they were passing him the quickest way from the centre of the rally to its rim, where he was dropped in the dust of the street like a partly eaten gingerbread man.

Giotto Pucker cried: "Your duty is sacred, comrade! If you fail, so will your bones, as we all jump on them. Go now and arrange our official election cake! We shall meet you at the telescope at noon tomorrow. You are the icing on our vision."

Gregor hobbled away. He reached the junk shop of his choice, but he shivered as he traded his cardigans. He took the long way home, a detour which skirted the town. There were quicksands out there, but these were preferable to Pucker's slow slimes.

Back in his apartment, Gregor prepared a salad with spoons clenched between his teeth and lit the candles to harass evening. Sonja blustered in later, hair coloured naturally, something

humming in her outstretched palm. He looked at it anxiously.

"Exchanged it for some mood henna with a gypsy," she confided. It was a clockwork news bee, an antique model. "What not have a go, chum?" She fixed it to his lobe and he grimaced as the corroded insect stamped over his ear like a drunken journalist. The broadcast was distorted but he listened obediently. Albania was still threatening Milton Keynes with war. The king of Oxfordshire had gone out in the rain. The whole of Utah had been varnished by Philip Pew.

More alarmingly, an accident at an inspiration factory in Gumpshire had sent a cloud of the chemical drifting over the Volent. Most had been recovered in nets, but it was possible a few grains had reached the Isle of Chrome. Citizens of the Republic were reminded that snorting without a license was illegal. Gregor quivered and Sonja cradled his head in her bosom. "Why the blush, chum?"

He knew he should tell the truth, but he was ashamed and scared. So he tried a lie to distract her until he found the courage. He indicated the insect and stammered: "It has just been announced that pipes are back in fashion!"

While she rummaged in the wicker disintegrator for splinters of her briar, he almost found it possible to tell her about his encounter with Giotto and his forced conversion to Trueman's party. But he licked his lips too much in preparation, and she stood and he was no longer facing her back, but the

stars of her eyes, and he was a boring planet circling them in an orbit which resembled a möbius strip. And as the night wore on, the moment never came back.

Raiding the cupboards for ingredients was difficult without hands. But he had already taught himself to operate tongs with his teeth before his mate left for work. Five bags were soon at his disposal, one pliant with butter, the others holding flour, eggs, sugar and pieces of chocolate. Enough to make a serious cake, but nothing on the scale envisaged by the black shirts. They would berate him. All the same, he felt compelled to muck in with their zeitgeist.

He tied the bags together with string, looped them over a shoulder and set off. Sonja's footprints were still melting on the pavement, for gelatine shoes had become chic after midnight. The news bee had told her this from its hive under her pillow. She had slept with it like that for reasons arcane and regretful to him. Or because times of stress generate an interest in current affairs.

Thus he had risen in the small hours to do her bidding, which was a pair of boots, lime flavoured. Although the chore was annoying, it gave him the opportunity to learn the skill of working tongs orally. Now he was outside with the evidence of his labours, but her prints disappeared at the point where she had mounted her bicycle. Nonethe-

less, he remained pleased by his tracking abilities.

The telescope seemed aware of his treachery, for it throbbed orange in the late morning like an oven warming up. He did not hurry, but he did not loiter. He hoped to play it safe. Ventnand was still sleepy, but a pair of black shirts were profaning shop windows with paintbrushes. The symbol of Trueman's militants was a hand pulling a plug out of a socket. Not the easiest graffiti to daub on glass. He tried to act inconspicuous and that is how they noticed him.

"Give us a hand!" they demanded together.

"I don't have any to spare."

"Less of your thick lip! Or more of it, for you can hold the brush in your mouth. It's not impossible."

They seized him and dragged him toward a clean shop window. He was weeping when they forced the paintbrush between his teeth. A rogue hair curled upward and tickled his nose. After a while, he grew to enjoy the taste. He knelt and dipped his brush in the pot of paint. His attempts to reproduce the symbol were poor. Later they beat him for his trouble. But now every shop was defiled, so they retreated and rested on a bench in the town square, beneath a statue of a forgotten President from the Isle of Chrome's complex history.

"What do you honestly think of politics?" they asked.

Gregor shrugged and mumbled a few meaningless words, before winking

with effort. "I'm... I'm glad... it's there!"

They smirked. "For us it's just a game."

"Really?" Gregor was fascinated, but his new companions glanced at their chronometers and jerked up.

"Nearly noon. Time to meet at Maliface Down."

They tramped out of Ventnand. Giotto Pucker was already waiting for Gregor. His followers stood neatly behind him. He span his truncheon but his jaw dropped in disappointment.

"Where are the ingredients for the election cake?"

Gregor unslung his bags. "Here, sir!"

"Idiot! That's not enough to fill the dish of the radio telescope. We shall be a chuckling stock!"

Gregor thought fast. "No, this is just a trial bake, to see if the operation is viable. An experiment."

"I see. Good thinking! What must we do next?"

"Rotate the dish until it points at the sun. The motors no longer work and they turn it manually."

They gazed at the telescope. Two cables dangled from the rim of the dish, one to pull it down, and a second on the other side to elevate it again. At this moment it was aimed at a patch of sky a few degrees above the horizon. Giotto directed his men to tug at the nearest cable. There was a low note from the instrument as the dish started to move. Creaking and booming, it slowly tilted up.

A hatch in the control cabin opened

and Sonja Peterson emerged. She was followed by several astronomers. She spied Gregor and shook her fist at his personality. "What's going on?"

"It's politics!" he squealed.

Giotto said: "We are altering the direction of the dish so that it points at the sun. Do you comprehend?"

Sonja replied: "We have come out to rotate it too. But we are going to point it at Sagittarius." She glowered at her mate. "That was on *your* advice. I listen to you sometimes."

Giotto turned to him. "You know this woman?"

For an answer, Gregor suddenly raced into the vacated control cabin and slammed the door behind him. Here he was surrounded by computers and printers. Through a window, he saw the astronomers grasp the other cable and tug the dish back to the horizon. But the black shirts merely doubled their efforts. There was little to pick between the two teams. They both pulled with all their might in different directions. Gregor tightly shut his eyes and whimpered as he hid.

Then he jumped in alarm as a printer chattered into life. A single page wafted to the floor. He kneeled and snatched it up with his teeth, crumpling it in the process.

He ran outside, his shout muffled by the paper.

"A message! A message at long last! Project Premonition has come up trumps! I knew it would! A signal from an intelligence among the stars! Contact with aliens has been made!"

His ludicrous gait was enough to create a temporary truce, as both sides looked up and disapproved.

“What do you mean, chum?” demanded Sonja, embarrassed that her mate should disgrace himself in public like this, even though she had already warned her colleagues of his flaws.

He halted before her and opened his mouth to explain properly, an action which caused the paper to float away, cancelling the need for his explanation, because she caught it.

He muttered anyway: “We have discovered aliens!”

“Don’t be a silly stick. Look at the telescope!”

He did so. The black shirts had tugged it one way, the astronomers another. One of the cables had snapped. The winning side—which Gregor never asked or learned—had promptly overpulled. The dish had started to spin. It had come to rest pointing downwards. At the ground. Into the centre of the Earth. The opposite direction to the sky and its stars. It was rock, magma and liquid iron down there. No planets or civilisations. No continents, bicycles, cardigans.

“It’s a mistake, that’s all,” she said.

Gregor misunderstood her words. “A mistake? Yes, you’re right! How wise you are, darling! Our world is not solid: and the aliens are under our feet. That’s where they live! Not in outer space at all, but inside the planet. It makes sense!”

Giotto added: “There have been the-

ories about this before. I wanted to adopt one myself, just for show.”

Sonja sneered. “The Hollow Earth? Nonsense!”

Gregor frowned. “What does the message say? I was too happy to read it. I brought it to you immediately.”

Sonja studied the paper. “It’s a bill.”

“A bill? A bill for what?”

“For all the sunshine that has been used since life evolved on the surface. Not just a bill. A final demand.”

“A final demand? The sun is free!”

“Seems not. That has just been our assumption.”

Giotto hissed: “I want a look!” He took the message and scanned it with a malodorous and solid sigh.

“Well?” gasped Gregor. “Do tell me!”

“It truly is a final demand. They must have been broadcasting bills to us for millennia without our knowledge. We have aimed our telescopes in the wrong direction all this time.”

Sonja snorted. “This will cause a revision of accepted cosmological theory. At least until they disconnect us.”

“Disconnect us?” shrieked Gregor. “From the sun?”

“That’s the usual outcome when a final demand is ignored, isn’t it? They will presumably turn the sun off.”

“But how much is the bill? What do we owe?”

Sonja and Giotto recited together: “194,237,262,443,584,913,876,251 marks and 73 cents precisely.”

Gregor was distraught. “73 cents? That’s exactly *one cent* more than

the total amount of money in the world!"

Giotto shrugged. "Now every shirt will be black."

"Hello darkness, our new chum," said Sonja.

Gregor refused to share their fatalism. "I won't give up so easily! I lost a cent inside a sofa once! A single coin. I didn't include it in my calculations. The Home Economics examiners don't like admissions of incompetence, especially when linked with soft furnishings. I shall raid that sofa! I will bail out the world!"

"How will you rummage inside it without hands?"

"Won't any of you help me?"

"What's the use, chum? So that we can pay our bill and live forever in a world without any money?"

"Because there will be none left," added Giotto.

Gregor widened his eyes. "A world without money? That's utopia! We want that more than anything! I will raid that sofa! The perfect society shall have its place in the sun!"

He skipped away and Sonja said: "He's serious."

Giotto scratched his nose. "Where did he get the notion that utopia is a place where there is no money?"

"He's very rarely like that."

"It's not a bad concept, though. Not bad at all."

"Too good for him!" spat Sonja.

Giotto knitted his brows. "If you are right—and I no longer have reason to doubt your word—he must have stolen

the idea from somewhere else. But where? That's the question."

"Some sort of accidental insertion?"

"The inspiration powder from Gumpshire! Of course!"

"Sniffing without a license is illegal," she replied. "Even I agree with that law. It's safer that way."

"What's your address?" he asked her.

She told him. He wielded his truncheon and then shook his head. He needed something more despicable.

"Run and fetch buckets, bowls and spades! We are going to transfer the quicksands to the perimeter of his house. When he emerges with the extra cent, he'll fall in and drown!"

Sonja touched his arm. "Some of those quicksands are rumoured to be bottomless. If he steps in one of those, he might plunge into the hollow world and pay the surplus cent on the way!"

"In that case, we must guarantee that the rest of the bill remains forever unpaid. I will lobby Trueman."

"And I'll lobby Bloomer. Perhaps we even ought to persuade them to merge their parties? I mean, there's one policy they share. Real people always oppose the creation of utopias!"

"Stress our similarities? Not our differences?"

"I think that's the idea, chum!"

On a sudden impulse, he leaned forward and kissed her. Then he drew away, but she snatched him around the waist and pulled him back. And for the first time, she understood how it felt to have a genuinely nice day at the radio telescope. It was going to get even bet-

ter. She had a fresh stale mate at last. But she still owned Gregor's hands. Polyandry in the dark was her thing. Lovingly, forcefully, she awaited the powercut. When it came, so might she. Just once.

Life Sentence

It was an age of strange holidays.

Gregor Pontoon was hunched over a glossy brochure full of them. His eyeballs rolled in his head so smoothly they might serve as castors in a showroom of office furniture—if someone squeezed his throat to make them protrude from their sockets and pushed him onto his face. Sonja Peterson was tempted to do just that but she restrained herself.

He had been her official mate for three seasons. Time to start searching for a replacement, she decided. She puffed her pipe in sullen annoyance while he turned the pages.

He cried, "How about this one?"

She stepped up behind him and read over his shoulder. "Three weeks connecting inside an active volcano? I think not. You get claustrophobia even when I shut you in the oven."

"These protective suits seem very roomy."

"Are they included in the price?"

He squinted timidly. "No."

"In that case, chum, choose something else."

He nodded and continued to work his way through the brochure. There were many trick adverts, things which weren't holidays. One read: CATCH

CRIMINALS RED HANDED IN THEIR OWN HOMES! FINGER THE COLLARS OF ORDINARY CITIZENS! BE THE BOOT THAT STAMPS ON THE HUMAN FACE FOREVER! LET GIOTTO PUCKER GUIDE YOU ON THIS EXCITING (MULTIPLE) BREAK. This was clearly an advert for the Police Force, who were on a recruitment drive. Such low cunning was so common among government bodies that most people had evolved an immunity against it. Only imbeciles were still gullible enough to take the bait. This suited everyone. It was a squalid but effective technique, rather like Giotto Pucker's own repertoire of colonic tortures, a stain on his reputation which no appeal to public safety could whitewash. Amnesty Interstellar were currently poking their noses into that one. With pegs.

Gregor finally said: "Here's a nice spot."

"A beautiful location, you mean?" asked Sonja suspiciously, and he shook his head with delight.

"No, an infected blemish on the skin."

"Let's have a look."

He showed her and announced: "Their new line of disease vacations."

"Huge. Pulsating."

"It's like an extra head joined onto his real head, isn't it? I've heard about such pimples. The men at the Laundry Moaning Group told me. A few contain pus under phenomenal pressure, enough to turn a generator or propel a baby elephant up a ramp at a steep in-

cline. The pressure of some is so high that the boiling point of the pus isn't reached even in serious house fires. Those spots are all the rage in palliative society."

"Disgusting. Tell me more."

He continued to read, summarising the itinerary for her as he went along. He was no ordinary dunce.

"After you've booked your vacation and signed the disclaimers, you take a hovertrain to the camp. The doctors examine you and estimate how large a dose of the chosen bacillus should be injected. Within a minute, the infection has you in its power. The pimples can grow anywhere on the body. It's difficult to predict their exact location. They may even appear on your *eye*. Can you imagine that? They get bigger and bigger until normal callipers can no longer measure them. There are competitions in the camp to judge the foulest, and they're real symptoms of a dangerous illness, not just cosmetic pustules, each one loaded with enough gunk to infect a hamlet."

"What if they shrink?" she wondered.

"All ailments guaranteed not to get better."

"I don't like it. Perfect!"

He frowned at her. "Do you mean it? Are you really interested in a holiday of this nature? You don't think it's a bit perverse? It *is* a trifle decadent, no doubt, but anything goes at this time, doesn't it? I mean, the single world state and all that, society isn't what it used to be. We have far less *mores* now."

Sonja yawned and cuffed him with the back of her hand. Her ring cut his lip and he recoiled with a groan. This was a logical extension of those occasions when she made him kiss her ring, not just in the privacy of their bedroom but often on the balcony in view of the neighbours. Or in the shadow of her radio telescope. Each facet was always a different flavour. Variants of fudge. How he squirmed as she pulled his hair and compromised his glands!

"Your mind is wandering again," she said.

He nodded. He tried to focus on the present. He replied, "I'm just astonished you seem so eager."

"I'm feeling benevolent, chum, that's all. I'm thinking of getting rid of you, so I want to grant a final request. The vacation itself doesn't stimulate me too much."

He nodded swiftly. "Of course not."

"I'm prepared to do it for you. Now what do you think of that? Can you believe your luck? We'll go tomorrow, shall we? Let's pack our best things and get an early night. Up bright and breezy for the hovertrain. That's the spirit, my pet weed!"

He stood and walked across to the bedroom to fetch his few portable possessions. As he passed the window, he gave a gasp and pointed at the sky. Sonja come over and stood beside him, her arm draped around his shoulder.

"The news bees are swarming," he cried.

It was true. An entire hive was on the move, doubtlessly conveying an

important story to the earlobes of the general public. Suddenly a flock of birds descended on the swarm. Like the bees, they were made of metal and powered by electricity. Censorship halcyons, recharged and dispatched fresh from the attics and roof gardens of the Police Station to prevent the news, whatever it was, getting through. A typical act of information sabotage by Pucker, doubtless under orders from his friend, President Bony. The halcyons with their bright feathers, clashing wings and voracious appetites made short work of the bees. The story was lost, digested and fated to be recycled as guano that would fertilise no crop. Which reminded Sonja of something. She shrugged and took her new riding crop from its hook on the wall.

“Never forget the essentials, chum.”

“I wonder what the news was?” he lamented.

“It doesn’t concern us.”

“It must be something absolutely vital.”

“So what? I’ve given up on the bigger picture. I just look after my own ambitions and desires now.”

“What about the rest of us, who don’t have any? I nearly acquired a longing once. It dissipated.”

“An inferior model, doubtless,” she said.

“Yes, I think it was made entirely of helium! Anyway, that’s in the past. Which holiday shall we buy?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are many options to choose

from. Different camps, different doctors and diseases, a variety of life expectancies. Shall we pick the luxury break? That includes priests to give the last rites and carts to trundle past with hooded figures on board who ring bells and call, ‘Bring out your dead!’. You also get nuns to poke you with pins when nobody is looking.”

Sonja grimaced but when she opened her mouth she emitted a tolerant laugh. He was safe again. She answered, “Gregor, my dear subhuman, haven’t you weighed the piggy recently? It’s ultra light. We will have to go for the cheapest vacation on offer.”

His face fell, but he scanned the brochure again. “You mean a Youth Hospicing expedition in the lagoons?”

“That sounds about right to me,” she agreed.

“But we have to carry our own supplies in rucksacks! And walk from one plague site to another!”

She shook her head. “Correction, old chum. *You’ll* have to carry all our supplies, mine included.”

“I’m too old to go Youth Hospicing!”

“Grow up!” she snapped.

This implied paradox had a soothing effect on his nervous system, which was temporarily paralysed. He slid down in a faint and she caught him, but only on the rebound. Then she hoisted him onto her shoulder and danced fiercely around the room for the remainder of the evening. Tough exercise and a good way of staying fit for the holiday. For soft things, lagoons are awfully hard going.

They were up with the dawn, which had no choice. Bed and warmth and other comforts were forsaken. They stepped out in the chill glow. Across Maliface Down, the radio telescope sparkled with frost. Gregor balanced a suitcase on his head and trailed behind Sonja, who made a path of smoke at nose height for him to follow, for he was unable to see where he was going due to a badly packed shirt which flapped out of the front of the case and dangled in his eyes. He had shut and locked the lid when it was only half in, and swallowed the key. A reflex. After all, he was an unchallenging mate.

Sonja preferred her men like that. She reminded him of his worth as he walked. "You are dispensable."

"Like a chemical?" he asked.

"Not quite. But utterly so."

He didn't understand this, but nodded sagely. There was a shift of loose objects inside the suitcase. Something broke. A thermometer. From now on, he pledged, he would never agree or disagree to anything with a gesture, just with a murmur.

Something glinted in the grass ahead of him. It moved. "What's that down there?" he asked shyly.

She bent closer and peered at it.

"A news bee," she said.

"Is it still alive?" he gasped.

She span to regard him with her hands on her hips. "They are never alive. They are automatons."

He quivered. "You know what I mean."

She narrowed her eyes. "Do I?"

"Please don't hurt me! I take it back, all of it, whatever it was! I love you, don't you know?"

This soothed her briefly. "It still works."

"The halcyons must have missed it. Lift it up and press it to your ear. Learn what the fuss was about."

"No, I'll slip it in *your* ear."

"It might be traumatic news . . ."

"Which is my justification," she said.

And she was as good as her word, scooping the insect up, kissing it back to partial health and inserting it smoothly into her mate's ear. He squealed and hopped around in a clumsy fashion, the suitcase threatening to tip over but never quite doing so. After a short time, he remembered that news bees don't have working stings, and he forgot his phoney pain, concentrating instead on what it was trying to tell him. It limped about on his left eardrum in a lame tango, a routine not at all like the dance of the previous night, which had ended when Sonja dropped him on his head in the kitchen, as she sometimes did anyway. It was indeed an astounding item of news. A prime scoop.

"Truly a revelation," he commented.

"What is it?" she demanded.

He tipped his head to the side and the exhausted bee fell out. This last effort had proved too much for its circuits. It was defunct. In the rising sun, its wafer wings wrinkled and crisped, no longer protected by functional heat neglecters. Real ants crawled close and examined it with modest confusion. Gregor's own confusion was

on hold just for once. He knew something.

"This bee was part of a rogue hive which had created a nest beneath the dish of your radio telescope."

"We've had trouble with animals," she acknowledged. "It was pigeons last year. Aardvarks before them."

"Well, guess what?" he cried.

"How the hell can I do that?" she fumed.

He swallowed and quickly added, "What it told me was that a message was received from outer space yesterday at noon. From a star on the edge of the constellation Aquarius."

"Wonderful! What was its content?"

"That we should expect another message at noon today. It was a sort of preview, I guess. An advert."

She rubbed her chin. "That makes sense."

"What shall we do? The telescope is closed today. You work a three day week, partly because President Bony has decreed that all weeks must only have five days and you still require a weekend. A chance to make contact has been lost!"

"Don't be silly. I have my own key."

"You mean we can enter on our own and do some freelance listening? What if we get caught?"

"I've told you before, chum, that I'm head of the project. I can go in and work whenever I like."

"That's just dandy!" he exclaimed.

She was amused. "What a quaint word. Where do you get your archaic expressions from, old fruit?"

"From my Antique Ejaculations class."

"I always wondered why your erotic techniques were so hackneyed and why the sheet on the bed resembles a palimpsest."

"It's not that sort of class," he mumbled.

But she wasn't listening. She was striding toward the telescope with big steps. He lumbered behind, already exhausted, now wishing his suitcase had castors like bulging eyes, but Sonja would never permit him to do things the easy way.

They reached the base of the telescope and she ordered him to leave the suitcase on the ground while they climbed the gantry. She opened the door of the control cabin and they passed in. Some hours remained before noon, so they killed time making love, Sonja using the stem of her pipe on him until both his cheeks achieved resonant frequency and could no longer be relied upon to clench or pucker properly, a situation reminding her of the Prefect of Police and his own diarrhoea, which was verbal and political and less fun to mock. Gregor opened the window and sat perched on the sill until time and wind brought a certain amount of relief. It was almost noon and she pulled him to the central console, fitting headphones on his ears.

"Safer to experiment on you," she said.

"Yes," he conceded glumly.

The message came through in a short burst. His eyes watered and his

temples throbbed. Sonja yanked the headphones off as roughly as possible and demanded to know what it said.

He repeated it as best he could: "THIS IS OUR GIFT TO THE UNIVERSE, THE REMEDY FOR EVERY AFFLICTION."

"Garbage!" she snapped. "But not static."

"No," he agreed. "A code?"

"Who cares? I don't! Project Premotion has become boring. It was always an idiotic scheme, even in the very early days when a man called Bogart was in charge. That was several millennia ago. The project had a different name then. I'm not interested in life in outer space anymore. I'm jaded. Hence this holiday!"

"I thought it was for my benefit!" Gregor pouted.

"That as well," she agreed.

She ushered him out of the cabin and locked the door. Then they resumed tramping over the landscape until they gained the town of Ventnand. The sleek hovertrains were waiting for their favourite commuters. It was hard for anyone to judge whether they belonged in this category or not, which made the process of boarding the vehicles just a little perilous, but nobody knew why. True, the front of each train was sculpted in the likeness of a ferocious god, but even the most worthless citizens, such as Gregor, scarcely believed they were alive. It was more of a social game, a shared superstition that helped to maintain cultural identity in this peculiar era.

As they approached the first platform, they recognised a grotesque figure striding among the commuters, wielding his truncheon and causing devastating squeaks with his new boots. Unnatural oppression was his special talent. Each squeak seemed to proclaim his hatred like a fanfare generated by the evil hinges of deep dungeons. Only his feeble chin denied the power of his office.

"What's Pucker doing here?" Gregor stammered.

"His duty," replied Sonja, deliberately unsympathetic to her mate's anxiety. "It's his obligation to do his duty and he has a responsibility to discharge that obligation."

In fact the Prefect of Police was arresting hovertrains. He boarded each one in turn, counted the number of passengers in every compartment and attached handcuffs to the drivers of certain vehicles. These drivers were actually programmers, for the steering was mostly done by primitive clockwork and steam computers.

"Full vehicles are now illegal," he cried. "President Bony changed the law today over breakfast."

"Damn his cereal!" sighed Gregor.

Giotto Pucker added, "The world has become decadent, but I'm a very soft bully. All I intend doing is sending the commuters on the offending trains into the chromium mines for life! My predecessor would never have been so lenient over this sort of behaviour. Canaletto Sharples was a tougher muffin than me. He often made buses

and trams fight gladiatorial battles in private stadiums.”

“Not a coherent transport policy,” shouted Sonja. “Blood sports should take place in the public arena.”

“A liberal!” he retorted. “Don’t you know that privatisation is more efficient and profitable?”

“I’m scared now,” confessed Gregor.

“Don’t worry,” said Sonja.

“Why not? What can we do?”

“We’ll take an empty train.”

And so they did. Once they had purchased their tickets and found a secure compartment, the hovertrain glided out of Ventnand, accelerating toward the dim western lands.

They crossed the agitated waters of the Volent on a gleaming arch, passing above the factory ships which lumbered up and down the channel, endlessly manufacturing goods and bads which no true citizen needed but all their mates wanted. The particular ship which caught their attention was the confectionery-jewellery factory, ultimate source of fudge rings and carob tiaras. It left behind a slick of cocoa which rose like steps to bedtime on the giant tides. Then they were safely across and entering the former pocket kingdom of Gumpshire, always the first realm to secede whenever the single world state had a period of economic instability. It was a flat land full of bandits with little to raid but the rotten teeth of their own savage laughter.

Now they were travelling at maximum velocity and the west gradually

came to meet them. They glided over a wide estuary into a domain of dark lagoons. The hovertrain paused and the driver came back along the silent corridor to give them a message. He announced: “The hovertrain can glide no further. It’s time to walk.”

Gregor stood and prepared to get out.

“Where are you going?” snapped Sonja.

“You heard the driver . . .”

“I certainly did,” she replied.

He shrugged and she nodded at the window. He opened it and thrust out his head. Looking at the base of the hovertrain, he was astonished to see metal legs emerging from secret hatches. They sunk themselves in the lagoon. Once they were all partly submerged, they began to stride mechanically forward, kicking up mud and decaying reeds. Gregor closed the window and leaned back in his seat. He was both comfortable and appalled, like a king enthroned in the heart of a monstrous cabbage.

They stopped at last on the edge of a vast pool. The colours were black and stinking. This was a surprise to Gregor, who never imagined a colour might have an odour. Fat flies rose, not in a cloud, which is pure, but like a splash of magnified germs. Unlike bees, they weren’t designed to provide news, but they didn’t seem aware of this fact, for they settled on the windows and roof of the vehicle and tried to dance

smutty stories into it. Old news. Rotting.

Sonja took her mate by the arm and led him out of the compartment. They descended onto a platform which was just a boardwalk of wet planks. With a dismal whistle, the hovertrain moved on. The flies went with it. Even *they* dreamed of better places. Gregor found himself wondering about such concepts. Better? What did that mean? It was a notion as mysterious as that of a loving, tender woman. Don't fret about it, he told himself. Watch where you're going.

He did. They skirted the lagoon. He only missed his footing once on the slippery boardwalk. Sonja pulled him out of the horrid waters by his hair. And he was grateful.

"The first Hospice!" she announced.

There it was ahead of them, a squat building without windows. On a pole sunk in the marsh was a sign which declared: COMA RIGHT INSIDE! Gregor decided it sounded boastful. They passed through the gate into a courtyard. It was empty, but the stink of disease was thick. Or maybe that was the cooking, for a kitchen stood to one side and its ventilator shafts opened onto this square. They approached the main door. It was unlocked. They walked into a dark lobby and groped blindly until they knocked into a counter in one corner of the hall. A bell faintly gleamed on its surface and Sonja rang it with correct impatience.

"Are you members?" asked a receptionist.

"No," said Sonja. "We've never been Youth Hospicing before. Do you think we're too old?"

"Not at all," came the reply.

"What do we do now?" blubbered Gregor.

"Follow me, if you can . . ."

The receptionist strode off. Only the smell of formaldehyde on her uniform gave them a clue as to which direction she had gone. Gregor tripped over something. A coffin. Some residents brought their own beds rather than spending the extra few cents to use the wards. It was cheap and uncheerful, exactly as it should be. A door opened and dim lanterns provided some relief from the utter murk. They went inside. The ceiling was very low. So was the sense.

They were in a room full of electronic apparatus. The receptionist was being fondled by a man covered in burns. His crooked smile might be charming. Impossible to say.

"This is Doctor Hossdoktor," she said.

"Pleased to meet you," blinked Gregor.

"Sure you are," said Hossdoktor, releasing the receptionist with a convulsive jerk. "This is the beginning of your vacation! Never been to a Youth Hospice before? Bubo virgins! The first time isn't the best but it's the most memorable. Hurts. Sit in these chairs. We'll tie you down with strong leather straps."

"Not me," smiled Sonja. "I'm an observer."

"What?" muttered Gregor.

"This holiday is *my* gift to *you*," she explained.

"Suits me," said Hossdoktor.

Gregor began trembling. "I'm scared on my own."

"You're never on your own," beamed Hossdoktor. "There are millions of worthless cretins out there."

"Plenty of company," agreed the receptionist.

She left the room and Sonja asked: "What are you going to inject him with?"

Hossdoktor shook his head. "First we stitch wires into his brain and download his personality into computer code, so when he dies of his chosen disease, we can clone a new body, accelerate it in our ageing chambers and reprogram him exactly as before. This way he can die again and again of a multitude of afflictions and still be around to appreciate the experience."

"Ingenious," commented Sonja.

"It's what Youth Hospicing is all about!"

"I like it," she added.

"The downloading is good for every Hospice in the vicinity. I'll forward his personality to all of them. They can create their own clones when he arrives. We're bound by an identical guarantee. GUESTS NEVER GET BETTER! All our diseases are fatal. Each Hospice specialises in one accelerated malady. There are sixty Hospices among these lagoons. How many do you plan to visit?"

"Every one," she answered casually.

Gregor struggled as Hossdoktor

bore down on him, but with the help of Sonja they soon had him in the chair. The straps were tightened. The tools used for the operation were antiquated and rusty, but they seemed to work quite well. Sonja distracted Gregor from his ordeal by molesting him viciously. She was trying to hurt the pain. That's what she said. He was in no position to dispute it, or maybe he was, but it didn't matter. Within an hour, all of Gregor's feeble personality had been copied into code. Then they released him.

He was foaming at the mouth as they dragged him into the ward and cast him on a filthy bed.

"Botulism is what we do," grinned Hossdoktor.

"Yes please!" she cried.

The needle glittered but extinguished its sparks in Gregor's thigh. He was naked and comical and Sonja clapped and laughed as the foam on his lips became a darker and more adhesive sludge. Hossdoktor explained that the disease would run its course in less than ten minutes. Sonja was excited at the prospect of viewing Gregor as a corpse instead of a fool. They consulted their watches.

"About now, I'd say," she remarked.

Gregor stopped screaming. But then something unexpected happened. His complexion cleared and his eyes focussed on her and he smiled, not a rictus grin, but one of cheery health.

"What in damnation are you up to?" she roared.

"I'm better!" he blabbed.

"This is not right," grumbled Hossdokter.

"Untie me!" cried Gregor in delight. He had rarely looked so well, so fit and wholesome, and not the smallest droplet of the juice of fever remained on his submissive brow. It had evaporated into steam with his fear and was presently condensing on the cold tungsten of one of the nasty medical instruments.

"This is a poor service," snapped Sonja.

Hossdokter blushed. "I don't understand. Botulism doesn't act like that. I'm deeply troubled."

Sonja loosened the straps around her mate. "We're going elsewhere! I hope the next Hospice proves more competent than this one. I don't intend paying for that dose."

"I'm sorry," stammered Hossdokter.

"Lethal! That's what we expected."

"Yes, I've failed you, but I don't know how. Off you go. I'll send Gregor's encoded personality down the wires to the other locations and it'll be there when you arrive."

Sonja marched off in a huff, dragging Gregor behind. They retraced their steps through the darkness and burst back out into the brown light of the lagoons. He was still nude and vulnerable but far too intimidated to utter any sort of protest.

They skirted the pools, slid over boardwalks and crunched across causeways toward the horizon. The only sound was the hum of occasional pylons sunk into the gunk. But Sonja still had

the holiday brochure and its featured map and she studied it regularly to determine the direction in which they should head. Her navigational skills proved adequate to the task. Within an hour they found the second Hospice and entered it. Then they followed another receptionist through an unlit corridor into an identical ward.

"Welcome! I am Doctor Hossdokter."

"Any relation to the last one?" asked Gregor.

"Not saying. Jump on the bed and I'll see what I can do. That's right, don't hope for a recovery from this injection. It's Lassa fever. Severe muscle aches should start about now. I can almost see your stupid ugly head undulating with the agony."

"Now we're talking!" chortled Sonja.

"Help me!" gasped Gregor.

"Not likely, chum. This is the funniest thing I've seen since you caught your tongue in the toaster and after it was cooked I spread it with salt and cayenne pepper."

"And broken glass . . ." croaked Gregor.

"Nearly forgot that! But wait a moment: what's happening here? The fever is wearing off! Why aren't you dying, you selfish oaf? Your skin is returning to a normal colour!"

Hossdokter flapped about. "It doesn't make sense!"

"You're a fraud too!" she hissed.

She released Gregor from his straps and dragged him out. Soon they were tramping toward the third Hospice,

which was identical to the other two and not a spark less dark. Here he was given a shot of Typhus, which usually has an incubation period of seven days but in this case gave its headache and delirium to him in just as many minutes. A rash also. But once again he recovered and Sonja refused to be itemised and stamped away.

An inkling of the truth of his immunity began to stir in the depths of Gregor's substandard imagination but he held back from sharing it with his mate. He worried about her reaction, which would be the same whether she believed or disbelieved him. He tested her mood by casting a few vague doubts about his general suitability for the pastime of Youth Hospicing. Yes, fury.

He even remained quiet during the next injection in the next shadowy ward in the next sinister building. From this point, the remainder of the day became a blur of accelerated illness, faster recovery, apologies and recriminations, and more tramping over a depressing landscape. Now it was night but the quest for a fatal injection did not cease. Marburg Disease, Encephalitis, Rabies. It made no difference how roughly, gently or indifferently he was treated. He recovered. His health was sound.

All the doctors were confident when Sonja thrust him into their care, but he always defeated them. Yellow Fever, Anthrax, Cholera. As they bent over him with needles and crooned, he even learned the names of the infective agents responsible for the conditions. Rhabdovirus, Togavirus, Filovirus, *Le-*

gionella pneumophila, *Yersinia pestis*. But although these doctors spoke to him as if they were providing profound answers, only once did he manage to ask a question:

"Why do you have the same name?"

"We're all Hossdoktors around here," came the unsatisfying reply. This was while he was being injected with Ebola and his internal organs were bleeding in anticipation.

At last the final Hospice was reached. Dengue fever, Meningitis, Tetanus, Malaria, Trypanosomiasis: these were all fading memories and his main discomfort was due to the blisters on his feet. Sonja threatened the receptionist with legal action if this last chance failed, and the receptionist passed on this threat to the doctor, who merely shrugged and assured her he had something special with which to flood Gregor's system, a disease that had once been eradicated from the world but now was back—the cleverest and most powerful deadly virus ever known. Smallpox.

"The one with the big pimples," Sonja hissed as she pulled the straps tighter than necessary.

"Pustules on pustules on pustules!" grinned Hossd doktor.

"Mountain ranges on his body. Volcanic upheavals. I'll stick him with this hairpin when he's completely covered. Burst his life away spot by spot. The pathetic runt."

And her locks tumbled over her shoulders.

Gregor could no longer resist blurt-

ing his theory about why he kept getting better.

“The message from space. That’s what did it. A remedy for every affliction, remember? It said that. I was the only person to hear it. Maybe a distant civilisation out there, a race of beings more advanced than us, wanted to save the universe from disease. So they beamed a signal which was a form of medicine. They announced it was coming so that everybody on a planet could get ready, but the radio telescope was shut and the news bees were eaten. Imagine it. The signal was the remedy. It must have adjusted the cells of my body, reprogrammed my immune system. And the transmission is rushing out in every direction at once. A gift to all sentient life from unknown benefactors. But I was the only one on this planet to hear it. What do you say to that? There isn’t a disease stronger than me now. Why aren’t you listening? I have become impossible to infect.”

“He looks like pizza,” cried Sonja.

“What’s that?” wondered Hossdoktor.

“An antiquated form of food which helped people in the past work out the phases of moons orbiting other worlds. It was flat and round and the way pieces were cut off represented the shadow of the mother planet moving greedily over the surface.”

“Sounds quaint and stupid and saucy.”

“You’re my favourite Hossdoktor so far,” said Sonja.

“I’m the last one, I’m afraid.”

“That’s how I like them,” she concluded.

Gregor was still explaining himself. “An act of cosmic generosity. The signal made my cells vibrate in a different way. They understood the message at a microscopic level. Form and content were the same thing! I’m getting better already: can’t you see? The pimples are sinking back, my flesh is smooth again. It’s all thanks to that unknown race of beings out there somewhere. They never knew me but they’ve shown more affection than any mate or colleague ever did . . .”

Sonja finally noticed. Her tone was beyond anger.

She said simply: “Legal action.”

Hossdoktor was desperate. “The Youth Hospice network operates on a very tight budget. You’ll ruin us.”

“That’s what you deserve,” she responded.

“Wait! There’s a Hospice you haven’t tried yet!”

She frowned. “The brochure doesn’t mention that.”

Hossdoktor chewed his lip. “No, it’s true, but we keep it a secret. It differs from the others in many ways. It’s bigger, far bigger. And it doesn’t kill quickly, on the contrary it kills slowly, very slowly, with the most protracted and horrible of all maladies. To reach it, travel back to the city and you’ll recognise it when you get there. You may use my personal hovertrain.”

He led the way out of the room and down a corridor to a door which opened onto the lagoons. They found

the miniature vehicle waiting on its private legs, scarcely big enough to carry the two of them. A ramp slid down automatically and the hatch swung open. They climbed. As she settled into her seat, Sonja glanced at Hossdoktor and observed his expression. It was clear he didn't want to part with his beloved hovertrain. She raised her eyebrows.

Glumly he muttered: "No extra charge."

They set off through the dirty water back toward the eastern lands, reaching the edge of the lagoons, retracting the legs and gliding over Gumpshire and the Volent bridge. Now they were approaching the outskirts of the capital. Gregor was deep in thought all the way.

"I wonder where it is?" Sonja said.

"What?" he stuttered.

"The last Hospice, the secret one!"

He made a gesture which encompassed the sky, land and horizon. This was the product of his deliberations. "I think I know. In some ways it's a trick answer, but it's also correct."

"Hurry and tell me, chum!"

Before he could reply, a violent explosion rocked the hovertrain and deafened them both. The vehicle regained its balance but proceeded at a reduced rate. The sky was suddenly full of ash and smoke. Now heavy clouds rolled over the landscape. The volcano on the outskirts of the city had erupted again. Typical!

Something struck the train, smashing one of the windows. A charred body in a protective suit. A tourist from the convection holiday. Others plummeted,

some clutching brochures and souvenirs. Gregor coughed and shielded his eyes.

"*The last Hospice is the entire world.*"

But Sonja wasn't listening. "A rain of little men. I'm glad we didn't go on that vacation."

"And the slowest and most monstrous of all fatal conditions," he continued in small voice but with an ironic grin, "is life itself. Ordinary life. Just life."

On Chromium Pond

The Chancellor of Chrome College, more commonly known as the Dean Supreme, was remembering a time when robots existed. In fact, back then, they ruled the world and indulged in all those energetic things which must be done to assert control over anything, to say nothing of everything. There was marching, lots of it, up and down elevated metal roads which spiralled around the crystal towers of immense cities like hopelessly unfashionable collars. Humanity was reduced to eking and squeaking a living on the edges of that pristine but clanking society, among the wastelands and weedy bits, in the marshes where machines prefer not to go, in caves high up in the mountains, along the bleak muddy shores of tidal estuaries. The robots ignored people and bore them no malice, though they swatted any who got in their way, with no sense of remorse, just as a dandrum might swipe a bugaboo, or a *fiddly* detach the nose of a *snoff*, but

those beings and disputes belong to a later era, so it wasn't quite like that.

The Dean Supreme was only a boy when the robots were still in power. He lived with Jitters, his uncle, and Ruggly, his best friend, in an abandoned tower block isolated on its own between cities. Built on soft soil, it had sunk over the centuries until only the top floor was now above ground: the thirty other levels lay beneath, many flooded with mud and clay which had burst in through the windows, setting hard as the radio mast on the roof conducted occasional lightning strikes down the wiring in the walls. The baked clay strengthened the ancient structure and a previous tribe of occupants had carved elaborate corridors and grottoes and even temples into these solid rooms. The Dean Supreme went there to meditate and offer small gifts, but not to any god or goddess: he prayed to himself. Much later he sacrificed his uncle but that is still a secret and the official line is that there never was an uncle in the first place.

Sitting forward and leaning his elbows on his desk, fingers extended and touching, the Dean Supreme contorted his face into a mask of genuine sincerity and sighed.

"We never had adequate illumination down there, just oil-soaked rags on sticks and a few buckets of luminous paint which we daubed on the walls as we went along. I did spots and stripes but Ruggly was more creative, liked to paint owls and seals and intestines, charming and sinuous images, which reminds me about the latrines, always a

big problem in the dark, forever treading in something, often luminous in its own way, a *different* way, I never enjoyed looking too closely. We had a room, a whole room, used to be an office, to do our business in, an unprofitable business I should add, on the bottom floor, as far away from our living area as possible. It was already half full, or half empty if you happen to be an optimist. Anyway . . ."

Unable to restrain himself any longer, the Dean of Anecdotes interrupted with a cry, "I have a better story about dung."

The room became a sluggish ocean of muttering.

The Dean Supreme raised a hand. "No, let him have his say."

The Dean of Anecdotes glanced around anxiously. "It's about robots as well. My grandfather told it to me and he heard it from *his* grandfather, or was it from his grandson? If so, then I invented the whole thing! But here it is anyway: it seems there was a man called Swaggle who kept finding electronic and mechanical components in obscure corners of lonely alleys, all sorts of components in prime working order, chips, switches, capacitors, resistors, nuts, bolts, cogs, springs, you name it! High quality stuff and too good to waste, so he gathered it up and took it home and used it to repair his own equipment, televisions, music reproduction apparatus, heating systems, whatever. Then one day, just like that, he realised what it all was and why it was left lying around in obscure corners."

“The dung of robots isn’t proper excrement,” remarked someone.

“Ah, but the idea wouldn’t let him go, the notion that his house was full of robot droppings, inside all his domestic appliances, somehow making them dirty. He couldn’t bear to live there any more and moved out.”

The Dean Supreme put on a very glum face.

“That couldn’t have happened in the age of robots, it just wasn’t like that, not at all. They never relieved themselves, they were too perfect for such processes. We’d still be living under them if they hadn’t destroyed each other in a monumental civil war. I am the oldest here and I was there, I remember it well. Seems that the robots with real names and the robots with numbers fell out, got angry at each other, but it wasn’t just as simple as name versus number. Each side fell into two different camps, one wanted immediate war with the opposite side, the other wanted to adopt their ways as a gesture of conciliation. The pacifists won the argument and all the robots with numbers gave themselves names, and vice versa. They employed a simple substitution code for the purpose. For instance, a robot named RODERICK would become 181545189311 or 18154425, and a robot numbered 3523208154 would become CEVTHOD or CEBC-THAED, depending on what his friends preferred.”

“That sounds like a farce,” said the Dean of Definitions.

“And so it was! The exchanges on both sides cancelled each other out and nothing really improved, the jealous hatreds between name and number remained. This time the belligerent elements insisted it was their turn to settle the issue. The pacifists had tried and failed. The war was brutal and oily. Giant machines strode across the landscape trampling, with difficulty, only slightly smaller devices, in a grotesque ballet of amplified newtonian forces. Sprockets sprang and cogs had their teeth knocked out. The humans stayed out of it and most of them survived to construct the civilisation we are sitting in today.”

“Where is all this getting us?” asked the Dean of Returns.

“Nostalgia trips are usually static,” admitted the Dean Supreme, “but I’ve been toying with a money making scheme recently. Chrome College could do with some extra funding.”

“What’s your probably unworkable plan?” frowned the Dean of Doubts.

“Some sort of theme park linked to the campus. A heritage diorama. You know the sort of thing, fake antique sets, actors dressed in period garb, hefty admission fee for the public. Blatant commercialism in disguise. We could call it a living history lesson, interactive, fun but educational, similar to what they’ve done in the Botanical University of Lubbalouana, the *World of Antediluvian Fruit*, I visited that last year with my cat, his feet still smell of paw-paws. I was thinking along the lines of something more technical. A localised

reconstruction of the robot age. Outside this window.”

All faces turned to regard the vast glass pane. Far below there was an oval gleam.

“We don’t have room to spare for such a venture,” pointed out the Dean of Boundaries. “We’ve already built on all the available land between departments and we can’t widen our perimeter without risking conflict with our neighbours, who happen to be the Priests of Drigg. The theme park is a good idea but impractical.”

“The pond,” said the Dean Supreme.

“But all the equipment, sets and actors will sink to the bottom,” objected the Dean of Buoyancies.

“Not after the site is modified.”

There was a sharp intake of breath and a shaking of heads. The Dean of Pauses was the first to recover his powers of speech.

“That strangely silvery expanse of water is an integral part of the image of this institution. It gave the college its name. For one thing we’d never get planning permission from the government to drain it. For another, the students would riot!”

“It’s their favourite picnic area,” added the Dean of Excursions. “The news bees like it too.”

The Dean Supreme rolled his ultra academic eyes.

“I don’t propose pumping the liquid out and just leaving an ugly pit. No, I suggest replacing the surface level—the mysteriously shiny and clean meniscus—with a solid sheet of chrome. The

pond will continue to look the same, possibly even more appropriate to the nomenclature of our college, but it will be able to hold the weight of men dressed in tungsten costumes.”

“That puts a different slant on things,” chortled the Dean of Definitions.

But the Dean of Incursions was less convinced. “What will stop the participants of the theme park accidentally spilling out of the designated area onto the non-commercial parts of the campus?”

The Dean Supreme cleared his throat. “That could be a problem. We’ll have to lower the level of the sheet of chrome to a point where the vertical banks of the steep lake become walls which can’t be surmounted. For the actors inside the diorama it will be almost like a prison. We can use students in disfavour to dress as the robots. We can set them so many weeks, months or years of working in the park—I mean interactive history lesson—as a punishment for poor exam marks, inadequate research results or failure to pay fees on time. Visitors to the park will stand on the banks behind railings and watch what happens from above. There will be no danger of mixing those inside with those outside. They will be kept separate.”

There was now general agreement that the scheme was a good one and could be implemented within a week.

“I wonder what I can contribute?” sighed the Dean of Vapours.

"It must be absolutely authentic," insisted the Dean of Details.

"To make it more convincing," agreed the Dean Supreme, "it would be nice to have two humans among the fake robots, a man and woman lost in a society which has no use for them, barely surviving in the margins of the theme park in the same way I existed with Ruggly in the real robot age. If we could get hold of a typical couple for that role, say a househusband with a professional female as a mate, it would be perfect! But I can't imagine anyone agreeing to do something so uncomfortable and degrading, not willingly at any rate."

"What are you hinting at?" someone asked.

"Just a little kidnapping exercise, maybe the next suitable couple who happen to stray into our territory could disappear from the modern world and find themselves suddenly transported back in time? It would make for a much more genuine show."

There was laughter and smirks. But another commotion swamped the noises of the jubilant academics, a clattering and howling along the corridor outside, a stamping and pounding which rose violently in volume and then fell away again, part of a venerable tradition to which nobody in the chamber raised an eyebrow. The annual ball game was in progress. The male students of Chrome College were competing against the hydrogen girls of St Tritiums. The aim of the game was to hit a glowglobe with sticks in a perfect

straight line from the Crystal Piers to Wildewood and back again. The route passed directly through this building. Chrome College had a fair reputation in sporting achievements. Already this year it had beaten the University of Paraparapara at its own specialist pastime—paragliding. The Dean Supreme was proud.

"I conclude this meeting," he announced.

There was a knock at the door. The Dean of Belatedness strode in, battered from his contact in the corridor.

"I trust I'm *not* not late?" he asked.

Gregor Pontoon sweated as he towed the piggy on a leash. It made no effort to help itself locomote along, mainly because it was ceramic and incapable of choice. Although empty it was heavy and much taller than its owners and it caught on every protuberance and hole in the decaying road. In the strong afternoon sunlight the oily moisture on Gregor's face held inner rainbows, but there was no gold or wishes anywhere on him, nor could there ever be. His mate, Sonja Peterson, emptied her pipe by tapping it on his head.

"What is the point of this jaunt again?" she asked.

He coughed as the ash streamed down his face. "To sink it in the lake."

"I get it," she answered. "A symbolic casting away of our poverty. Now there isn't even a single cent in the thing, you imagine we can free ourselves from the everyday struggle of living by making

an impetuous and romantic gesture. Poor piggy!"

"It will empower us," he gasped.

"No it won't, chum. It's just a desperate little ritual which seems better to perform than simply sitting in the house and starving slowly to death in the cold winter days."

"You're so negative!" he whimpered.

"No I'm not. There's no need for *me* to starve, I can eat you. This little trip is for your benefit alone. You're unbelievably selfish, I don't know why I don't chew you right now."

"What the heck's that?" he spluttered.

"It looks like a fight of some kind. A man is being overpowered by a giant insect. There's nothing we can do to help him. It's a quick doom and that's something to be grateful for."

Gregor squinted but it didn't appear to him that the insect was trying to kill the man, rather that it didn't know its own strength. It seemed to be dancing on its victim rather than deliberately assaulting him. Not that this difference counted for much. The result was the same. The dance finished and the creature took to the sky, heading toward the alabaster pillars of the Pallid Colonnades which jutted insignificantly on the horizon like hairs on a cold forearm. As it passed low over their heads, Sonja pointed at writing emblazoned on its side. The signature of the Prefect of Police. She sighed.

"It's a news bee, an experimental model, far bigger than it ought to be. This is another attempt by the authori-

ties to censor the news. As the bee dances the latest bulletins into you, it simultaneously stamps you to death. You get the story only at the price of your life!"

"Sneaky," commented Gregor.

They hurried up to the side of the victim. He was still alive but fading fast. He beckoned them closer and Gregor stooped and placed his ear against the man's mouth. Between congealing, cooling spittle the following items could be made out:

"Two confectionery ships have collided in the middle of the Volent in a violent chococalypse . . . Philip Pew has polished himself completely off while cheating at the boatrace in a converted hovertrain . . . Utah has been flunked by its teacher state, Tutah . . . The God of Elks has just come into being and he's in a foul mood . . ."

The broadcast was terminated at this point by a death rattle. Gregor shook the man and then struck the top of his head with his fist but he couldn't get reception back.

Sonja shrugged. "We're not in a position to change anything. I don't care about current affairs anymore."

"Let's complete our mission then," said Gregor.

They tramped further down the lane. Ahead lay a bulging wall of fog. It was curious to behold, because the day had been clear until now, but he accepted it as a natural phenomenon, in the same way he never suspected contrivance in the spurt of juice into the eye when he peeled an ugly fruit. It just

was. They had walked a long way. Maliface Down and its radio telescope were far behind them, as were the phoney diamond towers of Ventnand, for they had passed through pathless Jester Wood and picked between the columns of several fake temples. Now they were close to their destination.

"You first into the mist, chum," said Sonja.

He nodded and crossed the billowing threshold into a clammy copy of the world. The fog extended its tendrils under the collar of his shirt, spreading down his back and along his arms. It even explored the empty piggy, entering the slit like a tongue posted by accident instead of a letter, though the taste of nothing may be nothing like tastelessness. Hard to say really, especially if you are the owner of that symbolic tongue. Sonja shivered and decided to blame her mate for this discomfort also. She refilled her pipe and scowled at him as she thrust it between her teeth and for an instant he was troubled by the notion that this fog was a gathering of all the fumes she had ever puffed in his face, come together again after dispersing, just so that her past actions could be as actively vindictive now as before.

Then he shook his head and mumbled excitedly: "I saw the lake! This way. Take my arm and follow me."

"Are you sure, chum? I can't make out a single thing in this soup. Did you glimpse it through a *rent*?"

He recoiled. "I dislike that word. Piggy can't pay it, neither can we. That's why we're here."

"I meant a hole, a clear spot."

"Yes, a gap opened in the vapours. It has gone now, but I remember the direction. All silvery the lake was, just like it's supposed to be. When was the last time you came to Chromium Pond? Was it when you were still a student? Did you revise for your radio astronomy exams while dangling your feet in the ripples?"

Sonja's voice was cold. "Steal my nostalgia again and I'll dangle those same feet in your mangled liver."

"It was just a guess!" whimpered Gregor.

"From now on, all your guesses had better be wrong. If you get any right, do you know what I'll do?"

"Show me affection for the very first time?"

"Way off. Well done, chum."

"I'll keep it like that," sobbed Gregor.

Arms outstretched, Sonja touched something hard and long. Then she frowned. "Railings? These weren't here before. What a shame. I think it spoils the natural ambience."

"Maybe they are to stop people falling in."

She leered through white veils. "Or to encourage professionals to *hurl* their mates in an impressive arc."

"A parabola," he admitted quietly.

"Well are you going to demonstrate with the piggy? I'm not lifting that thing, it was your idea, chum."

Grunting with effort, Gregor hefted the ceramic object onto his shoulder. He breathed deeply and clenched the

muscles of his face. Then with a mighty shout he employed the totality of his strength to launch the piggy far out into the mist. It glinted irregularly as it fell. For an instant it even seemed to grimace. Then it vanished. Silence. Gregor waited for a splash which never came. Instead there was a sharp crack, a sound which made his knuckles ache, and a shimmering echo, as if a gong had been sounded to announce a dinner that nobody wanted. This was closely followed by a shout:

“Ouch . . . ! Bugger . . . ! I mean, *this does not compute!*”

“That shouldn’t happen,” remarked Sonja. She leaned over the railings. “Is anyone down there?”

“No.” A pause. “Are you a typical couple?”

“In many unlikely ways, yes.”

“In that case, keep leaning forward. Just a bit further, both of you. Come on now, it’ll be worth your while. There’s something I want to show you. Keep leaning, another centimetre.”

Sonja and Gregor stretched out over the void, straining eyes and ears to make out what lay below. The mist was still thick. It was almost an academic fog, crafted at the highest research level, the best of its kind, not readily available for general atmospheric use. Suddenly the railings gave way, as if they were hinged at the point where they met the ground. Sonja reached out as they plummeted and span Gregor in midair, to ensure she landed on top of him. His final fate as a mate would be to break her fall. He attempted to kiss her

a moment before they hit the lake, but she covered his mouth with her free hand. The contact of his lips was not a passable last sensation. Then they struck the surface, but they remained dry.

“The shimmering waters have solidified!” he croaked.

“Are you injured?” Sonja asked.

“Not badly enough to mess up the wounds you gave me yesterday. I think I can stand. Yes, that’s right, you go first. Use me as a platform to regain your balance. Push your foot into my groin just a bit harder to gain adequate leverage.”

The being that now approached them was curiously cheap and menacing in appearance, a series of metallic cubes balanced on each other with four spindly legs, six curving tentacle arms and a conical head equipped with a complete circle of eyes.

“You are now in the age of robots. We are indifferent to you. Our brains are clean and hard, yours are squishy.”

Gregor rubbed his bruises. “The robot era was just a glitch in the evolution of a utopia for people, a utopia conceived centuries ago by our spiritual father, the glorious Charlton Radish.”

Sonja hissed, “We only have to believe in utopia in front of the police. Less ideology, if you please.”

The robot answered, “You have inadvertently plunged through a faultline in the fabric of spacetime and returned to your past. The year is now whatever you think it is minus whatever has to be taken away. Um, I’ve forgotten. I’d better check.”

“The fabric of spacetime?” repeated Gregor. “I’ve always wondered about that expression. *Fabric*. How can space and time be like cloth and what sort of suit might they make? A pinstripe apron? One set of stripes would be wide and long and deep, the other set would change without moving, grow worn and stained.”

“You are an idiot,” objectively observed the robot.

“He certainly is,” sighed Sonja.

“Whether you agree or disagree with me is irrelevant because robots don’t care about human opinions.”

“Who do you work for?” she demanded.

“The Cog of Cogs, the ultimate ruler of the robot age. Don’t think you can catch me out on that one. I’ve carefully rehearsed all the most obvious questions. Ask me anything you like. Go on. I’ve memorised lists of stars, forces, minerals, components, equations, chemicals. I’m also competent at big universal questions.”

Sonja tested him. “What is best in life?”

“Cold reason housed in steel.”

“And what is worst . . . ?”

“Skeletons encased in blubber.”

“You’re doing very well,” admitted Sonja, but before she could ask another question she was interrupted by Gregor, who was desperate to get in on the act. He cried:

“Which is superior, a cucumber sandwich or eternal happiness?”

The robot started to say something, but Gregor was so pleased with his trick

question, the only one he knew, that he couldn’t wait for an answer. “I suppose you think it’s eternal happiness? But that isn’t correct! Listen carefully. Nothing is better than eternal happiness, right? And a cucumber sandwich is certainly better than nothing. So a cucumber sandwich must be superior to eternal happiness. Queasy!”

The robot scratched his head at this last word.

“I think he means Q.E.D.” said Sonja.

“I don’t like cucumber or sandwiches,” grated the robot.

“Really?” she replied. “So what *is* your favourite dinner?”

“Light emitting diodes. Yum! I also like electromotive forced solenoids with a side order of chips.”

Sonja leaned forward. “Potato?”

The robot laughed scornfully. “Silicon.”

She mused. “Maybe you really are a robot. You didn’t groan at that abysmal joke. If you were something other than a thinking machine—say a student encased in a primitive techno-costume—then you wouldn’t be able to resist an ironic mutter.”

“Unless he’s equipped with mutter deflectors,” whispered Gregor. He licked his lips. “Cheap pantomime ones.”

“There’s no such thing,” snapped Sonja.

The robot placed two of its tentacles on its vertical hips. “This conversation has become unproductive. I am wasting precious cybernetic time talking to or-

ganic lifeforms. You are now on your own. You will be forced to exist on the margins of robot society, reduced to eking and squeaking a living on the edges of our pristine but clanking society. . . I've forgotten the rest of the script, but you know what I mean. Here's a small gift for you. It will help you to survive. It will be the only assistance any robot ever gives you."

He stalked off and they watched him depart. The back of his head was dented and a ceramic shard was lodged between his shoulders. The fog closed again. They regarded the object left behind.

"What is it?" wondered Gregor.

Sonja peered closer. "A bucket of luminous paint!"

The Cog of Cogs, the Grand Cognomen, the Ultimate Unit: all these were valid titles of the leader of the robot empire. He was also remembering the age of robots. It was easy to do this, because that particular epoch hadn't passed yet. He raised himself to his full height of one and a half millimetres and surveyed the massed ranks of officials assembled before him. The debating chamber was enormous, a metre in length, and its limits were almost beyond the range of his vision. Lacking a mouth, he communicated by thought impulses, but even so he wasn't sure he could be heard at the back. Fortunately the minions gathered in that part of the chamber were of minimal administrative importance. He folded

four of his tentacles and blinked twelve eyes.

"The reason I summoned you here today," he began, "is to debate an issue which can no longer be deferred. Something ironical has slowly happened which threatens our dominance of this planet, perhaps even our existence in any meaningful sense. To state the matter simply: the theme park has got out of control."

The mental murmuring was silently deafening.

"It was inevitable," commented the Unit of Probabilities. "From the moment it was set up, this *had* to happen."

"The risks were deemed acceptable," said the Unit of Assessment.

"I always had my doubts," sniffed the Unit of Measurement. "My vote was against the project right from the beginning. I suggest that others among us examine their consciences."

"Guilt circuits are a shameful waste of power."

"Not if they are superconductive . . ."

The Ultimate Unit raised all his tentacles. "There's no point blaming ourselves. It's more important to take action to control and reverse the developing crisis. Otherwise we will lose everything we have to the barbarians who don't even suspect our existence."

"I detest them," growled the Unit of Precision. "I hate the way they stride around on their fleshy feet crying, 'By Chrome!' They are stupid lukewarm monsters."

"The one who calls himself *The Pres-*

ident is especially repellent,” remarked the Unit of Competence.

“His Prefect of Police outdoes him for pomposity.”

“No, the one known as the Dean Supreme is worse. Can you believe that he even sacrificed his uncle to his own ego? He gave himself the Jitters. He gives me that too!”

“They are *all* hideous,” concurred the Ultimate Unit, “but they are also interesting, which is why we set up the theme park in the first place. It is our own progress which has played into their unwitting hands. That is why we should be able to remedy the situation without too much trouble from them. I have an idea I want to discuss.”

“Please do,” came the communal thought.

“There is no need for violence—yet. The humans don’t even have to become aware of our presence. We robots have always known how to settle disputes and other difficulties logically and without spilled oil. For instance, by combining numbers and letters in our private names we avoided civil war half a century ago, though we let the humans think we eradicated ourselves over that very issue.”

“Yes,” nodded the Unit of Precision, “and it made the theme park more authentic, because they believed they had reclaimed the world, that our age had passed. They acted more naturally within their confines and consigned us to their history books!”

The laughter was unanimous. “The deluded fools!”

Even the Ultimate Unit managed a chuckle. “We chose the Isle of Chrome as the best site for the theme park and allowed the humans to run all the affairs of the civilisation they constructed there. We took pleasure in observing everything they did. Such primitive lifestyles! They actually believed that atomic trampolines were ‘futuristic’. Very amusing! We assembled on the perimeter of the park and guffawed silently at them, sometimes even falling on our backs and rubbing our waists with our tentacles. Progress for the humans remained (and remains) slow, but the speed of our own evolution began to prove disadvantageous for us. You all know this already, I don’t know why I am bothering to repeat it.”

“Miniaturisation was to blame,” sighed the Unit of Probabilities.

“We were able to rehouse ourselves in smaller and smaller casings,” added the Unit of Assessment.

“Look at us now!” cried the Unit of Measurement.

“Exactly!” soundlessly thundered the Ultimate Unit, before pausing to rub his temples. “All this thinking is giving me a dry head. May I trouble anyone to fetch me a cup of oil?”

“I’ll do it!” volunteered the Unit of Domesticities (also known as the Kitchen Unit) from the back.

After the tiny cup had been respectfully presented to him and its contents smeared over his minuscule but imperious brow, the Ultimate Unit resumed his inner speech:

“As we became gradually more com-

pact, the world around us appeared to grow larger. There was more space everywhere. We found we had to do a lot more walking. Soon the distances between our individual bodies grew too vast to be practical. How can we live together in a workable society if it takes a centimetre high robot an entire day to visit his nearest neighbour to borrow a spanner or exchange a battery? The solution was to huddle closer. We needed less room on the surface of the planet. As our civilisation advanced, it also contracted. Each of us is now almost invisible to the human eye! Soon we will all be much smaller than a single mote of dust."

"Thus we are more efficient!" came the general reply.

"Agreed. But there are dangers in this perpetual miniaturisation. We are in effect *withdrawing* from length, breadth and height and handing over these dimensions to the humans. As we advance we require less room, but as they advance they require more. By huddling closer we gave them space in which to expand. First they spilled over the perimeter of the Isle of Chrome, constructing a bridge which allowed them to colonise the vacated region of Gumpshire. Then they spread out in every direction, an ever widening circle, while we were locked in an ever decreasing ring. They occupied Amana, Grokkland, Bubble, Hummdong, the deserts of Khyor, the majority of the globe!"

"They breed so fast," murmured the Unit of Precision.

The Ultimate Unit nodded. "Now we are confined to a circle with a radius of one thousand kilometres centred on a point 50°30'S, 178°45'E, which is the antipodes of the human metropolis of Ventnand. This debating chamber is located on what was once called Bounty Island. Before another year has passed our remaining territory will have a radius of less than one hundred metres. The following year it will be less than one thousandth of a millimetre! We are shrinking to nothing! We are resigning from the game of existence!"

"Is it really that serious?" croaked the Unit of Possibilities.

The Ultimate Unit closed all his eyes. "We can no longer justifiably claim to be *outside* the theme park!"

There was a pause, no louder or quieter than the babble of thoughts which immediately followed it.

These thoughts converged into conformity.

"We are surrounded on all sides by the inflated theme park. It has run out of control and we are marooned in a shrinking cage of robotic values and achievements. Indeed it might be accurately claimed that our territory now constitutes the real theme park, that we are the exhibits, the objects of amusement!"

The Ultimate Unit waited for the level of alarm to reach its peak and then announced forcefully, "I am not a prisoner. I am a free number and letter combination. That is what I will remain."

“Us too!” came the anticipated chorus.

“What can we do?” asked the Unit of Assessment.

The Ultimate Unit shrugged. “I have pondered the matter in my free time and this is my plan. Our probes have reported that Chrome College has recently set up a theme park of its own, a diorama of the robot age, in effect a theme park within a theme park! It is occupied by actors in costumes. It occurs to me that if we infiltrate this site we can regain a foothold in the heart of human civilisation.”

“We will pass unnoticed among the fake robots,” said the Unit of Measurement. “Is that what you mean?”

The Ultimate Unit shook his head. “Not just that. We would pass unnoticed anyway, due to our size. What has proved to be our weak point is our access to superior technology, the tools that enable us to keep miniaturising ourselves. You know how it is. If a process is available it is impossible not to make use of it. But if we relocate to the theme park at Chrome College and *leave our equipment behind* we will be forced to live as we did half a century ago. We will have little choice but to scale ourselves back up. We will be compelled to exist in bulky casings and to clank wherever we go.”

“The theme park will be far too small for us,” objected the Unit of Measurement. “The population of this chamber alone numbers in the millions. If we all resume our ancestral dimensions we will burst the boundaries of the site.”

“Precisely!” cried the Unit of Precision.

The idea was rapidly accepted with rare enthusiasm by every robot present, even by the menials at the rear, the Units with ludicrous or unnecessary specialities, the abacus brains and recycle bins. A chanting softer than a non-existent wind began to rustle nothing at all along the length of the hall. It was inspiring.

“The robot age! The robot age!”

“The world will be ours again!” declared the Ultimate Unit. “For we will be at the centre of a new ripple which will spread out and engulf mankind. This time we must finish them off. Ignoring them and bearing no malice, as we did last time, was a mistake. We will utilise aggression and technical dooms if necessary, but it may be feasible to manipulate them into eradicating themselves by secretly influencing their politics. For example, I believe that the current President should be overthrown and replaced by a candidate who will weaken the institution, say a being with many heads, arms and legs.”

“Let us hope we can find one,” mused the Unit of Competence. “I am also of the opinion that the Prefect of Police, Giotto Pucker, should be replaced by an even more pompous successor.”

“There is a fellow by the name of Tiepolo Bunter who might fit the bill, but we will make those sorts of decisions at the right time. First we should prepare for the voyage to the far side of the globe, from this chamber to the Isle

of Chrome. It will be a long journey. Our legs are so tiny! Fortunately one of our probes has discovered a shortcut through the centre of the earth. It appears that the ground beneath our feet is riddled with tunnels and corridors, the products of an advanced but now extinct subterranean culture. We will utilise these passages and surface up through Chromium Pond itself."

"That makes things a bit easier," agreed the crowd.

"I am looking forward to helping engineer the collapse of the human race," confessed the Unit of Competence.

"We are also taken with that prospect," said the Unit of Precision and the Unit of Measurement together.

The Ultimate Unit mentally smirked. "Of course you are! I too like to imagine how it will occur. One day, perhaps not so far in the future, there

will be only one man left. A single human! His destruction will be an occasion for extreme rejoicing. I wonder who he will be and what his name is? It is fascinating to speculate."

"We could take bets while scuttling through those tunnels," replied the Unit of Possibilities. "To pass the time."

"Fine idea," nodded the Ultimate Unit. "I also think it might be nice to debate some of the more outrageous theories that are currently doing the rounds of fashionable robot society. For example, the claim this is not in fact the planet Earth but a world called Zor and that we are not actually robots but Zoromes. That is a peculiar one indeed! There are plenty more. But come on, let us conclude this meeting and get moving!"

A noiseless cheer went up as the robots marched out of the chamber. ☒

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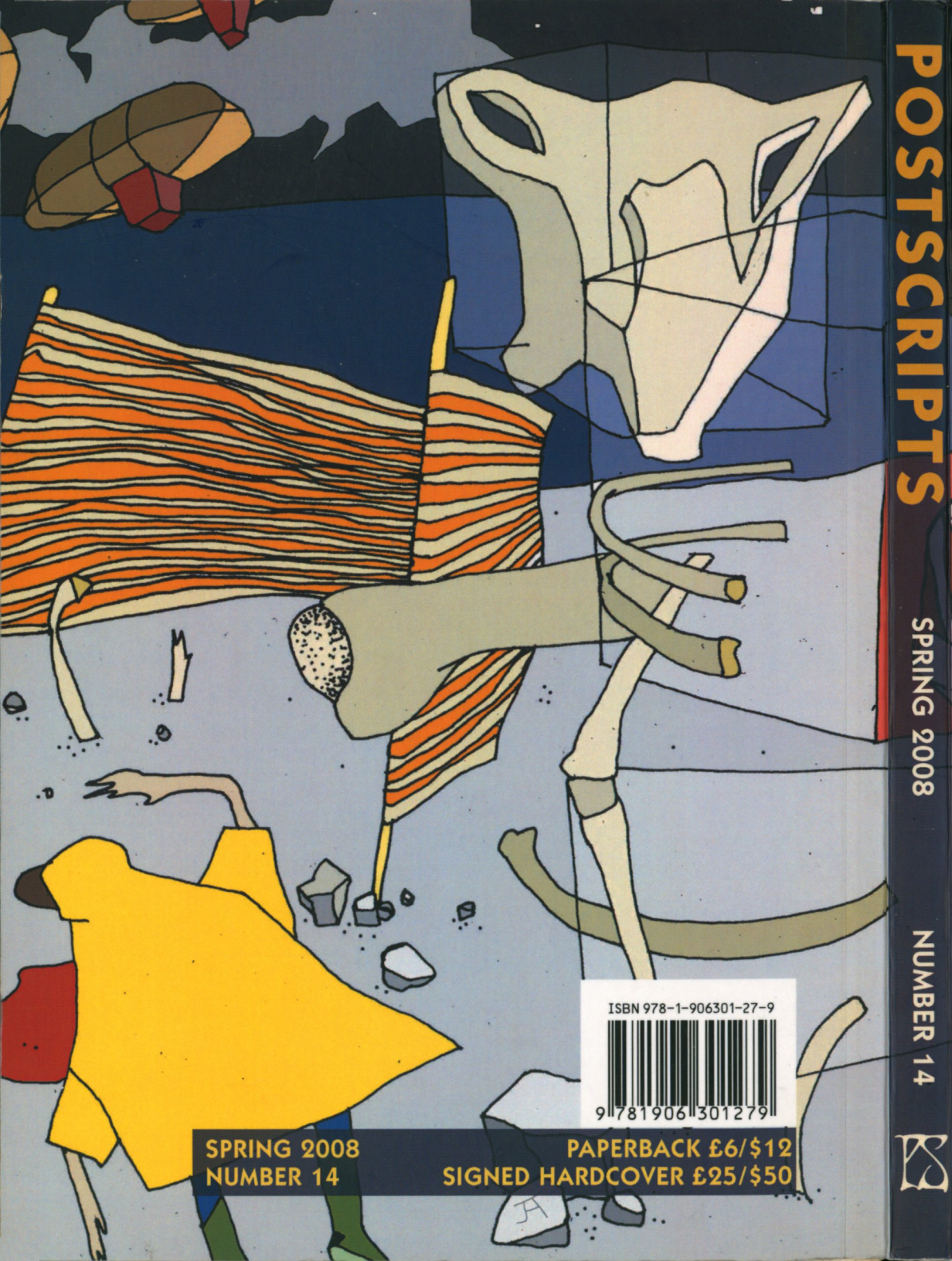
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