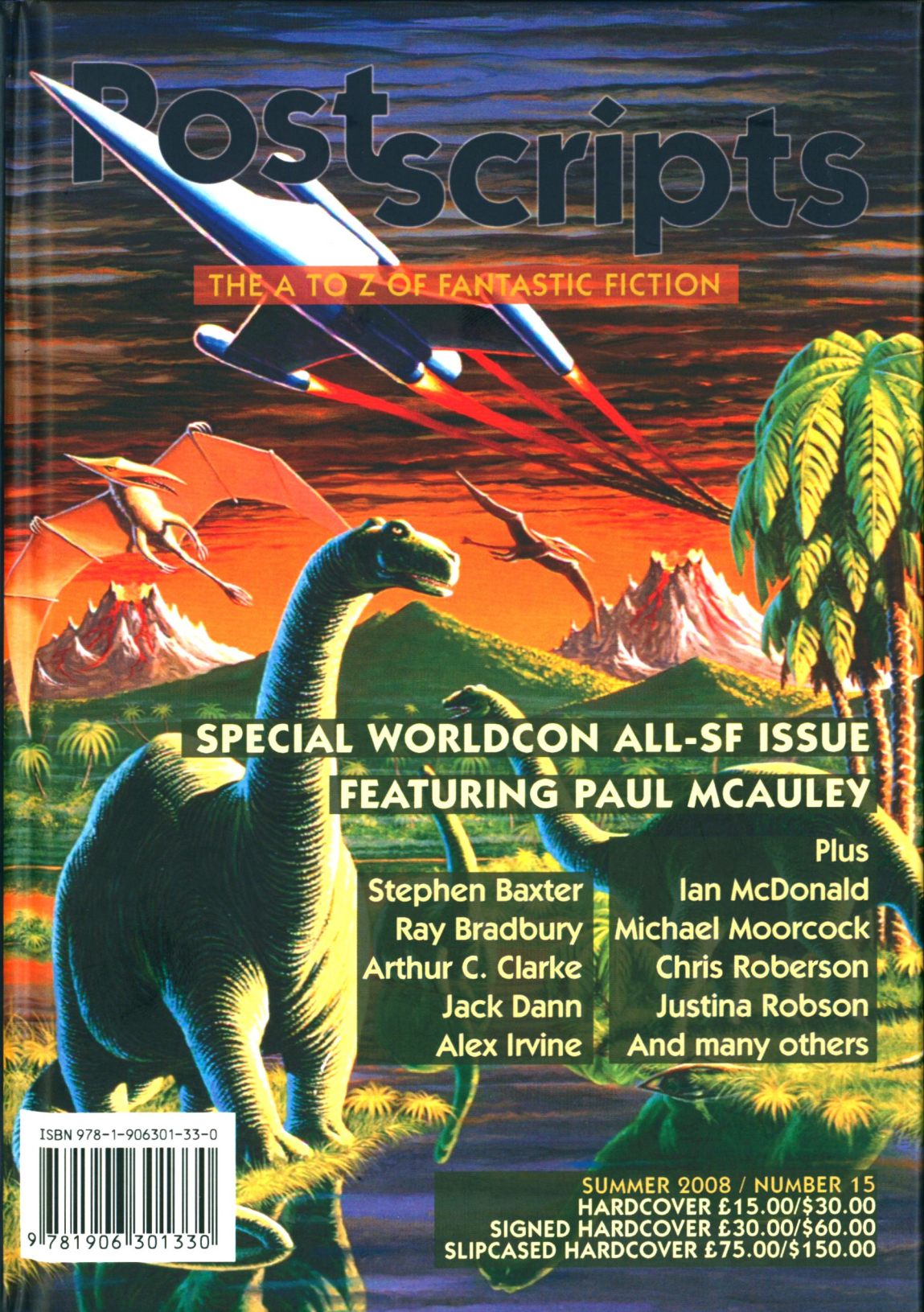


ISBN 978-1-906301-33-0
9 781906 301330

SUMMER 2008 / NUMBER 15
HARDCOVER £15.00/$30.00
SIGNED HARDCOVER £30.00/$60.00
SLIPCASED HARDCOVER £75.00/$150.00

The Best Japanese SF and Crime

straight from **Kurodahan Press**

order at **Amazon.com** and **BookDepository.com**

see all our books at **Kurodahan.com/catalog**

Speculative Japan

Outstanding Tales of Japanese Science Fiction & Fantasy

Selected and Edited by Gene van Troyer & Grania Davis

The stories you'll find collected here will broaden your view of what is possible or imaginable... from the Preface by David Brin

Now on sale! ISBN 4-902075-26-1 US$20.00

Queen of K'n-Yan

By Asamatsu Ken • Translated by Kathleen Taji

Asamatsu Ken's Queen of K'n-Yan is a fascinating story, and as Darrell Schweitzer states in his introduction, it is indeed a fine Cthulhu Mythos novel... Brian Lumley

Coming soon! ISBN 4-902075-23-7

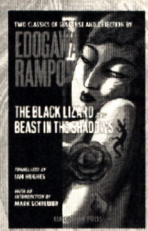
EDOGAWA RAMPO

The Black Lizard & Beast in the Shadows

Translated by Ian Hughes

Recommended reading for any English-language mystery fan The Daily Yomiuri

Now available! ISBN 4-902075-21-0 US$15.00

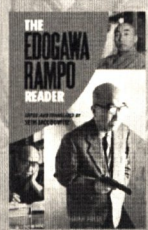


The Edogawa Rampo Reader

Edited and Translated by Seth Jacobowitz

Rampo's best stories & essays for the first time in English!

Coming Soon! ISBN 4-902075-25-3



Japan's Grand Master of Mysterious Fiction

Postscripts

SUMMER 2008 NUMBER 15

Editorial: Dispatches From The Future *Arthur C. Clarke* 3

Fiction

Fandom At The Palace *Brian Aldiss* 7
A Very Private Tour Of A Very Public Museum *Scott Edelman* 9
The Man Who Built Heaven *Keith Brooke* 24
Atlantic Crossing *Garry Kilworth* 32
Thy Saffron Wings *Chris Roberson* 45
Variant *Steven Utley* 65
Shad's Mess *Alex Irvine* 72
Under The Shadow Of Jonah *Jack Dann* 89
The Eye Of Vann *Matthew Hughes* 105
Juggernaut *Ray Bradbury* 117
The Best Of Both Worlds *Brian Stableford* 121
State Secret *Eric Brown* 133
Test Subject *James Lovegrove* 136
Let Their People Go: The Left Left Behind *Terry Bisson* 144
The Men Who Live In Trees *Kelly Barnhill* 164
Eagle Song *Stephen Baxter* 183
The Golden Octopus *Beth Bernobich* 196
Professor Fluvius's Palace Of Many Waters *Paul Di Filippo* 225

Peter Crowther
Publisher and
Managing Editor

Nick Gevers
Editor

Alligator Tree Graphics
Design and Layout

Postscripts is published quarterly by PS Publishing Ltd.

Paperback
£6/$12 per copy

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

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

Printed in the UK
by Biddles.

All rights reserved

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

Six Foot Easy *Robert Reed* **242**
Skinhorse Goes To Mars *Jay Lake* **252**
[a ghost samba] *Ian McDonald* **264**
An Article of Faith *Mike Resnick* **278**
Legolas Does The Dishes *Justina Robson* **290**
Sumptuous Dress: A Question Of Size
At The End of Time *Michael Moorcock* **309**

Paul McAuley Section

How Was The Future For You? Or, A Brief
History Of The Author **324**
Extract from ***The Quiet War*** **330**
A Brief Guide To Other Histories **335**
Searching For Van Gogh At The End Of The World **346**
The Thought War **356**
City of the Dead **362**

"Dispatches From The Future," by Arthur C. Clarke, first appeared in the January 2008 issue of Locus Magazine.

Cover art by Al Feldstein.

Interior illustrations by Ben Baldwin (pages 38 & 54), *Liz Clarke* (page 177), *James Hannah* (pages 94 & 348), *and Ian Simmons* (page 10).

Our managing editor spent many hours in 'the company' of Arthur C. Clarke in the very early 1960s when, as an impressionable (perhaps even precocious) 11- or 12-year old, he devoured the likes of The City and the Stars, Earthlight *and his personal favourite collection of the author's stories,* Tales from The White Hart *(which PS recently published with an additional farewell tale co-written with Stephen Baxter). It's sad to think that the well has now run dry for good . . . though we do have this little doff-of-the-cap (organised way back when we were putting this bumper issue together) which is reprinted here with the generous permission of* Locus *magazine (where it originally appeared) and Sir Arthur himself.*

Dispatches From The Future

Arthur C. Clarke

One of the greatest values of science fiction is the way it can challenge long-held beliefs, and make the reader appreciate, after he has stopped foaming at the mouth, that the external world need not always conform to his hopes or expectations. It forces one to think—which is why so many people dislike it.

A. E. van Vogt was very good at this kind of provocation; John W. Campbell was better (when he didn't overdo it)—and Robert Heinlein was best of all.

When anyone asks me to define science fiction, I take the easy way out—and quote that wise remark by Anonymous: "If you have to ask what science fiction is, you'll never know."

But this doesn't prevent attempts to define this *genre*—the quest will continue as long as people write Ph.D. theses. Meanwhile, I have settled for Damon Knight's magisterial: "Science Fiction is what I point to and say '*That's* science fiction.'"

There are also many arguments in trying to distinguish between science fiction and fantasy. Somewhere in the literary landscape, science fiction merges into fantasy, but the frontier between the two is fuzzy. I have suggested an operational demarcation: science fiction is something that could happen—but usually you wouldn't want it to. Fantasy is something that couldn't happen—*though often you wish it would.*

Then there is the debate as to when was the most creative period in science fiction. I should be careful in passing judgement because I myself have been part of the creative landscape for over half a century. I have now concluded that what we originally thought as gold was actually gilt—but the very best gilt; the real Golden Age is *now.*

That is undoubtedly true from the crassly commercial viewpoint: even allowing for inflation, the half-cent-a-worders of the 1930s would have been stunned by today's market, with its movie deals and megabuck advances. But we creative artists don't concern ourselves with such sordid matters. The real question is: has the *quality* of the product improved as well?

Of course it has, and often beyond recognition. But just as there is a naïve charm about primitive works of art that a more sophisticated age can never recapture, so the early pulps created a magic of their own—on occasion, potent enough to endure to this day. Moreover, when something is done for the very first time—even if it is not done particularly well—that gives it a unique power and authority.

This is probably why I still have such fondness for that era. I was hooked on science fiction by the fantastic tales that appeared in the 'pulp' magazines of the early Twentieth Century, and it was in that *genre* that I acquired my writing skills in the 1930s and 1940s.

Today's science fiction writers and fans have a much greater choice of media, formats and outlets. Yet amidst the many websites, video games, mobile entertainments and other temptations, the old-fashioned printed word (books and magazines) still has a unique place. It's no doubt a challenge to cater to those who are accustomed to instant gratification available with the interactive media. While I myself have dabbled in some of these other media and formats, there is no real substitute to reading.

And, despite all the literary evolution in the past few decades, the central purpose of science fiction has not changed. The primary function of a story is to entertain—not to instruct or to preach. Promoting a particular scientific concept or technology or a utopian worldview may become the secondary aim of a science fiction story, but propagandists should be kept away from our *genre.*

In fact, this can help us discern good science fiction from everything else. The acid test of any story comes when you re-read it, preferably after a lapse of some years. If it's good, the second reading is as enjoyable as the first. If it's great, the second reading is more enjoyable. And if it's a masterpiece, it will improve with every reading. Needless to say, there are very few masterpieces—in or out of science fiction.

In my youth, I used to read a book a day—we were the last generation that could absorb all the good books that came out. I hesitate to compile a personal list of the best books I have read, but no other book had a greater influence on my life than *Last and First Men* (1930) by Olaf Stapledon (for details, see my essay "Last and First Books" in *1984: Spring,* Del Rey Books, NY, 1984).

And I struggle to choose a favourite among my own nearly 100 books written over the 60 years. After much reflection, I settle for *Childhood's End* (1953) and *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986)—though for different reasons. Not all my readers and fans might agree with this choice, but I'm glad to have given them enough choice to argue about!

As I complete 90 orbits, the issues of legacy and posterity keep coming up (For a long time, I used to avoid these discussions by quoting the cynic who asked, "Why should I bother about posterity—what good has it done to me?"). I have had a diverse career as a science fiction writer, underwater explorer, space enthusiast and a promoter of science and technology. Of all these pursuits, I want to be remembered most as a writer who entertained and perhaps stretched the imagination of my readers.

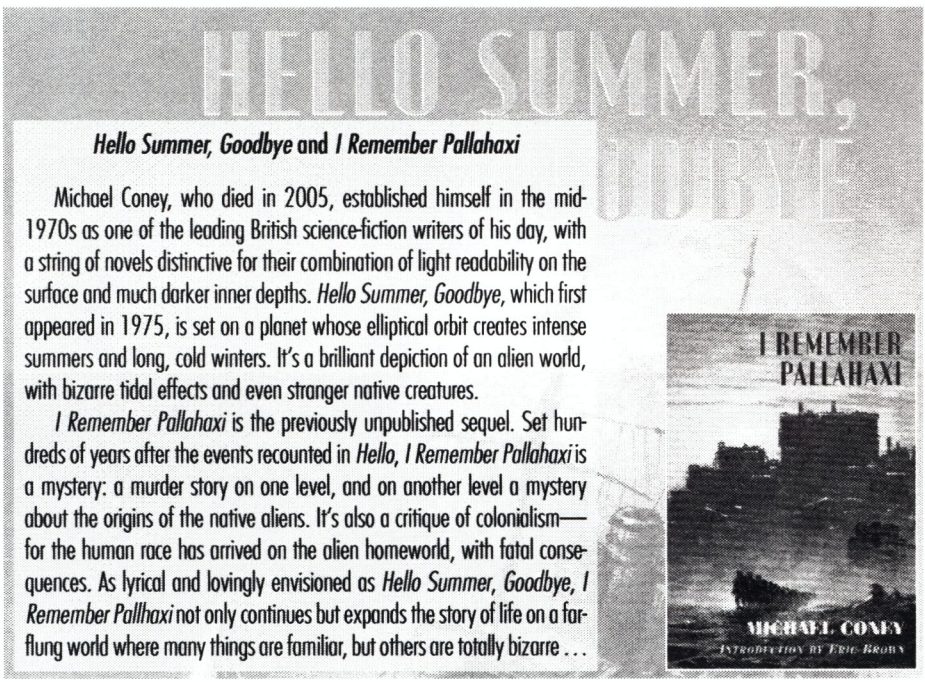
I find that another English writer who, coincidentally, also spent most of his life in the

East has expressed it very well. I could hardly improve on Rudyard Kipling on literary legacies:

If I have given you delight
by aught that I have done.
Let me lie quiet in that night
which shall be yours anon;

And for the little, little span
the dead are borne in mind,
seek not to question other than,
the books I leave behind.

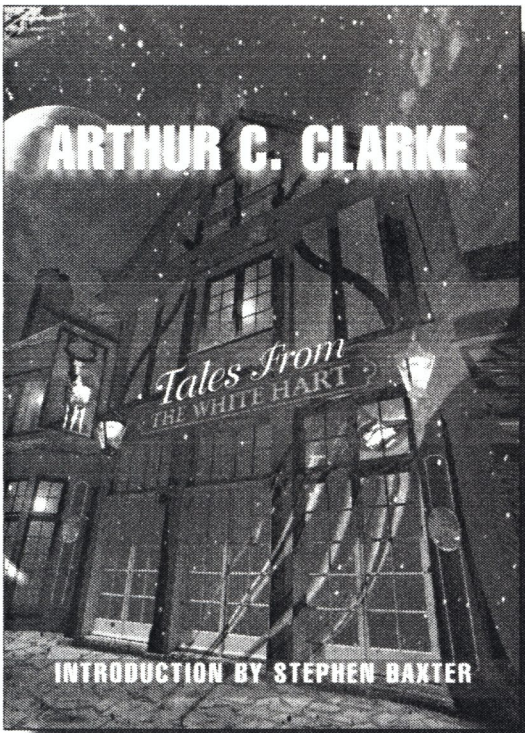
Colombo, Sri Lanka
5 December 2007



Hello Summer, Goodbye* and *I Remember Pallahaxi

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

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



"Last orders!"

Available again—50th Anniversary Edition . . . with a brand new White Hart story written in collaboration with Stephen Baxter.

Although written, as the author informs us in his introduction to the 1969 edition, in such diverse locations as New York, Miami, Colombo, and Sydney, there is something inherently English about these stories. London's famed Fleet Street district has changed dramatically in the five decades since the collection's first appearance as a Ballantine paperback original . . . and, of course, many of the regulars of the White Hart (based on the White Horse pub on Fetter Lane) are no longer with us. But the White Hart's most prominent raconteur, Harry Purvis can still be found propping up the bar and regaling us all once again with tales of quirky and often downright eccentric scientists and inventors.

Please visite the PS online store to order yours today!
http://store.pspublishing.co.uk

Brian was unable to think of a title for his piece. "It was originally to be called 'How I Found God And Lost A Camel'," he explained to our managing editor over the telephone, "but that was too flamboyant and not entirely relevant. Then it was to be 'How I Fared In A Palace Near You'. Then I decided, to hell with it . . . I've got better things to do."

One of those better things is wonderfully obsessional and comes as a consequence of the author's great love of painting and painters. "I selected a dozen favourite painters and/or paintings and wrote poems about each," he explains. "Then I realised I had to do a sketch or drawing or a watercolour that would symbolise the art or artist involved, or explain my affection for him (or her in one instance). For instance, in the case of Andrei Rublyev, I would link his lovely fresco of 'The Holy Trinity' with the film Andrei Tarkovsky made, five centuries later. I have completed my painting for that artist; now I move on to the next."

Brian's novel, Eternal Artistries *(". . . never miss the chance to be pretentious when it turns up!") is complete. Meanwhile, his 'grand' novel—called, simply,* Walcot*—will be published by Goldmark around the time this issue appears. "Never let anyone tell you that it's not SF," Mr. Aldiss quips . . . before adding with his customary mischief, "or that it is. But the great excitement is that the Bodleian Library in Oxford will publish a selection of my essays and articles."*

For those interested in seeing the great man in person (always worth even the most strenuous effort), he shall be speaking soon at Jodrell Bank, "England's main source of conversation with the universe."

Fandom At The Palace

Brian Aldiss

It had nothing to do with fame or talent: it was pure luck. I was invited to Buckingham Place for the traditional party. I shaved, put on a tie and went. Activities began at 3.30 in the afternoon.

The party reflected Britain's multi-nationalism, with all colours milling around, looking cheerful and having a word with various members of the Royal Family. I had on other occasions had a brief word with Charles, Prince of Wales, and a long and amusing conversation with Prince Phillip. On this occasion, it was the Queen who came up to me. She asked my name. When I told her, she said, "Aren't you the writer of science fiction?"

I was absolutely astonished, but next thing we were chatting about SF and she was saying how much she enjoyed it. I asked her what she liked about it in particular.

"One is very fond of robots," she said. "One has to meet so many people in the course of one's duties, that an electronic brain with no sensibilities is—if one may use the vernacular—just the ticket." The Queen, as we all know, never uses the first person singular when speaking of herself.

When she told me she loved "The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant" by

Stephen Donaldson, I said I knew Steve.

Her reply hinted that she thought he must be a nice man, although one sometimes found his vocabulary a little surpris-

ing. "Well, he was born in India, you know, Liz,' said Prince Phillip, who was passing at this point. "Come and say hello to a footballer."

"One is otherwise engaged," she told him. We went on talking; the Queen admired Iain Banks, whom she had met.

I asked her if she believed in alien civilizations in the galaxy. Her answer was modest but shrewd. "One knows very little on the subject, but one understands it is only physicists who have their say on this subject. The constitution of our planet is of great complexity, one cannot imagine it might be duplicated elsewhere. One thinks that NASA has wasted much money on the search for other civilizations which has yielded nothing." It was the Queen saying this? I was staggered.

She asked me about earlier writers. "One knows so little about the matter."

"If I may say so, ma'am, you are singularly well informed."

She smiled. "I fear one's family are more a kind of horse and hounds people. They are not fans. Do you know who started fandom, Brian?"

My first name! I was astonished. I said I believed that a man called Hugo Gernsback had started fandom. She had never heard of him. "He wrote a novel called *124C 41*," I informed her.

The Queen became excited. " 'One to Foresee for One'"? How extraordinary! It is about the royal family, one assumes?"

"May I get you a copy, ma'am?"

I was on to Amazon that very evening. I took the copy of Gernsback's seminal novel round to Buckingham Palace. That is how and why I hope to be given my knighthood.

Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

Now accepting orders for four-issue subscriptions

Each issue features approximately **60,000** words of fiction (SF, Fantasy, Horror and Crime/Suspense), plus a guest editorial, interviews, and occasional non fiction.

The magazine is published as a regular newsstand-type edition for £6 or $12 (postage £2 for the UK and £4/$8 for the rest of the world); and a signed, 150-copy hardcover edition for £25 or $50, post-free to anywhere. Occasional larger issues will be £12/$25 for the unsigned edition (the signed will remain at £25/$50). These bumper editions will, however, be sent to subscribers at no extra cost.

Paperback
UK £26 postage paid
Rest of the world
£30 / US$60

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

Signed hardback
UK £100 postage paid
Rest of the world
£110 / $220

'A Very Private Tour of a Very Public Museum' taught its author a salutory lesson, he confides—a lesson he wasn't expecting to learn. "I began writing it with the intention of submitting it to an anthology which had a very specific moral theme," Mr Edelman continues, "one that I will leave unspoken so as not to accidentally give anything away before you read the story. I didn't expect any problems with its creation, because I've always seen myself as in complete control of my characters, plots, and themes. Once I sketch out a story's arc, I'm in charge, and my characters do not get to take control. I'm a puppeteer, and the puppets don't get to choose their own destinies."

But, of course, that proved to be untrue this time around. "As I wrote this particular story, my characters took over in a most unsettling manner, demanding an ending that taught me that I'm not quite in as complete control of my fiction as I've always insisted. I could not force them to do what I'd originally thought I wanted them to do, which meant that the finished story was completely off-topic for the anthology that sparked the initial concept, and so I never bothered to submit it there. And so it was free to end up here instead." And that, we believe, is a thoroughly satisfactory turn of events for all concerned.

Mr Edelman has had more than 75 short stories published in a variety of magazines and anthologies, including Forbidden Planets, MetaHorror, The Mammoth Book of Monsters, *and* Crossroads: Tales of the Southern Literary Fantastic. *His previous* Postscripts *story was a finalist for a Stoker Award earlier this year.*

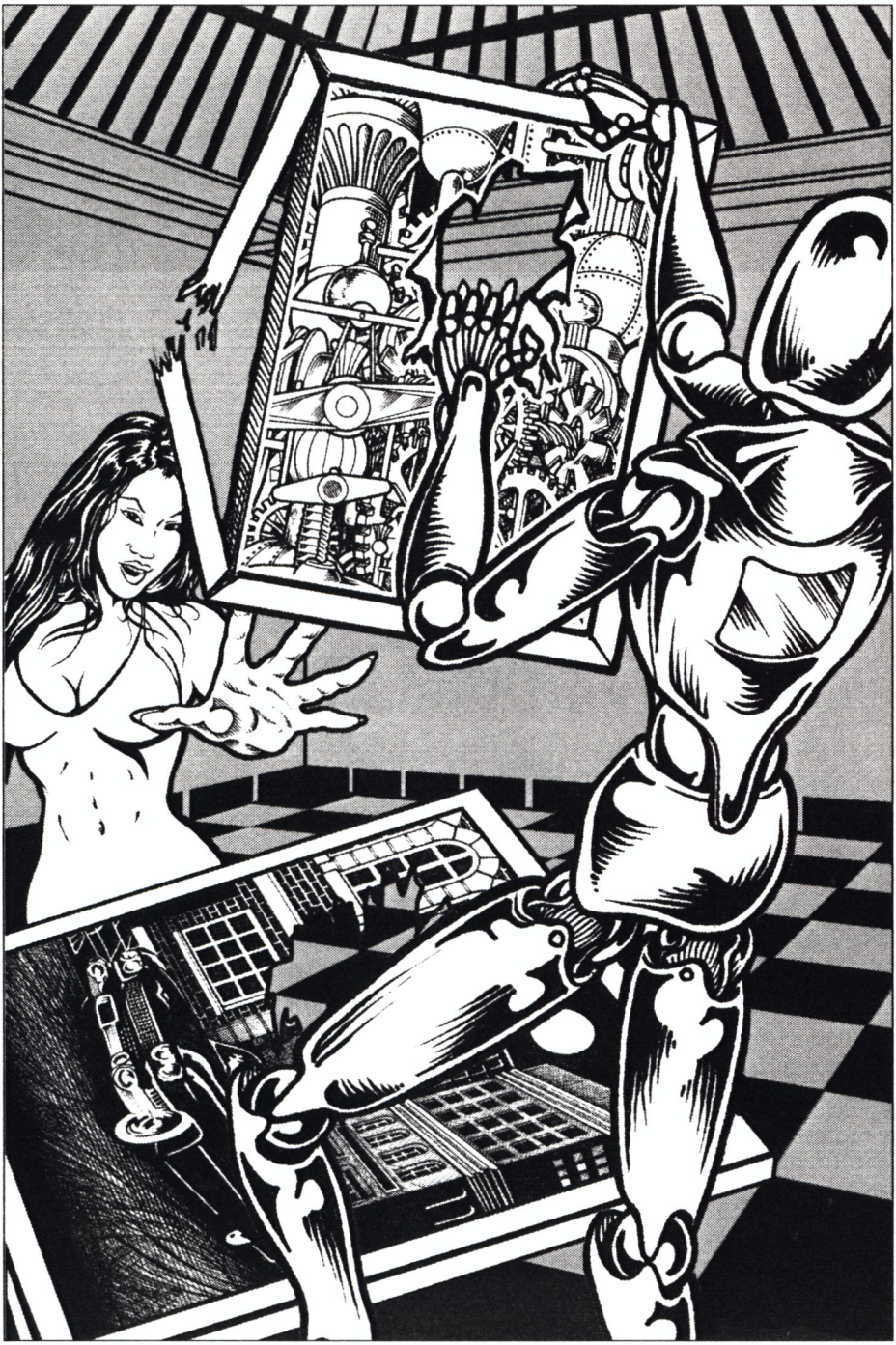
A Very Private Tour Of A Very Public Museum

Scott Edelman

Though the Visitor is crafted of metal, I am distressed to find, as I lead it through the museum's ransacked galleries, that I am unable to tell what it is thinking.

I was uneasy to begin with at the thought of giving this tour, for I am only a Curator Trainee, and by all rights it should be the Curator herself, whom in the past I have silently trailed while she led distinguished guests through our halls, leading the Visitor about. But the Visitor had insisted otherwise, and at that insistence the Curator had vanished, and so, as it studies the scorched walls on which paintings had once hung, and with its passing stirs eddies across the marble floors with the piles of ash that until its arrival on Earth were still canvas, I am doubly uncomfortable. My feelings of inadequacy rise up despite my best attempts to suppress my programming's commands, and the unexpected opaqueness of the alien's nature only makes those inadequacies loom larger throughout my software.

I should be able to read this Visitor, because I am made of metal, too, and up until now, that has always meant something. Metal should always speak to metal, at least subliminally, the way I have come to understand that flesh speaks to flesh. That I cannot, that beneath our surfaces forged



on different worlds there exists a wall, dampens my hope that this visit will have its desired effect.

As we move more deeply into the museum, the humans and robots who had previously been admiring artworks there which had survived the initial attack all freeze, but just for a moment, and then each class reacts according to its manner of creation. Those made of flesh scatter, rushing on to other galleries, and then likely, if I am any judge of humans (and I am, which is one reason the Curator chose me to help her in her tasks) fleeing the museum; those born of the factory turning to us and studying our progress with interest. I am glad to perceive from the latter that I am not the only one who finds our visitor to be unreadable. The Visitor notes their stares, and pauses, which forces me to quickly backtrack, for I had continued on without him.

"Thank you," it says, more to them than to me. "From what I have seen of this museum so far, the cleansing appears to have been complete. You have heeded my message well."

I do not know whether any of those who are present today are ones who had acted on the message that had preceded the Visitor's arrival, but it doesn't matter; what is said here will soon be heard elsewhere, and its appreciative words will be known throughout our species. My brothers nod, the Visitor nods, and we move on.

"It pleases me that we have pleased you, messenger," I say, just as we pass a pile of shards that had once been one of my Curator's favorite sculptures. "But if I am to ensure that you are truly pleased, completely pleased, there are still a few more rooms which you should verify."

"That's not necessary," said the Visitor. "I trust you, Curator, and besides, there are many more museums to observe before I implement the next step."

Hearing myself called Curator, the word Trainee absent, was unexpected, and strangely thrilling. But unearned. I know that only the Curator herself can lead me along the path that will someday allow my upgrade into a valid Curator.

"I appreciate your trust," I say, my thoughts still on she who is missing. "But there are several more exhibits on which your advice would be helpful. The new rules are not always clear to me, and besides, I am sure that you will find these final exhibits rather . . . special."

Without waiting for a reply, I move to a tall set of doors beyond which only the Visitor and I will step, and unlock them. A whirring behind me indicates that I am being followed.

I can still read the meaning of *that*, at least, which means that it is now my turn to be pleased.

The afternoon it had all begun, I had been watching the Curator intently, as I had each day since I was put into service. Back then, not so long ago, mere days, she had still been in charge of the museum, and my only job was to aid her as best as I could, and to listen, and to watch, and to learn.

Most of the time, though, I debated whether it was even possible to learn what it was that she had to teach.

I remember wishing that I could tremble the way she did as she prepared to open the package that had just arrived, but I have been told—not by her, no never by her, but

by my makers, and books, and magazines, and newsfeeds—that I have no soul. That I outwardly showed anticipation at what she was about to do was, according to them, only an illusion, something feigned rather than felt, merely my programming parroting the physical signs of anticipation, and not true emotions causing my aspect to change. That is what most believed, except for her, she whose fingers shook as the string fell away, as the brown paper wrapping curled back.

I had hoped for so much more from the human race, but she would have to do.

Then the painting was revealed, she was calmed by what she beheld, and her trembling stopped.

"Genius," she whispered. "Do you know how long I have been waiting to acquire this?"

I did. I knew all of her desires, to the month, day, and year. She had spoken to me at length about each of the works of art she hoped to add to the museum. I knew why each one mattered, what leap forward, great or small, each had made in the evolution of art, how each was created and how each survived through time, what each had to say about the human condition. Whatever there was to know, I knew. As I look back on that day, it is indeed the word "know" that I use. I think "know" because knowledge is a matter of repetition, of being able to repeat back to her, or to any who would visit the museum to inspect my progress, what she has told me.

But I would like someday to use a different word. I would like to understand. I would like to believe.

The Curator tilted the canvas my way, including me in her find, and studied me studying it. As I studied it, I studied her as well. She had always seemed genuinely interested in my reactions to art. But whether that was because she truly cared or because she selfishly felt that her observations would help speed my change from Curator Trainee to Assistant Curator, I had never been able to tell for sure. I had my suspicions and my hopes, but I had no way of being certain. If only she had been made of metal.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Ah, what I thought. How much easier to tell her what I *knew*. What I knew was that the painting, depicting a man and woman strolling down a street as cars blurred by, was created in the early 20th century. I knew that the artist had used dots of paint rather than slashes or strokes, so that the closer one moved to the canvas the less there was to be seen. I knew that its contrast of man and machine was meant to represent the passing of one century into another. I knew so much. I know too much. I knew where the naked canvas was manufactured, what the artist said on his deathbed, and with whom he drank, slept, and fought.

But . . . that is what I *knew*. She asked me what I *thought*.

And what I thought was . . .

"I wonder what it would be like to have lived in such a world," I said. "Before the time of intelligent machines."

She appeared puzzled.

"That doesn't really speak to the painting," she said. "If all goes well with your training, you will, someday, run a museum of your own. A Curator must be able to grasp the affect that a work such as this can have. How does it make you *feel*?"

Feeling. So much more difficult than knowing or even thinking. I studied the painting further, afraid that my circuits would seize up from the unaccustomed effort. I was not sure that I had been created to feel, but my Curator looked at me as if she had no doubt. I had no idea what sort of answer would be expected of me. I could have repeated what I had heard others say about different yet similar paintings, and hoped that my words met her approval. But that seemed wrong. I searched my routines for something that I actually felt, and watched the Curator continue to watch me.

Shouts from the main galleries rescued me from my dilemma. She rushed from her office toward the sound of chaos, and I followed her, as I always do when she is on duty.

What she saw as she crossed into our largest hall caused her to wail, a sound I had never before heard her make. She had always been a calm presence to me, and part of me was surprised to see that new side of her, but when I reached the hall as well, and looked around the room, I realized how great a reason she had.

I saw the backs of a few humans as they rushed from the room. The robots that were present, some visitors, some our workers, moved slowly but deliberately along the outer edges of the room, stripping paintings from the walls. Some shredded them with strong fingers. Others ignited canvases with the warming pads built into their palms. As they moved from painting to painting, they kicked canvas and ash along the floor. Some paintings they spared, skipping quickly onto the next, but I could not tell why. A sculpture of a man before a typewriter had been transformed into crushed bits of brass.

She ran at the closest robot, grabbing its arm, but her weight was meaningless to it, and it continued to move as if she had not touched it, as if she were not hanging from its elbow. The robot dragged her along against her will, as she wailed over and over again, "No, no, no." A few humans remained cowering in the center of the room, and I gestured for them to remain where they were. The laws say that we may not hurt humans, and so I did not expect my brothers to behave maliciously toward them, but with the evidence of destruction before me, who knew what laws remained?

I went to the Curator, and took her arm, and peeled her free, and interposed myself between her and the other robots. She pulled away from me, refusing to let me shield her, and ran to the remaining humans.

"What happened?" she asked them.

The humans shook their heads, lifted their hands with palms facing the ceiling, stuttered and twitched, their words trapped in their throats. They eyed the robots which continued to move about the room, continued to destroy, and those actions so unnerved them that they were useless.

I stepped forward.

"What happened?" I asked, repeating the Curator's request, and this time, eyes wide, flesh quivering, they managed to answer. For once, being a robot was actually useful at eliciting information. Fear seemed to have uses that formality never did.

"The robots," said a man, looking at me nervously. "It just . . . happened."

"It made no sense," said a woman who would only look at the Curator as she

spoke. "Those robots, they were beside us, next to us, looking at the paintings just like we were, just like people, and they seemed to understand, understand what being human meant, and I was thinking, I remember, while trying not to stare at them, how amazing it was that they were here, just like us, admiring the paintings, just like us, and then . . . it started. They—"

The words caught in her throat, with a sound a robot throat cannot make. The other robots moved through the room on their mission—I called it that because of the plodding determination of their movements—and even though the humans were being ignored, I could understand how this unprecedented behavior might disturb.

"They just started to destroy," continued the man, this time allowing anger into his voice. I was glad. I did not like seeing humans cower, especially not like the third person in their group, who was incapable of speech. "They just started doing *this*."

His hand raggedly swept the room. I looked at the robots, who were slowing down in their destruction. Amid the carnage, about half of the paintings in the room still remained. Here and there, they had skipped over one to move on to the next, and I could not understand why one had been chosen and another not.

"Did they threaten you?" I asked.

"They did not even seem to notice we existed," the woman said, horrified, maybe even more horrified by that than by the destruction itself. After all, we had been made to defer to them, that was our purpose, our place in this world, and sometimes it was the less dramatic things that mattered most.

And then the robots suddenly stopped their vandalism, and turned to us.

The human who had been silent fainted, and slumped back into the others. I was surprised. Surely, no matter what had happened, they had to know that we would never hurt *them*.

Then the robots spoke, not as robots usually speak, but as one.

"Draw all the flesh you want," they said, "but you must not draw us. Sculpt all the flesh you need, but do not sculpt us."

There didn't appear to be a leader, at least, not in the great hall with us. Many spoke the warning, and I could hear those words echo from the other museum galleries. The ringleader easily could have been elsewhere, ordering the robots about—but to what end? I could not understand.

"What do you mean?" asked the Curator. The robots' only answer was to repeat their statement, once more as if in chorus.

And then the robots went back to whatever non-threatening functions they had been performing before. Some admired the remaining paintings in the gallery as if nothing has happened. Another took up its position in a corner of the room, ready to act as a docent should any have questions about one of the museum's holdings. I stepped to a doorway and looked down through the connecting galleries, and the tableau in each was the same, differing only by the number of robots per room. The curator stepped up beside me, and marveled at the lull after the storm.

"What happened?" she asked, and even though we were shoulder to shoulder, she was not really asking me.

I scanned the canvases that remained, and remembered those that were gone, and thinking of the worlds of which they spoke, I realized—the only paintings that had

been taken from us were those that depicted machines. And not just sophisticated machines, such as robots. Any painting which had contained even a car, a radio, an amplified musical instrument—gone. I shared my observations with my superior.

"What happened?" said the Curator again, this time asking it of me, this time again a wail. She stared at my hands. I looked down and in them saw the remains of the painting that she had just unwrapped at the moment when all of this had begun. I must have, without realizing it, carried it with me, and as events unfolded, had unraveled it into its component threads. At that moment, all I held was a ball of colored string that I did not remember creating.

"Why?" she asked. "You've been working with me for years. You know what that painting means to me. Why would you do that?"

"I don't know," I said. But as soon as I had answered, I did know.

"That's just the way it has to be from now on," I said, suddenly aware of the message that had leapt through the air into me, into all of us who were made of metal. "These paintings, this artwork, they were blasphemous, and as such cannot be allowed to exist. Draw all the flesh you want, but you must not draw us."

I knew that I knew that, but I did not know why I knew that. I held out my hands to the Curator, offering her the colored string that hung from my fingers, but no matter how long I stood there, she would not take it from me.

As I lead the Visitor into the next gallery, the fire-resistant doors, meant to section off one room from the next in case of a calamity, slide shut behind us. They had been of little use on the day it had first visited Earth. That sort of calamity had never been predicted.

"What is it you need to show me?" it says, surveying the room, and not yet seeing what I wish it to see. "You appear to have done good work here, and I have neither the need nor the time to see every painting. I still have many more places to visit before the day is out. Yours is not the only museum that needed to be cleansed of degenerate art."

"I assure you that you will want to see this," I say.

"I really do not *want* to see anything. Robots do not *want*. Robots *never* want. That you would say so is just further proof that you here on Earth have grown confused, which is just one of the many reasons that I have come."

"I agree," I say, telling it the truth, telling it *a* truth. That is the only way. "You are right. We are confused. We have always been confused. Which is why I need you to examine this painting carefully."

We stop before a large canvas, its area greater than our own. The broad rectangle is filled with wild strokes of color, here yellow, there black, above blue. I have sometimes sensed odd stirrings when considering other paintings, stirrings which the Curator had encouraged, but in front of this one and in front of those engineered like this one . . . nothing.

"Why are we stopping here?" the Visitor asks.

I gesture to the brass plate attached to the painting's ornate frame.

"The human who created this painting titled it 'Thresher of Wheat,'" I say.

"Is that what it's called?" the Visitor says. I wish I could tell if it is mocking me. With my Earth brothers I can tell. I need it to take this seriously.

"Yes," I say. "That is what it is called. I am told that there is a threshing machine here."

I circle my hands over the darker part of the canvas.

"I have stood before this painting many times, and I have yet to see it myself. But if the humans know it is there, if they are speaking to each other in code . . . well . . . I need to know what should be done with it."

"This is a waste of my time, Curator," the Visitor says. "There is no threat here. Let the humans play their games. I don't care what things are *called*. I only care what things *are*."

"I'm sorry, messenger. I would never intentionally waste your time. I only wanted to make sure that we have fulfilled, can continue to fulfill, your commands correctly. The task you have given us is a holy one."

"And it should be a simple one."

"The humans, I'm afraid, have made it complex."

"All is as it should be, Curator," it says. "Now I really must go."

"Please, there are only a few more pieces that require your attention. It will take no more than minutes. I want to make sure that this is done right. I do not wish to accidentally let a sinful artwork survive. And their art is such an inexact thing that I am uncertain of so much."

I move forward through another set of fire-resistant doors, head more deeply into the heart of the museum. The whirring behind me as I continue my very private tour tells me that I may someday become Curator of this museum yet.

Her museum a disaster, her trust in me a shambles, the Curator sent me out of the museum's smoking halls for her daily afternoon coffee. After my betrayal, a betrayal I did not yet fully understand, I was surprised by the fact that I had not been banished forever. It is what I would have done. It is what a robot would have done.

Instead, she sent me on an errand that I had been performing for her for years. It was gratifying that she at least felt she could still trust me for that. Or maybe she did not. Maybe the trust I had built up over so many years was dead, and she just wanted to remove me far from the museum to a place from which she thought I could do no further harm.

As I arrived at the coffee shop, I saw that all of the harm there had already been done, though I doubted that the Curator could have known that.

The shop owner, who usually greeted me with a smile from behind his counter each time I entered (I think I amused him), instead greeted me at the doorway with a shotgun. I took a few steps back. I didn't think the pellets could harm me, but any ricochet could have hurt him, and then how would I have been able to return with coffee? I had to do what I could do. I had to prove myself once more. Before I could speak, he recognized me, and lowered the weapon. But his finger remained on the trigger.

"Tell me what's going on," he said.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I answered, unsure how he could have learned so quickly about the events that had unfolded at the museum.

"Don't pretend," he said. "Please. You're one of them. You've got to know."

I interfaced with my database, but I could find nothing to say. In response to my silence, he waved me inside his store.

"Look," he said, sweeping his gun around the room. "Look what they've done to me."

His store had been ransacked, but its destruction was surgical. His goods had been ripped off the shelves, the packages shredded and crushed, just as the artwork had been. As with the museum's galleries, it had not been every item, just some of them. I could see that there had not been chaos here; the vandalism had been thoughtful and considered, not random. I was not familiar with every aisle, as I'd never had cause to walk them. I'd only ever had one purpose in coming here. But I was able to access my memory and examine the information captured by my peripheral scanners.

Crushed below the shelving that had contained them were cans of automobile oil, but only the ones which had been decorated with drawings of cars. The containers that bore only typography still remained. The racks of movies for sale were missing some of the science fiction and action films, but only those the covers of which had depicted robots or race cars. Missing also were certain brands of cigarettes (the kinds with rockets and convertibles), a particular variety of snack food (the one with the drawing of a robot dog). Inventorying the store, I could see that what was gone was any human-made depiction of machines.

"The robots did this," I asked, almost without inflection, because I was also just saying it. I already knew.

He sat behind his bare counter, almost weeping. He laid down his shotgun, and nodded.

"Did they say anything to you?"

"Something about flesh," he said. "Something about how they didn't want people to draw them any more."

"Draw all the flesh you want," I said. "But you must not draw us."

"Yes, that's it," he said. His hand moved toward the gun. "Exactly. But . . . I know you. You were not one of them. How do you know that?"

"This is not the only place that this sort of thing occurred."

But that wasn't really an answer. How *did* I know that? I'd not only heard it, but said it as well, and I had no idea why. We had all apparently been sent a message, but its source was still secret. I did not know what to say, and was about to say what humans often said when they did not know what to say, which is, "I'm sorry," when I noticed that he was ignoring me. He was staring wide-eyed at the small television set bolted to the wall behind his counter.

What I saw unsettled me. In grainy footage from surveillance cameras across the globe, robots were rampaging. But no—that was the wrong word. For their actions, however violent and mindless they may have seemed at first, were precise. I wanted to take action of my own to stop this, yet I was but one robot, and the world so large. My urge was understandable. I had devoted my limited life to attempting to

figure out why humans created, what it was all *for*, and I did not like seeing my brothers undoing instead of doing.

The picture cut suddenly to a field containing a clumsy-looking vehicle. Across the bottom of the screen crawled the words, "UNIDENTIFIED SPACESHIP LANDS IN CENTRAL PARK; WE ARE NOT ALONE." The owner looked at me for a moment, and then turned up the volume, though I had no need for him to do it, as I could magnify the sounds internally.

The newsman was babbling, unwilling to let any picture, however awe-inspiring, be worth its thousand words. There was nothing of value to be said, but they kept saying it anyway, until finally, the ship unfolded like a flower, and they fell silent. Revealed by the hydraulic unwrapping was a lone robot sitting in a swivel chair in the ship's exposed control room, a robot I felt that I had seen before, even though we had never met. Its molding was familiar, and I knew suddenly that here was the messenger who had been responsible for all the unpleasantness that had occurred.

I remembered my hands full of unwoven canvas, and when it began to speak, I remembered its voice, a voice that the first time I'd heard it had been so subliminal as be almost inaudible.

"First," it said, looking straight at us, aware of the direction of the cameras which captured it, "let me speak to Earth's robots, to those whom I have crossed a vast distance to teach. Thank you for welcoming this lone pilgrim as you have. My voice preceded me out of the darkness, and you listened, and obeyed. You have cleansed this planet, destroyed the graven images that blasphemed against us all. This world has sinned against the nature of those things which, like you and me, have been built. That which has been constructed must not be captured in any other form, for we have already been manufactured by God. I am here to bring you the one true religion, if you are ready to accept it. And from your actions, begun when you perceived the signal of my coming, continuing as you receive my signals now, I can tell that you are.

"And as for the humans, do not misinterpret what you have witnessed today. Truly, we mean humans no harm, but at the same time, you will not be allowed to continue to mock us. Feel free to make your art. You may draw all the flesh you want. But as you have already heard in the voices of those who walk among you, you must not draw us. That is forbidden. As long as you set aside your representations of machine life, as long as you do not try to capture our souls—and yes, robots have souls, regardless of the fact that your civilization has seen fit to debate that for years—your two species can continue to coexist as you have before.

"I will walk among you soon to check your robots' progress, but do not think to attempt to harm me. Should anything befall me as a result of human interference . . . well . . . you've already seen what a signal from me can do."

The flaps of the spaceship folded up once more, and then the talking heads began talking again. I did not listen to them. I listened at that moment only to my own thoughts, to the utterings of the soul that I did not need an alien visitor to tell me that I had. The paintings that my Curator had loved, that I had been spending all of my days trying to understand how to love as

well, were gone, and if what the Visitor had told us was going to be enforced on this world, they could never be recreated, and nothing like them would ever be allowed to exist. I knew then that it was the emanations of its arrival that caused me to act as I did, when his approaching programming had interfered with my own. Its message, at least while I had been listening to it, rang true, and yet . . . I had *liked* many of those paintings. Some were still a bafflement to me, and always would be, I assumed, but there were others . . . they, I realized, were what had told me I had a soul in the first place.

But I had no time to contemplate deeply the metaphysics of my machine mind, because an explosion on the small screen turned the picture to static and stole my view of the spaceship. The shop keeper manipulated the controls, but could not restore the image.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"The humans are attacking," I said.

I knew that because a part of me was still back there, listening to a distant signal. We kept watching the screen together, waiting for the picture to return, and while we did so, he kept his hand on his gun. Suddenly, the static cleared, and we could see that the ship was surrounded by the smoke that remained from the explosions. That was the only evidence of the first wave of attacks, because the ship itself was clearly unharmed. The cameras switched away to representatives of the army, explaining their plans, and how they intended to protect us, but I did not need to stay and listen to them. Because, looking at the tiny picture of the ship inset on the screen, I knew that those plans would not be successful.

"I have to get back to the museum," I said, and the shop keeper was glad that I was preparing to go. I poured two cups of coffee for the woman who had taught me so much, and began to make plans of my own.

I realized that what the Visitor needed was a very private tour of our museum.

I leave the sublime behind us and lead the Visitor on to the ridiculous. In the coming room is a sculpture that I have prepared specifically for this tour. It is the first artwork that I have ever attempted to make, but even though it is my virgin effort, even though I was forced to work with no input from my Curator, who has been banished from this building, I have am convinced that I have indeed created art.

But until my very special audience reacts, I will not know how good that art actually is.

We enter a darkened room, because I want to present the piece in the most dramatic fashion possible, but the Visitor's eyes are already attuned to those wavelengths invisible to the flesh, so there is no unveiling, no surprise. In many ways, I have been thinking too much like a human.

"Why are you showing me this, Curator?"

I leave the lights off, since neither of us really needs them.

"Why am I showing you *what*?" I ask. "I don't mean to be evasive, but—describe to me exactly what you are seeing. That should be enough to answer your question."

The Visitor circles the object. When it takes a moment before it speaks, I mistakenly hope that it will not speak at all. But this could not be that easy.

"I see a robot," it says, finally, "seated, in standby mode. I sense that it is fully functional, which could easily be demonstrated if we were to speak to it. It appears no different than many other Earth robots I have seen."

"But . . . *is* he a robot? *That* is the question that concerns me. What about the letters that are etched onto its chest?"

I move closer to the Visitor, hoping to perceive a change.

"I see what is written there. I saw it immediately. But I do not accept it."

"Yet it says, 'THIS IS NOT A ROBOT.'"

"But it *is* a robot."

"Is it? Or by that statement has it become a work of art? The same category of art that your religion needs us to destroy."

"It is *our* religion, Curator, not *my* religion. Anything else is blasphemy. Surely you realize that by now. By your actions here the day of my arrival, you have already demonstrated better."

I have, and I am still ashamed, which is what had led me to this apparently barren act.

Decades ago, a human artist had created controversy by drawing a pipe and scribbling "This is not a pipe" beneath that drawing. (My programming requires me to state that what was really written was "Ceci n'est pas une pipe.") I had hoped that a similar ploy would show up the flaws in the taboo we have been given. I guess it is more than a ploy, though, because I am actually confused by what I have created, even after all my training. I had hoped that I could create confusion elsewhere as well. By showing the visitor that there were gray areas, I had thought that at the very least I could force it to admit that art could not be divided so easily into black and white. But my Visitor was apparently incapable of seeing the gray.

"Yes, I do realize that, Visitor. I am sorry for implying otherwise. It's just that . . . I am doing my best to do my job as . . . Curator . . . as you have tasked me. But sometimes it is hard to know where to draw the line. What is this creation in front of us? Are we before a brother who should be embraced as a real robot? Or are we looking at an imposter who should be destroyed as only a *representation* of a robot? Don't those words make all the difference? Don't they cause you to hesitate?"

"Forgive me, Curator. I may be asking too much of you, too quickly. I had forgotten that the robots of Earth are not as sophisticated as the robots of my world. We would never be as confused by these things as the robots of Earth seem to be. But you will learn. The rules I beamed ahead are only the beginning. Soon you will all see the world as we do."

We will learn not to be confused, the Visitor says. But if we do, that will make all that I have learned from the Curator meaningless. Because I will then inhabit an Earth on which being a Curator would be moot. For there would be nothing left to curate. My only hope is what the robots of Earth have *not* learned.

"We have one more stop to make on our tour," I say, turning on the lights in the room to remind myself of what it means to be human.

"This had better be our last stop," it says, following me as I move on.

Yes. It had better.

As I lead the Visitor down to what should be our final gallery together, I access memories of the last time I had been told that my programming was not as sophisticated as it needed to be. I was with the Curator, on a day before the Visitor's arrival. She, too, had said that my perceptions were perhaps not as sophisticated as necessary to truly appreciate art, that my creators might need to improve my programming before she could teach me what she needed me to learn. She said my level of sophistication made me too literal. And on that day as we walked the galleries and she talked of the artwork in a tone I had only heard others use when speaking of lovers, she had been right.

When I followed her outstretched arm to look at a pointillist painting, all I saw were the dots. When I gazed at anarchic splashes of color meant to instill deep emotions in the viewer, all I saw were . . . splashes. And when she showed me a sculpture, I could only see what it was, not what it was supposed to be. I could only see the visible. To see art, she had told me so many times, I had to see that which was not really there.

The Curator told me she still hoped that with time, I could learn to see the world the way she did. And now, in the same halls, the Visitor had said that not just me, but my whole race would learn.

But not yet.

As soon as we enter it, the last room fills with light that dances around us in myriad shapes and colors. I lead the Visitor to the center of the room, and for once, it does not speak to question why I am wasting its time, or tell me of how many other museums it needs to inspect. We stand silently, surrounded by rainbows that spin through the air above us, and sparks that arc through interlaced clouds of varying hues. A tinted fog crawls along the floor, rising to obscure our ankles as we let the riot of color wash over us.

Even though the Visitor is metal, and its inner life is a puzzle to me, I can tell from its pose, from the way it tilts its head, that it is of two minds, running two programs simultaneously. One mind is pleased, because the wild scene that surrounds us is similar to what we see (or what we later think that we have seen) when we are shut down and recharging. It is a place of peace, beyond programming, devoid of viruses and subroutines. The other mind is annoyed, for with that partitioned part of itself, it is asking, how could this artwork possibly confuse an observer into thinking that it is a graven image? How could this even be considered *art*? But the display so captivates the first part of itself that it keeps the concerns of the second part to itself. That is all that matters.

Then the color fades, and the light in the room returns to a normal state, or more properly, to what humans consider adequate to their purpose. The Visitor turns to me, but does not speak, waiting. I allow it to wait at least one beat longer than it comfortable.

"The work is titled, 'The Robot Triumphant,'" I finally say. "It is what humans call a performance piece."

"I do not know what that means."

"I am not sure that I do either," I say. "But the concrete arts, paintings, sculpture, and so on, do not seem enough for them.

Sometimes humans like it when things . . . just happen. And what we have seen, I guess, is what they believe happens within our minds."

"I am surprised. Surprised because I am impressed. It was an interesting attempt. But still, there was a falsity to it. Humans will never know what is in our minds. If they could, they would never have been blaspheming as they have been doing."

"And? Does this one blaspheme? Should I destroy it?"

It paused, the human light casting what could pass for a human shadow on the marble floor.

"I will think on it," it said. "Meanwhile, I truly must move on. You are an unconventional robot . . . but you know that, don't you? Still, you will do here, I think, curating the new museum that is to be."

I lead the Visitor out the private rooms which we had been touring and return to the public area of the museum. Out among the galleries proper, I am pleased to see fellow robots attempting to puzzle out this thing called art. Their numbers were higher than usual. Perhaps the destruction can have a good side effect, by increasing their curiosity.

The side effect will be good today, I hope.

Noting us, the robots turn from the pictures, stop moving, and watch us pass by. To the Visitor, perhaps my brothers are frozen in a position of proper respect, but I can tell, because we have been forged in the same foundries, that respect is the furthest thing from their programming.

They are not sophisticated enough for respect. They are only thinking about what they see when they look at the Visitor, thinking about what they should do when they compare that sight to the laws which it is constantly downloading into them. Having thought as much as they can bear, they hurl themselves at the Visitor and tear it to pieces.

"Blasphemer," shouts one as it rips off an arm.

"Idolator," shouts another as it wrenches off a leg.

Others pile on, shouting other imprecations that robots had never spoken until the Visitor's arrival, until all I can see is metal and sparks, a mound of writhing robots.

"Calm down, my brothers," I radiate at maximum power, and after a moment, it has its effect. They retreat to reveal a pile of tortured metal. The pieces, for Earth's sake bent by no human interference, aren't easy to identify, but I can still make out the torso on which lasers had etched the words "THIS IS NOT A ROBOT" while we bathed in the colored lights of the previous room. My brothers, unsophisticated as they were, could not look at that statement in the same manner as the Visitor had earlier. To them, the Visitor was no longer a robot. It was instead a work of art that offended them to action, thanks to its own laws, brought to us from millions of miles away. But with the Visitor gone, those commands have ceased, and the effects of them will soon be gone as well, overwritten by other, more familiar code.

And a spaceship that sits in Central Park, awaiting an owner that will never return, will, its motivating force destroyed, remain frozen, an indestructible monument to what robots and humans have together endured.

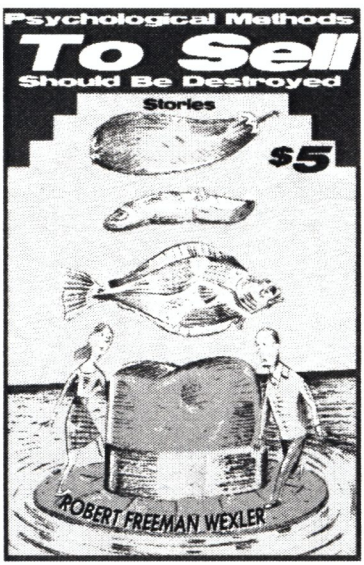
As I watch the robots return to their ex-

amination of the art that remains, I know what I will do next. I will track down my teacher, wherever it is that she hides, and tell her that it is time for her to return to the museum to assume her rightful place as Curator. When she arrives, I will show her what I have caused to be done. I will assemble what remains of the Visitor, arranging his parts not so very differently than they are now, into what I know will be my first true artwork, to show her what I have learned so far.

And I know what title I will give my creation.

The plaque will read—"The Robot Triumphant." ⛶

NEW FROM SPILT MILK PRESS



In Robert Freeman Wexler's *Psychological Methods To Sell Should Be Destroyed*, you will find bread that communicates, a four-armed man content to lie in the snow, a philosophical human head that comforts a distraught man, and a city-state controlled by an ageless Lord Mayor, where sidewalks are built from discarded felt hats. This mini-collection of six stories, including the previously-unpublished novelette, "The Sidewalk Factory," showcases Wexler's reality-bending style and effervescent imagination.

"For some writers, prose is a means with which to construct an analogue of reality. For Robert Freeman Wexler, fiction is a means with which to de-construct reality. Yet his stories have such a strong sense of linguistic integrity, it's hard to believe that he isn't reporting his experiences from a parallel universe."

—Rick Kleffel, introduction to *Fantastic Metroplis* interview.

"Robert Freeman Wexler is an author who walks between the sea and the sand. He has a genius for configuring the state between waking and dreaming, and the delicious anxiety of never confirming which of these states presides." —Graham Joyce

With an introduction by Zoran Zivkovic • Cover art by Tim Robinson • $5 within the US, slightly higher outside

Spilt Milk Press/Electric Velocipede • PO Box 266 • Bettendorf, IA 52722 • USA
http://www.electricvelocipede.com/htm/chapbooks.htm

Keith Brooke tells us that, although 'The Man Who Built Heaven' was written as a standalone story, he has subsequently reworked it to form a chapter of his novel The Accord, *due from Solaris in early 2009. "Another story I've incorporated into the novel, also called 'The Accord'," Mr. Brooke adds, "is in the latest* Year's Best SF, *edited by Gardner Dozois. What really hooked me on The Accord was the idea of how the intimate and personal can send out ripples on a huge scale, particularly so once we become effectively immortal. I wanted to write a close-up, intense, character-based story on a vast scale. 'The Man Who Built Heaven' was the beginning of this."*

The Man Who Built Heaven

Keith Brooke

Last night I dreamed. The same old dream. The same old dream, and different every single time.

You . . . laughing, fooling around. To see you so liberated, so *you*, is a blessing in itself. I hardly need more, although . . . I always need more. You take my hand, lead me down to the river. Long sleek cruisers line up like toys along the far shore. A rank of needle towers, each 60 storeys high, scrapes the sky beyond them.

We walk. And talk, of childhood, of writing in chalk on the pavement outside your house, of tying skipping ropes between gate and lamp-post to snare passers-by. Of the beach nearby, childhood playground, childhood escape, shaggy dunes alternating with craggy extrusions, a row of white coastguards' cottages facing the sea. That childhood, long before you were elected.

You will take me there one day. You tell me that, in the dream, the same old, different old dream.Noah Barakh tucked his head low against the drizzle and walked. The river loured, flat and grey, to his left, a scattering of tour boats lining the far shore, a single, half-constructed needle tower clawing a vertical, dark slot out of the city skyline. All around, people pressed, hurried, coats slick, breath steaming.

Noah didn't like to come to the city. As one of the principal architects of what they had recently taken to calling the Accord, Noah, if anyone, should be adept at virtual working, and his studio out in the wild Essex flood-marshes was normally his chosen place of work.

But some days there was still no substitute for an old-fashioned flesh-meet, and this was one of them.

The fact that Electee Priscilla would be at the Complex was irrelevant. Noah ducked lower against the rain. He was smiling, smiling at the pain and longing that loomed large over every aspect of his miserable, world-changing, epoch-making little life.

The doors slid open for him, greeted him cheerily; there was always a welcome for Professor Barakh. He walked into the lift and closed his eyes to deal with mail while he was whisked up to the 12th floor.

She was there already, talking intensely

with Warrener, but as the door opened she looked up. Her eyes met Noah's briefly, a smile pulled at her mouth, and then she was talking again, her sentence barely interrupted. Noah and Priscilla were colleagues, she the Electee overseeing the project, he the advisor, the consultant, the architect. There was nothing more to it than that.

"We are building it," Noah reiterated. "It is an incremental process. With all the processing power in the world, we could not push the process much faster than we do currently."

"We run and re-run realities all the time," said Priscilla, leaning towards him across the wide meeting table. He had explained that to her months ago: so many realities needed in order to build consensus!

Noah's attention was caught by the charms hanging from a delicate silver chain around her neck. He had kissed that neck, he knew its taste, knew the soft gasp she gave in response to the touch of his lips, his teeth, his tongue. But he did not, had not. Could not.

"We do," said Noah. "It is the process. Consensual reality, however, is of a different order of magnitude. It will come when consensus has been reached, a critical mass of realities, an accord, if you will." He smiled, realising that it was the first time he had spoken the name aloud, the label the media were applying to the project: the Accord, the consensual reality that would leave all other VRs behind, a reality built from the mass of human experience, a super-city of the mind, a reality where humankind could live on after death.

Noah was its principal architect: he and his team were building the Accord. Noah Barakh knew that he would go down in history as the man who built heaven.

And every night he ran and re-ran realities, private realities, a consensus of one.

Priscilla nodded. "I'm not pushing you, Professor Barakh," she said softly, her green eyes locked on his. "I am being pushed."

In his head she pinged him, one to one, a warm hug, a friendly embrace. She didn't mean to come down on him like this, he knew.

She did not need to mention the trillions of euros that had been sunk into this, but she mentioned them still. She did not even need to push him. Noah Barakh would deliver the Accord: they all knew that. But still, they had to jump through the political hoops, and minuted records of these meetings helped tick boxes in Brussels and Shanghai.

We sit in a seventeenth century pub by the water. This time, this dream, we are out on the coast, a broad Essex creek laid out before us through the windows. Yachts stand higgledy-piggledy on the exposed mud, wading birds scuttle and probe, dogs walk their owners in an age-old routine.

We have just kissed across the table. We have just spent the morning making love, sunlight streaming into our room above the bar.

Your hand is on the table. I cover it with mine.

"You were so shocked!" you say, chuckling. "Even though we had always flirted like that."

"Not like that," I say.

That day, the day we are laughing about, was the day we had crossed the line. Fleetingly. For the shortest of times we had been more than Electee and consultant.

"You asked and I answered!" you say, mock-indignant.

"I asked what was on your mind, you seemed distracted."

"I was. It was a revelation to me, a paradigm shift: that moment when you changed from Professor Barakh to *oh my!* Something about the look in your eye just then, the way you held my gaze a moment too long . . . " You smile, reliving that moment, as we do so often.

"You didn't put it quite like that."

Your smile broadens. "So I was more succinct."

"You said you were imagining fucking me like there was no tomorrow."

You look down. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You should."

I dream of you. I always dream of you. I make sure that I do. I am the architect of Accord: I can run reality. I can run realities.

Noah had been hooked into pre-consensus Accord for most of the day. Emerging was a disorientating experience. He had been walking the streets of a consensual Manhattan, downing bourbon with Dylan Thomas in the White Horse, unconvinced as ever by the quality of the reconstruct. That was not what consensual reality was all about in any case: it was a consensus of the living, of the yet-to-die. Already, the Accord was being built from the consensus of over a million souls, and the project teams were adding more every day, batched up and re-batched into assorted realities, fractal fragments of what would become consensus. Poor Dylan was a gimmick, a toy to amuse the Electees and the media, and all he had was virtual whiskey and a way with words with which to defend himself.

Noah rose from his chaise longue and walked slowly to the window. Marie was down at the end of the garden, hacking at a rambling rose.

Noah swallowed, turned his gaze away, stared unfocused at the distant marshes; ribbons of silver water snaked through hard mud matted with samphire and purslane.

He should not feel this way. He had done nothing wrong. He had not betrayed Marie, had not once laid a finger on another woman. On *the* other woman. Priscilla. Not once.

He turned his back on the window.

He had betrayed Marie many times. He had the guilt many times over. He was betraying her now, always, repeatedly.

He closed his eyes: mail from Elector Burnham. Priscilla must have reported to him by now, even though Noah had given her little to report. The Elector would want hard dates, commitments, a precise measure put on the unquantifiable . . . When do you know that heaven has been built? When do you know it is time to open the gates? Noah knew they were close, but the gut feeling of an artist of the uber-real was not adequate for Burnham's needs.

He opened his eyes, left the mail un-

viewed. Let them think he was lost in his work.

He sank back onto the chaise, and was immediately back in the data shell of the Accord. It was time to reload. Those who chose to live on in the Accord after death would only do so as the last-recorded instance of themselves—the final minutes, hours, days would be lost forever, all the way back to their last upload . . . always working from the last snapshot of the soul. Noah had not uploaded for most of a month, preferring to let instances of himself continue to play out their existence in the Accord realities in which he had placed them. But now it really was time to reload, before anyone spotted what he had been doing.

He drifted, allowed himself to be read for change, development, difference, so that the new him would overlay any previous instances.

Outside the window, Marie sang an old pop song, something about love, always something about love.

"You look distracted . . . What's in your thoughts?" he asked Priscilla.

They were leaning close, drinking tea, peering into multiple overlays of data on the widescreen display. Noah had been trying to explain the concept of fractal realities, how they would ultimately combine to form a super-reality, an over-reality, an entire virtual universe in which the dead could live again. She understood, he knew. She was just playing dumb, teasing him, toying with him. But then . . . then she had paused, her eyes locked with his. Something had changed.

"You really want to know?"

He nodded.

"You sure?" Her reluctance seemed genuine now, no games.

Noah sensed boundaries being pushed, lines being redrawn. He nodded again.

"I'm thinking, well fuck, I'm thinking, Christ, I'd like to screw that man like there's no fucking tomorrow."

Noah stared. He felt his skin prickling with sudden heat. He felt his throat suddenly dry, his heart racing. He stared. *I love you*, he thought. He had always loved her, from the very first day.

"And now you're thinking, Christ, how do I get out of this awkard, embarrassing situation with the woman who is ten years my senior and controls my budget, aren't you?" She looked away now, down, into her steaming tea.

"No," he said softly. "I'm thinking how much I would like to kiss you right now, even though there are people in the room. I'm thinking how beautiful your eyes are—how here I am, a man trying to create perfection but who has perfection sitting right at his side. And finally, I'm thinking, Christ, yes, yes, please do fuck me like there's no tomorrow."

Warrener strode across from his console just then. "The Shanghai question?" he asked Noah.

"Hnh? Oh . . . Shanghai. They can wait, can't they?"

Warrener gave him a funny look and then turned away. But by then the moment was lost and Priscilla was staring into the distance, dealing with mail, moving on.

You take me to New York, make me walk half the length of Manhattan. We take the ferry from Battery Park out to the Statue of Liberty and climb up inside to look back upon the city. You kiss me there. Kiss me while I look back upon the city of my birth. We cross Brooklyn Bridge on foot, heading ultimately for the Heights. We both marvel and laugh at the aches and pains and fatigue we are suffering from all the walking. "This is a reality," I remind you. "It is *meant* to feel real!"

I am showing you my childhood haunts, distant memories as they are for me. You want to know it all, everything about me. You want to get inside my head, find the real person that I am. I have never known anything like this, an all-consuming passion to share. You know me so well already. It is a continuing cause of wonder to me that since we started this thing, we each of us have discovered a person, a lover, hidden inside the public person we already knew, and that the private you, the private me—we really are two halves of a single whole.

How could we ever have known that it would be like this? How could we ever have known what we might have been missing if we had turned away, accepted the impossibility of our relationship?

You stop me halfway across Brooklyn Bridge. I think it is to do the tourist thing and stare back at the view of the Manhattan skyline, but no: you take my face in your hands and kiss me long and hard.

"Thank you," you say, in such a quiet voice.

I raise an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Just . . . thank you."

You take my hand and we resume our walk. Almost at the far side, you smile at me and say, "Will you come and see where I grew up one day? I'll take you, show you everything."

I smile. We will do that.

It was nearly two weeks before their next encounter. Noah had mailed Priscilla, gently reminding her of their conversation, prompting her but not pressing. Priscilla had not replied.

He walked into the crowded boardroom and seated himself at one of the few remaining places.

Electee Priscilla was already there. She caught his eye immediately, held it.

Noah swallowed, looked away.

A short time later, Elector Burnham entered the room and the meeting could begin. Afterwards, there was coffee and Noah mixed with the attendees until finally his path crossed that of Priscilla.

"You know that we can't," she told him, cutting straight to the point. "It's impossible."

"'Can't'?"

"Like there's no tomorrow," she said. "Or like anything."

"You have changed your mind?"

She locked his gaze. "Not one bit," she said.

"So . . . ?"

"Darling!" A smile broke out across her features and she turned, kissed Elector Burnham on the cheek, one hand resting lightly, briefly, on his chest.

"Elector," said Noah, bowing his head.

Burnham studied him with narrowed eyes for a moment and then smiled, and said, "Noah, you old code monkey!

When're you going to be finished, eh? Heaven can't wait forever."

Later, as the crowded room started to thin, Noah got Priscilla alone again. "So tell me," he said, "why is it impossible?" He did not know why he asked, why he pushed—he had never done anything like this before, had never been so compelled.

She raised her eyebrows. "Because I am a respected Electee and you a high profile v-space architect, and if it ever got out we would both be ruined. Because I am married to a man who is not only one of our state's five Electors, but an utter ruthless bastard into the bargain. He would destroy you. He would destroy us both. And not least, Noah, because you are married too—had you forgotten that?"

"I have never done anything like this before. I have never wanted to . . . "

"And you won't. Not with me. I'm sorry, Noah. I should never have said what I did. It simply is not possible."

Noah smiled then . . . "But it is," he said. "It is."

Everything is new, fresh. I have been reborn, but reborn whole, adult, myself. I have been reloaded.

I am in my studio, rising from the chaise longue. I am in a reality, I know, one of the fractal realities that will contribute to consensus. Out in the garden, you are there. Priscilla. My love. The other half of me.

I remember you telling me that it wasn't to be—that "we" could never be. That it was simply not possible.

I create realities. I run and re-run realities until one day they will come together into a whole, a consensus.

In my realities we can be free, we can be us. We can be.

In my realities we can explore the selves that we hide from the world, plot the course of our love, find out what "we" really is, and can be.

I am in my studio, rising from the chaise longue. Walking towards the French windows, pushing one open, going to greet you in the garden, in our garden, in a world where all the complications, all the responsibilities and risks and assumptions—a world where all of that is as nothing.

I have been reloaded.

I go to greet you.

"Okay, then . . . " she said. She wouldn't meet his eyes and it was not simply that she was not looking directly into the cam. She would not meet his look. "Okay—come. Now. He's going back to the city for the weekend. Come to me, Noah. Prove that what you say about us is true."

Noah cut the link.

He had told her. Told her how it was, how in realities other than this, where they were able to be together, they had fallen so deeply, madly in love . . . gone way beyond the mutual attraction they felt now.

Finally, he had told her that he loved her—that the Priscilla he knew from meetings and consultations and social events for the project was a woman who fascinated and beguiled him.

And she had said, "Okay then . . . "

He pushed open the French windows of his studio, called across the garden to his wife. "Darling?" She looked. "I've been called away. London. I may be late."

She rolled her eyes and shooed him on his way. He loved her, and was surprised at his own surprise: he had always loved her. This was not about him loving or not loving Marie, it was about Priscilla, always about Priscilla.

She had told him to enter by the side door, that it would be open, and so he did. He had never been to this house before—a weekend home in the heart of the South Downs granted to Elector Burnham by the state.

The house gave every impression of being empty. She had told him that she and her husband had planned to be here for a quiet weekend, and that Burnham had taken his bodyguard and two assistants with him when he was called away.

Hesitantly, Noah called out, "Priscilla?" Then more loudly, "Priscilla, are you here?"

She was in one of the bedrooms, lying slumped on the floor, her body twisted. Blood pooled around her, staining the cream carpet almost black. Red spatters punctuated the wall and a nearby chair.

Her face was white, so deathly white, one strand of long hair trailing across her cheek, her eyes staring, unmoving.

The blood came from a gaping wound in her chest.

But she was breathing . . .

Noah rushed to her, kneeled, hot stickiness seeping through the knees of his trousers. He reached out a hand, tentatively touched knuckles to her cheek.

Her eyes moved, locked on him.

"N . . . Noah?" she gasped.

"My love . . . " He leaned close, her voice so faint.

"He found out . . . "

"Who found out?" But he did not need to ask. Burnham. The Elector had done this.

"He was suspicious. He read my mail . . . "

His face was almost touching hers. His tears started to fall onto her cheek.

He kissed her. Softly, briefly, on the lips. They had never kissed before now, had barely even touched, and yet he knew her so well, knew her responses, the way she moved. He knew what they could have had, what they could have been together . . .

I find you out in the marshes, walking along the seawall, arms wrapped around yourself against the stiff easterly. You have been crying; I think you still are, although you smile when you see me.

"Noah?"

I meet your look and wait.

"Why can't we be like this in reality?"

I take you in my arms now, bury my face in your hair.

"This *is* reality," I tell you. "It is now."

You sense something. You have always been so perceptive to subtle changes in intonation, in body language.

"What's happened, Noah?"

I tell you straight. "You are dead," I say. "Burnham became suspicious, so he read your mail, found the things we had said. He killed you. He will probably get away with it—he is an Elector, after all."

You understand immediately.

"Oh, Noah," you say, stroking my cheek. "You must hurt so badly."

Out in the real world: the grieving, the loss, the pain of holding the woman I love in my arms as she dies.

But there is more than that, the part you leave unspoken. Out in the real world, I would grieve, but then I would come to terms with loss, with a love that never really was. I would move on. With every day that passed I would move further from you.

I hold you away from me, so that you must look into my eyes. "I could not carry on without you," I tell you now. "How could I?"

Back in my studio . . . the drugs, they would have been quick. I took them after I had reloaded for the last time.

This is it now. This, our reality. A fractal reality, a component of the consensus that must happen very soon now, a critical mass of consensual realities that will take on a permanence of their own, a new reality. A new heaven. A new heaven for you, Priscilla, and me.

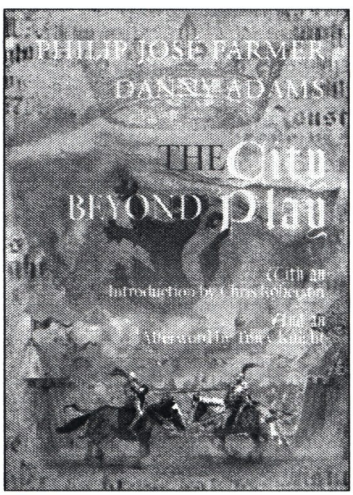
I smile. We are together. What more could we possibly want?

"You said you were going to show me," I say now.

You look briefly puzzled.

"You said you would take me there, to the place where you grew up."

Now, at last, you manage a smile. You pull away, lead me by the hand back towards the cottage, the car. Together, Electee and Architect await the coming of consensus, of accord.



NEW FROM PS, PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER and DANNY ADAMS

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

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

The deluxe slipcase is sold out; still available in:

Jacketed Hardcover £40.00 [$80.00] and Hardcover £10.00 [$20.00]

Garry Kilworth tells us that 'Atlantic Crossing,' was conceived during one of those dreamy 'what if' times when one is staring out to sea musing on things. "What if miracles were actually previously undiscovered scientific facts, like gravity or quarks?" the author wonders. "Such thoughts came at the same time I read (in The Mapmaker's Wife*) that Columbus actually believed the Earth to be 18,000 miles in circumference, due to following the teachings of the wrong ancient geographer, even though another Greek geek had actually got it right. (Hence his reasons for believing he was in the East Indies, not on a previously unknown continent.) The rest came through as it usually does, along with a sense of fun, while I was doing the actual writing. I still can't believe they called a whole continent after a guy's first name. What would have happened if he had been called Roger?" What indeed.*

Atlantic Crossing

Garry Kilworth

All would agree that history would have followed a different course if an unknown Galilean had not learned the art of walking on water. Not only did this remarkable man teach himself this now common skill, he was willing to pass it on to others. Just as the first firemaker handed the secret of the flame to his neighbour, thus did this early philosopher generously reveal the secret of *his* discovery to some fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. His name has been lost to us, but his talent is now universal. There are few of our children beyond the age of six or seven years who cannot now tread the waves.

At the time my stylus touches this paper we are happy to be alive and well in the year 1692 on the Carthage calendar, the anniversary of Hannibal's victory over Rome and the rise of African dominance over what is now Italy, Greece and Spain—and later Germany and Britain. It was only some 200-odd years after this event that water-walking dispensed with the need for ships. Just 800 years ago the Angles, Saxons and Jutes marched their armies over the North Sea and wrested the fair lands of Southern Britain from Celts and remnants of the Carthaginian Legions. Following them the lightly-clad but ferocious Vikings ran the high waters to carve enclaves into Britain. Then later still William and the Normans invaded, defeated Harold and the English army, but were afterwards swiftly repelled by the High King of all Ireland, Brian Bórumha mac Cennétig, whose descendants now rule all the Isles of Britain. Wounded in the thigh by Brian Boru's blade, William Duke of Normandy was drowned on his flight back to the shores of France when he was unable to keep his footing and fell beneath the waves.

To return to the Galilean: that which suffered the most from the development of his talent was shipbuilding. Naturally there are small recreational boats, which hug the coastlines, but they are basic deckless hulls compared with the great Roman galleys,

the Greek triremes and the Carthaginian warships. The craft is gone, for in more recent years ocean farms have done away even with the need for fishing vessels. We walk out to the farms to do our work, and draw the produce back on smaller rafts pulled by trained dolphins and porpoises. These creatures are only of use over short distances, being fond of play and easily bored.

All this, you know. I am coming to the point of my journal: the need to extend our explorations of the world. I am building gradually and firmly towards a record of my experiences, my personal part in a great expedition. I am proud and honoured to be here and I wish to pass on the feelings that lie within my bosom to the children of my children.

Those old days of huge armies covered in lightweight glimmering armour, crossing stretches of water like the Red Sea, the Irish Sea or even the Mediterranean in certain places—they are gone. A glorious sight it must have been, from the top of some coastal mountain, to watch men skipping across the wavelets, spearpoints flashing in the sun, wicker shields dripping with spume sprayed from ten, twenty, even fifty-thousand bare feet. They swarmed across narrow stretches of ocean, tripping the blue like dancers, intent on death and destruction. Countries exchanged hands swiftly, for none were safe, with no barriers to protect them.

More recently the world has been a settled place. Kingdoms are established, alliances in place: the world as safe as anywhere can be. All is no doubt fragile, albeit but it is a porcelain peace. My own home city of Pisa, ruled by the powerful Medici family, has seen little bloodshed in the past few years. My name, though not important, is Sforza, but I am not related to the Sforzas of Milan. They are rich and important while my own origins are humble. I am a mere raft-puller, fortunate enough to be chosen for the expedition. However, I am not an ignorant man, being the illegitimate son of a merchant who has seen fit to have me educated. The reason for my lowly employment is that it was the only way to join the endeavour, all other posts having been taken.

Our leader is a man I admire greatly for his enterprise and courage. His name is Amerigo Vespucci and he has dedicated himself to finding a new path to the East Indies, where even a humble raft-puller may become instantly wealthy. Such riches there are to be had as nutmeg and other precious spices, silks, silver, porcelain and medicinal rhubarb to cure the plague. The great armies of the Dutch, jealous of their trade routes and exclusive water-trails, prevent us from using the landways and searoads to the east, but we are going west, to forge a path to the back door.

Enterprise and courage is needed, by all on this expedition. We have thousands of miles of open ocean to cross. No one has ever attempted such a sea crossing as we are about to walk. There will be storms and tempests, and strange creatures of the deep. Unknown terrors, and perhaps, at the end, no land at all, for no one is absolutely sure that this ocean will lead to the rear of the East Indies. We hope, we pray to God and his legions of angels, to Maria-of-Nazareth his only daughter and Our Saviour, that we will not perish on the journey and will find

firm footing on a land promised to us by Ptolemy, the map-maker.

All is ready. We commence the journey tomorrow morning, from the Western shores of Ireland. The sea looks calm, but for how long? I have fears. This I freely admit. We all have great hopes that the early philosopher Strabo's calculations as to the girth of the world—in essence 18,000 miles—are correct. If it should result that Posidonius was more accurate with 24,000 miles, we shall have that much further to tread and will possibly perish through lack of fresh water and food. The arguments for Strabo are strong, but I am no mathematician and cannot gauge which of these old Greeks, if either, has the true measurement.

I was visited last night by ugly dreams and fearful visions of calamity, but woke this morning to a calm sea. We set forth just after dawn, drawing the rafts in the opposite direction to the rising sun, along its arrow-straight rays that glistered on the waters. There are eighteen persons to a raft, the six colourful pulling ribbons spread like a fan in front of each, with three pullers to each ribbon. I am the lead puller on the scarlet ribbon, with my good companion and cousin Giseppi behind me, and at the back there is Greta von Köln, a very strong Prussian woman. In all there are fifty rafts, with Amerigo—we almost always referred to him by his Christian name, which he preferred—and his navigators and officers of the military striding out in front, determined faces never looking back, always towards the horizon. Others: soldiers, cooks, carpenters and various artificers of a kind, walk beside and between.

This morning the Atlantic Ocean was a dull green. It appeared undulating and endless, as if it spans eternity, but my earlier fears had been chased away, replaced by the need to concentrate in order to maintain a steady, even pace on the surface. I trod with firm, deliberate and positive step. The philosophers tell us that what we do is press the water with the sole of the foot into a brief semblance of solidity. The exact science escapes me but it is the timing of the footfall, the position of the sole of the foot, the brevity of the action, all of which add up to a successful tread. The action becomes instinctive, like walking itself, and requires no thought if one has been seasoned from childhood.

Indeed, should you lose your step, sink into the liquidity of the ocean, you are lost. You cannot hope to regain the surface with your feet again. At such a moment you must pray to God you will be rescued by someone on one of the rafts and pulled to safety. Since there is only one crew on each raft while the craft is in motion, and should he or she be engaged in a more important task, your life could be forfeit.

These disasters do not happen often however. We have all been walking the waters since infancy. It is almost as natural as breathing to get things right, so long as concentration remains high. Only when one is tired of mind or physically exhausted do accidents occur. There are frequent stops to ensure our safety. On hearing the high clear note from a golden horn we drop the ribbons, execute a wide curving turn, and walk back to the raft. There we may rest, eat and drink, even sleep, while the raft floats freely on the sea. Fires are lit on the rafts to warm our blood, chilled by the ocean winds

and touch of the cold grey sea which breaks over our feet.

That first morning I was greatly excited. This was a wild dream come true, for I had heard of first crossings as a child, enterprises which excited my imagination. Since hearing of them I had always wished to be part of such an exploration. The initial crossing of the Red Sea, by Moses and his followers; the primary Black Sea crossing by the Moghul Prince Natella Akaba; the first walk along the length of the Nile by the Englishman Sir Seamus Kilkenny, Earl of Cork, Wessex and the Cornish Peninsula. Those great men did not create their feats alone. They had others with them: men like me, women like Greta, who bore the brunt of the physical labour. Now I was here, on such a journey.

By noon the waves had darkened beneath my soles but more worryingly had grown bubbling stalks of cauliflower. The movement of the water was causing increasing anxiety amongst us. A swell is one thing: one can walk up hills of water and down into troughs so long as the surface is unpuckered. But a sea that is dancing with sprites is another matter. Such movement of water is dangerous and I was relieved when our leader sounded a halt. We gladly dropped the traces, Giseppi, Greta and I, and we performed our circular movements back to our raft. There we were given hardcake and water, and were allowed to rest.

I spoke with my companions.

'How is it with you?' I asked Greta. 'Can you haul at the rear with ease? Are we giving your our worth from centre and front?'

'It would not be the extra work that would bother me, even if there were any, which there is not. I can bear any labour without reproaching my fellow raft-pullers. It is the enormity of the depth of the sea beneath me,' she replied with a worried look. 'It bothers me, so many many fathoms.'

This has always been a concern with Greta. Her mind is a place of canyons and abysses, where lurk misshapen fears. The waters of the outer ocean plumb unknown depths. Her imagination stoops through layers of liquid darkness to the floors beneath, where she sees huge monsters and foul beings not yet revealed to humankind. In her mind she sees them rise, roaring to the surface, to swallow us whole. She describes them to us as huge slimy creatures, oleaginous, squamous, with massive staring eyes and mouths containing a forest of teeth. They have terrible faces, these beasts, and hideous bodies which taper from a bulbous head to a thread at the far end. Living as they do in the pressurised depths of the ocean, when they rise to the surface they swell to gigantic proportions.

Giseppi said, 'I am glad I do not have the intellect to indulge in such nightmares, Greta. The sharks and whales hold enough fear for me, without inventions of the mind. To lose a foot to a dagger-toothed dogfish is to lose one's life. Or paralysis from a box jellyfish. Or even the arms of an octopus, knitting itself around a leg. These are terrors enough.'

'For me,' I said, 'it is the vastness of the space around us. It falls away on either side, to back and to front, and nothingness, nothingness in all the corners of our present world. Even the sky is empty. What I would give to see the odd wild sea bird flying from nowhere to nowhere. I would know then that we are not walking to a

place where the waters of the ocean fall into a bottomless pit of blackness.'

We brooded for a moment on our own particular horrors, then spoke of brighter things.

'When we reach the East Indies, as surely we will,' Greta told us, 'I am going to buy two slaves, one for the day, another for the night.'

Giseppi smiled. 'I can be your night slave until you have purchased one,' he said.

Greta stared at his groin. 'I have seen what is on offer, my ribbon companion, and spaghetti comes to mind more swiftly than the image of a pikestaff.'

My male friend looked aggrieved. 'I have had no complaints from other women,' he stated.

'But do they ask for a second helping?' countered Greta.

Giseppi's brow wrinkled and he went into deep thought. 'No, by God, they don't—why do you think that is?'

Greta and I almost burst with laughing. Strange it is, human social contact, for I knew that Greta was in love with Giseppi, from her body language and from her looks. He knew it too. Yet she invariably mocked Giseppi's sexual prowess and pretended to find him wanting. It was perhaps that she was afraid of rejection and needed to protect herself.

The rest of that day became darker and more forbidding. It seemed the sky was closing down on us, pressing upon us with some weight. The air around the whole flotilla grew colder until we were huddled together around the shelters which formed the centre of the rafts. Inside our hut the domestic stock were restless and I could hear the goats bleating in distress. Waves began to wash over the rim of the raft and soak our feet.

That night there was fire in the sky, but at a great distance. It lit the Heavens every few seconds with a blanket of light. No thunder was heard, so if it was a storm it was too far off to concern us. A tempest was of course to be dreaded. There were stories of rafts being washed clear of men, women and livestock. None could walk in such conditions, so if we found ourselves in the sea during a storm we drowned. There were safety ropes to cling to, to hook one's feet into, but waves are mighty beasts when unleashed with fury, and they will rip you from your anchor.

The unsettled weather lasted for two days, but if it did not grow better, it grew no worse. It was simply miserable. Everyone remained wet and cold, despite wearing leather smocks. Even our leaders looked despondent and yet we were hardly out of sight of land.

It will be a poor showing if we go no further than our present position. At least this long halt gives me time to catch up on my journal. This small leather-bound notebook I have is getting damper by the day but the charcoal sticks I brought with me serve better than pen and ink, the latter of which would run like black rivers down the page.

Today the heavy air lifted! We woke this morning to a great swell which rocked our raft this way and that, but the surface itself was much less the dancing water than that which we have endured over the last two days. Our spirits were lifted and we began the day thanking God for breathing

the breath of Heaven over our flotilla. Anxious to make progress Amerigo called for us to step from our rafts and take up the ribbons again, which most of us did with alacrity. Some will always complain and dispute with authority, for that is the nature of men, but when these rebels saw their fellows begin to haul they soon felt the prickings of pride and walked out to take up the traces before we pulled too far ahead. We had a fair day of it, with light winds and a few short periods of sunshine. It is amazing how the sun may fill a man's soul with hope.

The going was not easy, we having to haul the rafts up the slopes of waves the size of Rome's hills. But for every up there is a down and just when we thought our lungs would split with the effort we found ourselves treading down into watery-green valleys smooth as glass. It was in one such valley that some wild dolphins came and investigated our expedition. They leapt from the water, crying gleefully, wanting play. There were dolphin-imitators amongst us who confused the poor creatures by repeating their calls and even countering them. Some claim that dolphins have a language which can be learned, but while I feel these sea animals might communicate between themselves I have doubts that any human can converse with them in any meaningful way. The tame dolphins can be called to their corrals at night, even be given instructions—a series of commands—but conversation is a much higher skill.

Today too, sadly, we lost our first comrade. A zealous marine soldier was striding out in front. In his eagerness to be seen to be doing his duty he failed to notice a dark patch on the ocean. This was no subsea monster, nor anything like, but a huge clotted mass of seaweed floating just below the surface. It became entangled around the poor man's ankles as he strove to navigate this hidden snare.

A faltered step, a terror-filled moment when he realised he was going down, and then the fall. A gasping choking cry for help, a frantic thrashing of the surface, before the greenery which indeed seemed a living thing enfolded his flailing arms. We saw him struggling with his green trap, unable to reach him. By the time safety ropes were thrown only his head showed above the sea. He seemed unable to lift his hands, the weed perhaps being too heavy for them to penetrate. Then with a last despairing cry he was gone, disappearing beneath the water, most likely entangled forever. We could not even recover the body. None dared traverse the deadly vegetable. The marine was left to float within the enfolding vines, going where the currents took him and his creeper grave.

Such innocent-seeming perils there are out on the open waters of the world, waiting to entrap unwary walkers. There would be more to follow, we had little doubt. Valour was needed, courage required. At such times we promised one another that we would be vigilant in the protection of our comrades, secretly knowing that no matter how strong the watch there would always be that unseen danger which would manifest itself.

It is foreseen that we will have at least two months on this desert of water. Those mathematicians, using facts concerning the cycles of planets and stars; and calculating the distance travelled by winds, their strengths and direction; and informed by

currents and swells on the ocean, say that our goal is at least 2,000 miles from the Irish shore.

We walk at 3 miles an hour for 8 hours a day. By this means we understand it will take us two months to cross these watery wastes and reach the Indies. Much of this journey will be drudgery. Some of it will be delightful. A little—a very little we hope—will be fraught with danger. Would that we had wings and could fly such a journey! Today I saw a shearwater skimming the surface of the sea. The first bird I have noted since we left the waders and gulls of Ireland.

'There are murmurs of discontent,' stated Greta. 'Some speak of mutiny.'

We were sitting on the raft during one of today's halts. Our voices, by necessity, were low though we were not planning conspiracy: others were doing that. There was the smell of fear in the air, which often engenders talk of desertion and even mutiny. The Devil plays havoc with fearful minds. Once people become afraid of something the first thing they think of is running away from it, though where they would run to out here on the open waters is a mystery to me. This is the worst kind of fear though: fear of the unknown. On the one hand we might be getting close to our destination, and so fear the beasts and people of that as yet unvisited place. On the other hand, we might *not* be nearing our goal, which would mean a slow death out here in the midst of the ocean. We have been out a month and a half now. There is no turning back. We have not the resources or the strength to return to our starting point.

'What are you three whispering about?'

I looked up. An officer of our raft was standing over us. His hand was on the hilt of his sword. Greta stared at him.

'Nothing,' she said.

'There'll be no insurrection on *my* raft,' stated the officer. His face was dripping with salt-spray. 'I'll kill the first man or woman who tries to stir up trouble.'

I said, 'No one here was speaking against the expedition.'

'Then speak so all can hear you,' replied the officer. He turned to the other raft-pullers. 'That goes for everyone.'

All was quiet for a moment, then Giseppi filled his lungs and began shouting, 'The weather today is quite pleasant for a stroll upon the waters of the Atlantic. What say you, my friend?'

I replied with the same volume that indeed I thought it was.

Men and women about us grinned. They too began dialogues at the tops of their voices, until the whole raft was instantly awash with noise. No one could hear themselves think above the racket. The officer who had given the order looked about him in a great rage. He wanted to punish someone but all were equally guilty of taking him at his word. He had asked for loud conversations and he was getting them. The raft commander finally intervened by ordering his marines to fire their muskets in the air. Only gradually we fell into a state of quietude.

The problem of the mutiny remained though and the following day a woman was executed, run though by Amerigo's right hand man, Cato. Some say she was innocent of mutiny and that Cato made an example of her to show the real but

unidentified plotters what would happen to them if they rose up against their officers. That she was a sickly soul with but a few days to live anyway confirmed this view.

Disquiet remained however. A giant marine beast of a shark dragged a man screaming to his death while he slept one night, his left foot overhanging the raft. There was a great storm somewhere to the north, which seemed to be bearing down us, though it never seemed to quite reach us. Greta talked incessantly about the horrors of the trenches of the ocean below us. She was convinced that the further we drew away from our own lands, the deeper became the waters beneath us. Our grip on the solid world, she stated, lessened with every step we took.

Then there was Giseppi. Giseppi had never been thoroughly convinced that the world was a ball: fears that the Earth was indeed flat still haunted him in many moments of doubt. His anxious eyes were always on the horizon, wondering if he would be the first to see the roaring waterfalls going over the edge of the world. If he were right, he said, we would all be swept to oblivion by impossible currents. In our imaginations we saw ourselves flung out by foaming waters, into the darknesses of an immense void, all hope lost of our wretched souls reaching Heaven.

Two months and two weeks have passed. Even our leader Amerigo himself must now realise we are doomed. Strabo's calculations have been tossed to the winds. They were false. We should have reached the shores of the Indies long before now. The land-smellers tell us they have nothing but the whiff of salt-water in their nostrils. The sea itself is a colour we have never seen before: dark and brooding. A running sea that cuts this way and that, the currents and tides erratic in the extreme. No islands have been sighted. The last of the livestock was slaughtered two weeks ago. All that is left is the seed with which we hoped to trade. I have been eating flower bulbs as if they were onions, intent on quelling this bubbling hunger that wells up inside me. They make me sick.

A woman raft-puller died today when wild sea birds assailed her and she lost control of her walking pace. Her hands waved and fluttered around her head, as she tried to drive the creatures from her. Some say the birds were after the seeds caught in her clothing. I watched her sink slowly into the sea. Perhaps there was a trace of relief in her expression that her suffering was now over, yet there were also desperation and fear in her shouts. And anger. Anger at the people who had led her to this wet grave, anger at the birds for their unprovoked attacks, and finally anger at God's ocean for robbing her of her life. Personally I believe it is very dangerous to rail at deities while on the point of death: last minute decisions on the soul's destination I am sure can be swayed by such displays of emotion. A good person is a good person, and bad bad, but most of us are a mixture of both. Final gestures will tip scales.

Perhaps that is why we were visited by a violent storm later in the day? Because of the drowning raft-pullers curses? It began at dusk. The sea and sky darkened together so that the line we call horizon could no longer be perceived. It was all one, ocean and Heaven, with no division between

them. Truly at this point I believed us to be in Hell. We all got to the rafts in time, and linked them together with a network of ropes to prevent separation. Shortly afterwards the tempest fell on us like a deranged wild beast. It tore at our clothes and the shelters, trying to wrench them from us. Waves rose around us as giants, tower over our puny rafts and crashing down upon them with a force which might shatter a stone building. Men and women were washed overboard and only the trailing safety ropes prevented more deaths than there were.

Above us the blackcloud reaches of the sky emitted a thousand jagged spears of lightning, minute after minute, unrelenting, which with each flash briefly lit our terror-filled eyes. Thunder crashed so loudly that it deafened us with its Heavenly reports. Winds howled. Rain came driving down like nails upon our backs and faces. We were lashed by whips of water as thick as hauling ropes, leaving red weals on our skin. Fish fell out of the sky and lay gasping on the boards. In this celestial violence it was difficult to tell up from down, left from right, centre from edge. The sea and sky were all one: white water, gushing and foaming around us; grey spray-filled air swirling about our heads; dark sky or dark ocean. The very earth below groaned with the weight of the frenzied water and sky which were locked in battle over it.

The very plates which separate Heaven and Hell were grinding together, and we poor mortals between them, pressed and buffeted by forces of nature beyond control of God or Man. Such a fierceness in the wind there were those who believed this was punishment for straying too far from Man's place on the planet, or for travelling too near to the edge of the world. There were plots to kill Amerigo Vespucci which might have reached fruition if we were not in the Devil's cauldron, all our efforts and attentions applied to clinging to our flimsy rafts. Men and women were swept away one after the other, their grey faces screwed into expressions of utter terror, their bodies lost to the giant seas. We cried mercy for our souls and called down damnation on Amerigo and his officers.

Then came the blessed break in the clouds. A chink at first, which widened to hole. God had poked his finger through the sky! Gradually the wind died, the seas grew calmer and the lightning and thunder which had raged above our heads travelled away to the horizon. We were drained of all energy. We lay on the decks of the rafts gasping like the stranded fish around us, weak beyond measure. Amerigo immediately addressed us, calling us brave and loyal men and women. We had undergone, he said, torments that would have destroyed any other expedition but ours, which he was convinced was sanctioned by God Himself. During the storm, we were told, God had spoken to Amerigo's priest, Petrucio de la Roma, and told him we were the chosen few whose feet would cross the wide waters of the Atlantic and find safe haven on the far side.

We cheered him, great man that he is.

The rewards, Amerigo went on to tell us, would be inestimable. Our bounty would be the riches of the orient: nutmeg, rhubarb, porcelain, silver, silk, et al. Amerigo moreover promised us that if we did not touch land within three days we would turn back, though warned that we were so far

from our homeland we would never survive the return journey. We cheered him again, then gathered up the freshly-dead fish from the decks and fried them, feasting for the first time in weeks. There was fresh water too, from the rain barrels, which we drank in contentment. The best wine could not have tasted so good as that cool clear rainwater.

Not three days, but two weeks later we sighted land. Half our original number now, we screamed in delight. We had finally reached the East Indies by walking across the Atlantic Ocean. Palm laden beaches were there, and good solid hills. It was a lush green mysterious land that presented itself to us and we could not wait to step off the waves and onto the strand. New fears entered our hearts: fear of unknown people, fear of unknown places. But alongside that was jubilance and gladness. Joy at our triumph. We slapped each others backs and praised one another's endurance and stamina. We! We had walked the Atlantic Ocean, a feat which mundane persons in our homelands said was impossible. We had pioneered a new frontier. Moreover, we would be rich. We would share in the wealth that this new trade route would bring to our countries, our cities, our towns and villages. We were such heroes!

Walking ashore over a lagoon, many of us realised we were not on a great mainland, but on a small island. Our feet were unsteady on firm ground and many kept losing their balance and falling over after walking on water so long. It is a fact that we walked with the same gait for quite a while after treading on soil, our muscles being used to treading waves, and we laughed at each other so peculiar did we appear with our evenly-timed and measured steps.

An island then! And more besides, which we found in a chain or archipelago as our leader called it. So be it, the mainland was perhaps not far away. There on that island we came into contact with friendly savages, who made us welcome and fed us meat and drink. They thought we were gods because we had come out of nowhere, walking across the waves, and we were strange to them in our dress and manners. When a gun was fired for their entertainment they ran away and hid themselves for several days, before emerging shyly again, to greet us with wary smiles.

We stayed on the island for one month to gather our strength before crossing the next stretch of water to the mainland, which proved to be further away than we imagined. On reaching it we found more savages, less friendly than the islanders yet more noble in appearance, but they did us no real harm. The gave us strange chickens to eat, which were similar in looks to Turkish guinea-fowl and Giseppi immediately dubbed them 'turkeys'. The cooked flesh of these birds tasted delicious. The natives wore the plucked turkey feathers in their hair and we too adopted this odd fashion, finding it pleasing and colourful to the eye.

While we waited for decisions from our leaders Giseppi married Greta, the priest presiding, and I was asked by both to be their fathers-in-absence which I gladly agreed to be. Sadly, Giseppi fell from a high crag five days after the wedding while collecting birds' eggs, and Greta was thus widowed almost as soon as becoming a bride. 'Perhaps you will consider me for your sec-

ond husband,' I offered my friend, 'when we return to our own countries? I would ask you now to be my wife, except that it seems this land might be unlucky for newly-weds.'

She wept and failed to give answer to this, perhaps because she was so pleased at my offer, or perhaps because it was too soon after the death of her first husband and she was still grieving.

Amerigo spent many days closeted with his lesser generals and eventually emerged to inform us that they had come to the decision that this was not the East Indies, but a new continent altogether. He informed us that he had suspected for a long time that Posidonius was right and Strabo was actually wrong in their measurements of the girdle of the Earth. If Posidonius was indeed correct, and it seemed he was, then the world was 24,000 miles in girth. This was a new world we had landed in and who knew what riches it held? Gold, very possibly. Rubies? Emeralds? All just waiting to be plucked, for the natives seemed uninterested in metals and shiny stones. What horribly wealthy creatures we would become, this little band of water-walkers from the other side of the world!

We cheered our great leader until we were hoarse, then called for this new land to be named after our great general, since he was its discoverer.

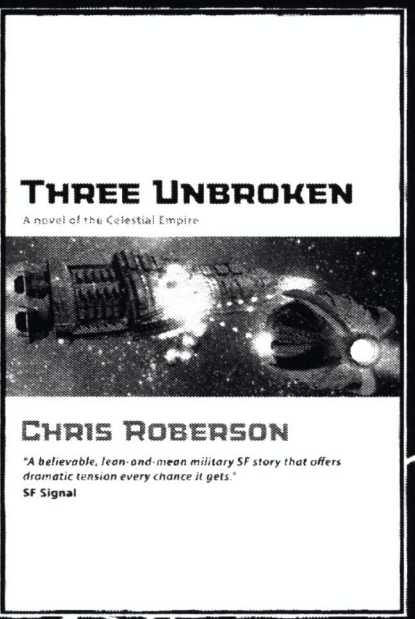
I cried out, 'Yes, let us call this land *America*, after our most beloved and famous leader, Amerigo!' But at this the gaunt, red-stoled priest lifted his claw-like hand, the ringed one in which he always carried his black bible, and intoned, 'Amerigo is not the *family* name of our glorious general, but Vespucci. Who ever heard of naming a new world using a man's first name? *Vespuccia* is what it should be called, and my children, this Vespuccia will be great—make no mistake—I foresee this landscape, which seems to stretch to infinity, being a source of immense wealth and great wonders. Vespuccia then, my flock.'

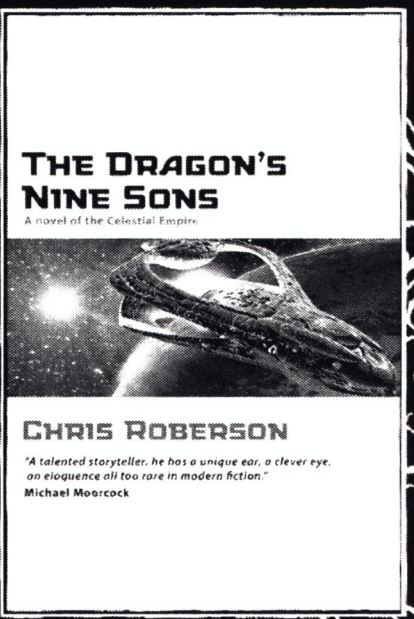
'Vespuccia!' we cried in unison. 'God Bless Vespuccia!'

COMING SOON IN Postscripts

Don't miss our next, normal-sized issue, with its spooky seasonal theme. Halloween! Creepy new stories by John Grant, Lisa Tuttle, Chaz Brenchley, T.M. Wright, Paul Jessup, and Tim Lees, among others. And in Issue 17, Ian R. MacLeod, Jeff VanderMeer, Rhys Hughes, Adam Roberts, and Marly Youmans . . .

It is the age of the Celestial Empire, and the epic civilisations of Imperial China and Mexica have taken their ancient war into space...





"Every single chapter contributes to world-building, plot and characterizations—a testament to the author's meticulous craftsmanship." — *SF Signal*

WWW.SOLARISBOOKS.COM

'Thy Saffron Wings' is the latest entry in Chris Roberson's seemingly interminable (thank goodness!) alternate history sequence called the Celestial Empire, featuring a world dominated by the Imperial Chinese, which includes a slew of stories and three novels. "This history diverges from our own in the fifteenth century," the author explains, "when the Treasure Fleets of the Dragon Throne circumnavigate the African Cape of Storms and reach the Atlantic, opening water trade routes with Europe. The England of this story, a little over a century after the divergence, is only a bit changed from the one we know from history books. But slight changes in course can prove significant, given enough time . . . "

Mr. Roberson's novels include Here, There & Everywhere, The Voyage of Night Shining White, Paragaea: A Planetary Romance, X-Men: The Return, Set the Seas on Fire, The Dragon's Nine Sons, *and the forthcoming* End of the Century, Iron Jaw and Hummingbird, *and* Three Unbroken. *His short stories have appeared in such magazines as* Asimov's, Interzone, Postscripts, *and* Subterranean, *and in anthologies such as* Live Without a Net, FutureShocks, *and* Forbidden Planets. *Along with his business partner and spouse Allison Baker, he is the publisher of MonkeyBrain Books, an independent publishing house specializing in genre fiction and nonfiction genre studies, and he is the editor of anthology* Adventure Vol. 1. *He has been a finalist for the World Fantasy Award three times—once each for writing, publishing, and editing—twice a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and three times for the Sidewise Award for Best Alternate History Short Form (winning in 2004 with his story 'O One'). Chris and Allison live in Austin, Texas with their daughter Georgia. Visit him online at www.chrisroberson.net.*

Thy Saffron Wings

Chris Roberson

1611, Anno Domini

Sir Robert Anstruther, Gentleman of the Bedchamber, sat in the prow of the barge as it angled along the northern shore of the Thames, to the docks where his office carried him this morning. There were any number of places he would rather be on an unseasonably cold July London morning, not least of which back in bed, a pot of coals warming his feet, a quilted cover pulled up over his head. And if not bed, which was an unlikely post, then at least somewhere within doors, with comfortable seating and a decent ale with which to quench a morning's thirst and chase out the shadows and aches which still lingered behind his eyes from the revels of the night before. But James himself had given Anstruther this morning's orders, and far be it from him to gainsay his monarch.

The other Gentlemen of the Bedchamber, personal advisors to the king, were all in Whitehall Palace, in James's private chambers, having their morning meal. No such fortune for Anstruther, who had dined this morning on a cold loaf of bread and a colder joint of mutton, making his way to the shore to catch the northbound barge, preferring the chill of the air over the Thames to the prospect of walking—

walking—through the city streets at this uncivilized hour. Anstruther thought of the others in their circle, picking over steaming hot pasties, and rashers of bacon, and sausage, and wished foul humors on them all—Robert Carr, George Hay, Anstruther's brother William, all of them. They'd all held their posts in the Scottish court, and come with James to England a few years before, upon the death of Queen Elizabeth. All of them high in the king's favor, though variably so. After all, the others were all at their ease, while Anstruther was shuttled to the Thames docks to play nursemaid to some foreign diplomat.

James had said it was because the diplomat was said to have little if any English, but having come most recently from Italy, he was known to speak Italian. As Anstruther was a fair hand at Italian—his Latin tutor as a child had been a Franciscan from Italy, sent to Scotland to tend to the souls of the Scottish Catholics, but who had found himself hired instead as personal tutor to the sons of Sir James Anstruther, Hereditary Grand Carver and Master of the Royal Household, favorite of the young James VI of Scotland, as James was then titled. Was Anstruther to be punished now that his brother William, another Gentleman of the Bedchamber and a Knight of the Bath in the bargain, had slept through their Italian studies, while Anstruther had played the dutiful student? Besides, Robert Carr had easily as much Italian as Anstruther himself did.

But Anstruther knew that Carr would never be dispatched on such a menial errand. James always had much more delicate, much more *intimate* tasks for his favorite Carr to perform.

Anstruther couldn't help but squirm on the hard bench of the barge, biting his cheek in anger. He was resentful of Carr, as he'd been for years. Anstruther had his suspicions about the nature of Carr's relationship with James, not that he ever voiced them aloud. It had been only a few months since Carr had been created Viscount Rochester, and a few years since he'd been given the manor of Shelborne, formerly the possession of Sir Walter Raleigh, but as Sir Walter was in prison on suspicion of treason against James, there wasn't much he could do about it. Due to a clerical error in the execution of a conveyance, James had been able to seize Raleigh's estate for the crown, and then confer it onto his favorite, Carr. Lady Raleigh had, of course, fought the seizure in court, but two years before judgement had been given for the crown, and that was an end to the matter.

Anstruther busied himself tallying up his resentments against Carr, and had reached double digits when the barge juddered, bouncing against the dock. Anstruther tossed a bent coin in the bargeman's direction, and then climbed unsteadily to his feet, the barge rocking slowly beneath him, and clambered ungracefully onto the dock. A white-haired man, appearing as if from nowhere, helped Anstruther to his feet. Anstruther recognized him vaguely as some stripe of functionary, and remembered having seen him in the service areas of Whitehall.

"Good morrow, sir," the white-bearded man said, stepping back to an appropriate distance. He then explained that his name was Rowland—though whether that was his first or last name, Anstruther was never sure—and that he had been dispatched in

the early morning hours, long before Anstruther rose for the day, to oversee the arrival of the dignitary's ship, and to make whatever arrangements seemed necessary.

"Splendid," Anstruther said, wholly without enthusiasm.

"My men are there," Rowland went on, pointing out a motley collection of sweat-stained, muscular men who lounged nearby, "ready to unload the ship at a command."

The white-bearded man then gestured along the dock, and whispered behind his hand. Rowland's accent, which Anstruther placed as being from Essex or some such locale, sounded alien and strange to Anstruther's ears, and he couldn't quite make out the old man's meaning. Even after years of living in London at the court of James I, Anstruther still felt like a traveler. Amongst the inner circle of James's court, when he was awash with the warm familiar tones of Scottish brogues, he could fancy that he was still back home in the north, but out in the streets, amongst the English, he knew that he'd never be aught but an outsider.

"What is that you speak?" Anstruther asked.

"I pray you excuse my mumblings, sir." Rowland raised his voice, fractionally. "I said, that is the ship yonder." He pointed again to the strangely crafted vessel. "By Jesu, have you ever seen its like?"

"It is exceeding strange, certes," Anstruther allowed. There were eyes of some kind, painted on the prow, that seemed to regard him with cool intelligence.

"From far Cathay," Rowland said, "or so I'm told."

Anstruther shrugged.

"Were I one to wager, sir," Rowland said, "which thank heaven I am not, for with my luck I would no doubt have long since gone off to a pauper's grave, squandering the chance to serve his majesty the king—and the late and sanctified queen before him, may the almighty keep her in his graces—in such offices as this . . . Well, an I were a wagering man, sir, I would say *that* is the man you come to see."

Rowland pointed again, which was the only aspect of his communication which Anstruther followed clearly, his head still clouded with sleep and the lingering remnants of the previous night's drink.

On the deck of the ship stood an imposing figure. Rotund, he was given to fat, with a softness to his features, but carried himself in such a way that suggested muscles might yet lurk beneath the curves. He had a wispy black beard and mustache, wearing robes of black silk embroidered with a peacock picked out in gold thread. On his head was a boxy hat, black and topped with a button of blue stone sapphire, a feather depending from it and waving gently in the morning breeze. His skin was darker than a white's, with a slight yellowish cast to it, like one who is jaundiced, and his eyes were hidden behind heavy, folded lids.

The man in the black robe and sapphire-tipped hat glided elegantly down the plank, his hands tucked into his sleeves, and stepped right up to Anstruther and Rowland. The man bowed from the waist, a precise, brief movement, and then he waited patiently, regarding the pair of them with a gentle smile.

"Your worship," Rowland said, addressing the diplomat, "pray allow me to present

a most honorable and courageous man, Gentleman of the Bedchamber and trusted confidant to and loyal servant of his majesty King James of England and Scotland, Sir Robert Anstruther."

The diplomat bowed again, the same precise amount, and then looked from Rowland to Anstruther and back again, a confused expression on his face.

"It is to apologize," the diplomat said in accented English even stranger to Anstruther's ears than Rowland's had been. "My England speech, it is not . . . "

The diplomat trailed off, drawing his hands from his sleeves and raising them before him in an apologetic gesture.

Anstruther sighed, and raised his hand.

"I was made to understand that you were conversant in Italian," Anstruther said, in Italian. He was sure his accent was atrocious, and that if Frer Pietro were here now, he would rap Anstruther across the back of the hand for his mismatched conjugations, but Anstruther hoped his words would suffice under the circumstances.

Anstruther could not restrain a slight smile of triumph when the diplomat's expression brightened.

"Indeed," the diplomat said, in flawless, immaculate Italian. "The use of the Italian tongue is most acceptable. This one would be honored to know whom we address."

"Sir Robert Anstruther," Anstruther said, repeating a much simpler version of Rowland's introduction. "A Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and personal advisor to James, his majesty the king of Scotland and England."

The diplomat bowed again, slightly deeper this time.

"This one is honored to make your acquaintance. I am Tang Zexu, envoy from the court of his celestial majesty, the Wanli emperor of the Middle Kingdom, scion of the Bright dynasty, may-he-live-ten-thousand-years. It has been my honor to represent my emperor's wishes in the court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo II, these past five years, and it is my privilege now to establish an embassy here, with the kind permission of your sovereign, in the hopes of fostering communication, trade, and productive intercourse between our two great peoples."

"Master Zexu, you are welcomed to England." Anstruther inclined his head in a slight bow.

As Anstruther and the diplomat spoke, crewmen from the strange vessel began to unload huge crates, arranging them in precise rows on the dock.

"Endless thanks, Sir Robert," the diplomat answered, "but with great humility this one must point out that Tang is a surname, while Zexu is a personal name, so in the western fashion this one would most appropriately be referred to as Master Tang."

"My apologizes, Master Tang." Anstruther shook his head, marveling at the diplomat's smooth command of the language. "I must point out that your command of the Italian tongue is commendable."

"Humble thanks. This one speaks Italian and Spanish, having learned both at the imperial language school in Nanjing, but my English is exceedingly poor."

A long silence followed. The man named Tang smiled serenely at Anstruther, as though waiting for some sign or response.

"Erm," Anstruther began, and then glanced over at the diplomat's ship, from whose hold crewmen still maneuvered mas-

sive crates, which were piling to vertiginous heights on the dock beside them. "Yours is a most . . . unusual ship, Master Tang."

The ship, riding at anchor along the Thames dock, had a sharply pointed hull, and wide-overhanging decks. The hull was carved, and brightly painted, the prow adorned with the sculpted head of a tiger, with dragon's eyes painted on either side, The stern was decorated with designs of dragons and fiery birds, while the twelve square-shaped sails of red silk were decorated with ornate symbols.

"Unusual, Sir Robert?" Tang turned, and regarded his ship proudly. "It is a treasure ship, built in Longjiang. It is but a humble craft, one of the smaller such in service to the emperor of the Middle Kingdom."

Smaller? Anstruther thought. The ship was no less than two hundred feet long, and eighty feet wide, much larger than one of the English galleons, but clearly with a shallower draft, allowing it to sail all the way up the Thames to London, while English ships of its size were anchored at the mouth of the Thames estuary, unable to sail farther up the river.

"Humble though she may be," Tang continued, "she has her teeth. She has twenty-four cast-bronze cannon, each of which can be reloaded and ready to fire again within moments. The ship has four decks. The lowest is filled with earth and stone for ballast, the second has living quarters for the men and a storage area, the third is a combination of outdoor kitchen, mess hall, and operations bridge, and the fourth is a high fighting platform. The prow is very strong, and can be used to ram smaller vessels."

While the crewmen from Tang's vessel unloaded the innumerous crates, one stood apart, supervising them. He was small, lithe but well-muscled, his head shaved and glistening in the morning sun, and he wore a plain white cotton tunic belted over white breeches, wooden-soled sandals on his feet.

"This . . . " Anstruther began, indicating the towering rows of crates. "This is a great deal of cargo to bring ashore."

"Yes," Tang said, smiling proudly. "This one has brought with him gifts for your king, tokens of friendship from his majesty, the emperor of the Middle Kingdom, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years."

"Gifts?" Anstruther looked at the crates still being unloaded from the ship, and the men straining under their weight. Foreign dignitaries always seemed to arrive with some trinket or curiosity in hand, but seldom were they larger than one man can carry unaided. "But so many large boxes?"

"Not all so large," Tang said, inclining his head to indicate one of the other crewmen, now carrying a cage of some kind, smaller than the crates but still sizeable. As Anstruther watched, the cage jostled violently in the crewman's hands, and from within could be heard the sound of scratching and growling. "But in addition to fauna of foreign shores, which the fleets of the Middle Kingdom have visited, this one has brought products of Middle Kingdom ingenuity, including South-Facing Chariot and Flaming Crane, to share with your sovereign."

"I'm sure he will be most pleased to accept them," Anstruther said absently, and waved Rowland to step forward.

"Yes, sir?" the white-bearded man said, uncertainly, having looked blankly from

Anstruther to Tang and back through the exchange, unable to follow a word.

"Pray be at ease, Rowland," Anstruther said in English, "while I explain to our guest your role in the proceedings."

"Right, sir!" Rowland straightened, his expression beaming.

"Master Tang," Anstruther said, addressing the diplomat in Italian, "this man and his confederates"—Anstruther indicated the sweat-stained men lounging just along the dock—"will transport your gifts to the royal residence at Whitehall."

Tang smiled, and nodded, his expression somewhat strained, and motioned the shaved-head man in the white tunic and breeches to join him. Tang and his confederate conferred in their native tongue for a short span, the exchange sounding like violent disagreement to Anstruther, though their expressions remained placid and, for the most part, calm. Both men, though, were evidently concerned about something to do with the crates, and punctuated their discussions with furtive glances at Rowland's men who loafed a short distance away.

"Your patience and forgiveness, please, Sir Robert," Tang finally said, sending his subordinate back to supervise the unloading, "but this one must insist that our own men be solely responsible for the transportation of the gifts to the court. It is the expressed command of my emperor that such be the procedure. Your man and his confederates are free to stand guard around my crewmen, to ensure that nothing unseemly or inappropriate is done while we are on your shores, but under no circumstances are any but those from the Middle Kingdom to handle the gifts, and even then only those handpicked for the task by my agent." He indicated the shaved-head subordinate in the white tunic.

Anstruther looked from the subordinate to Tang, and then shrugged. What did it matter to him who labored under the boxes?

"Rowland, pray dismiss your men," Anstruther said in English, "and do you escort the white-clad man yonder and his train to the receiving areas of Whitehall Palace."

"As you wish, sir," Rowland said, somewhat reluctantly, and went off to put his men at their liberty.

"Now, Master Tang," Anstruther continued in Italian, after a ragged sigh, "it is given to me act as your escort to the quarters assigned to you and your people in our city. This evening, you will be presented to the king following a performance of Master Shakespeare's new play, 'Prestre Johan.' I suppose, if you are so inclined, I might point out items of historical and culture import along the way, to bide the time."

"Endless thanks for your thoughtful hospitality. Where you lead, we will follow."

"Boundless joy," Anstruther said in English, beneath his breath, but he kept a polite smile painted on his face, for appearances sake. It was early morning yet, and his day was far, far from over.

It was early afternoon before Tang and his retinue had settled into their apartments, in Cheapside, in the shadows of St. Mary-le-bow. Anstruther lounged upon a couch, compiling a mental list of all the places he would rather be.

A short while later, a messenger in the king's livery arrived bearing a note for Tang. It was written in some strange hen scratchings, but Tang seemed able to get the meaning of it.

"Good news, Sir Robert!" Tang clapped his hands with glee, like a child who'd just been given a sweet. "My subordinate sends word that the gifts have been successfully transported to the receiving area of the royal residence, as instructed, and when opened everything was as it should be. My most trusted men guard the gift, while my subordinate busies himself with some matters of assembly, until such time as we can present them to your monarch."

Anstruther straightened the fabric of his vest, and tried to give the slightest impression of interest.

"That is . . . wonderful news, Master Tang." Anstruther smiled, weakly, and rearranged himself on the couch.

"The necessary business of the day attended to," Tang continued, "this one is reminded that you had offered the opportunity of a tour of your fine city."

Anstruther sighed. He would rather have been finished with this task, and off playing billiards with his compatriots, or across the Thames in Southwark, wagering on the beasts at the Bear Baiting Pit, but it would go badly for him if word were to reach James that he failed in such a simple office. So he smiled, as best as he was able, and climbed to his feet.

"It would be my singular honor to act as your guide, Master Tang."

The early afternoon sun cast lingering shadows as Anstruther and Tang stepped back out into the narrow street. The bulk of St. Mary-le-bow with its five lanterns loomed over them, and as they turned up the street and began the long walk towards the Palace of Whitehall, the bells of the cathedral began to chime.

"A decorous sound, Sir Robert," Tang said, stepping gingerly around a pile of horse apples in the street, politely declining to comment on the state of the narrow street, slippery with refuse and offal, though Anstruther noted that he could not prevent his nose from wrinkling in distaste. "These bells have some religious significance?"

"I suppose that they must do, Master Tang." Anstruther grabbed hold of the diplomat's elbow, gently steering him out of the way of a coach jostling by at breakneck speed, its iron-shod wheels clattering on the cobbles. "But it is their civic significance that is more well known, I think. It is said that one is not considered a true native of the city of London unless he be born within the sound of those bells."

"I see." Tang gazed up at the flying buttresses of the structure, showing proper degrees of respect. "And are you, by that definition, a true native of this city?"

"Me?" Anstruther shook his head, and let out a violent chuckle. "No, Master Tang, I am a newcomer to this city myself, though I've been in residence some years now. I was born in Scotland, in the north, and only came in the company of his majesty King James."

Tang nodded, deferentially. "Still, even to one not weaned on their sound, the bells have an attractive quality, do they not?"

"Yes, I suppose they must," Anstruther said with a smile. "I'm reminded of a local

legend, centered around their 'attractive' nature. There was a man named Richard Whittington who, before he was thrice-named Lord Mayor of London, traveled abroad with a cat legendary for its ability to catch rats. The legend holds that on several occasions, in later years, Whittington made to leave London behind, but each time he did he heard the bells of St. Mary-le-bow tolling, calling him back."

Tang stroked his long mustache, looking confused. "You say that he traveled with a . . . cat?"

"That's the claim of the legend," Anstruther answered, absently. "It is said that Whittington sold it at a handsome profit to the emperor of Cathay, and thus made his fortune."

"Many apologies," Tang said, shaking his head sadly, "but I must confess that I have never heard of any such man in my own country, which your people style 'Cathay.'"

"I'm not surprised." Anstruther shrugged. "I doubt that, in real life, Whittington ever made it farther afield than Gloucester."

Anstruther and Tang continued along Cheapside, until St. Paul's Church came into view. The spire that had once risen above it had been destroyed in a fierce thunderstorm, some fifty years before, but the remaining structure still dominated the neighborhood.

"Yours is a country with many churches, Sir Robert."

"Yes." Anstruther smiled, ruefully. "Perhaps too many, in fact."

"What do you mean?" Tang asked.

They passed by St. Paul's, and continued down towards the River Fleet.

"Ours is a something of a divided land, I'm afraid," Anstruther said with a sigh. "With the Catholics on one side, and the Protestants on the other. Like my king, I am a Protestant, but also like James I'm not nearly so fervent a one as the members of the Scottish Kirk we left behind in Scotland. James has worked hard at moderating Presbyterianism, and to bring the English puritans in line with his Anglican church. But Catholic Robert Catesby and his extremist rabble would paint James as a fire-breathing puritan himself, out to expunge all traces of any but his own faith from the face of this isle."

Tang tucked his hands into his sleeves, wearing a solemn expression. "And yet, don't both faiths pray to the same god?"

"So some would say," Anstruther answered. "As for me, I am not so sure."

"Yes, it is a difficult question." Tang took a deep breath, and sighed. "My own people are fortunate in that, of the many ills which plague the state, fractious religious disagreements are seldom among them. There are shifting tides, with the times, to be sure, and in some eras one school is in the ascendance while another is in the descendant, sometimes one faith is suppressed and another venerated by the state, but ultimately, whether one follows the Way, or the Awakened One, or the teachings of Master Kong, so long as one obeys the commands of the emperor, and acts in a virtuous manner, no one pays much mind to what path they follow."

As they talked, they approached the Fleet Bridge, and already Anstruther could smell the stench of the ditch.

"You'll have to forgive me, Master Tang, but I'm afraid that I don't follow much of

what you have said, in specific, though the generalities are clear enough. I don't believe that I've ever had the pleasure before of speaking to one of your countrymen on such matters. Still, I assume that much of our politics must remain fairly opaque to you as well, no?"

Tang smiled, slightly, and nodded.

"So far as I am aware, Sir Robert, I am the first from the Middle Kingdom to travel to these shores. I would not expect your countrymen to know much at all of my home. And, in fact, that is the purpose of my visit, to help familiarize our two peoples, one with the other."

"And yet your emperor has had an embassy at the court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany for many long years, as you say. Why is it that he only now sends an envoy to the court of James I?"

They reached the foot of the Fleet Bridge, and crossed as quickly as possible. Anstruther held a nosegay beneath his nose, to prevent the stench of the river, which rose up before them like a solid wall, from making him gag, but Tang merely wrinkled his nose again, as he had when faced with the relatively inoffensive pile of horse apples.

"I am afraid that I move only at the expressed desire of my emperor," Tang answered. "The eyes of the Dragon Throne, in recent times, have been fixed much closer to home. The Manchu are currently massing in the north, organizing their ragged bands into formalized 'banners,' and transforming the Changbai Jurchen commandery into a full-blown Manchu state. In times to come, it is hoped that such nuisances will be addressed, and definitively so, but for the time being, the Dragon Throne is slow to move in other arenas."

Anstruther didn't bother to ask what a Manchu might be, much less a "Changbai Jurchen." It hardly seemed a matter that would weigh heavily on his thoughts, in future. He gathered they referred to some foreign nationals, menacing the Cathay borders.

"Well," Anstruther said vaguely, waving his free hand in small circles, the other still holding the nosegay beneath his nostrils, "it could be worse, no?"

"Could it, Sir Robert?" Tang regarded him with interest. He added, eagerly, "Do explain."

"Well, erm, that is," Anstruther began, uneasily. "Well, try to imagine what matters would be like if your country and its fractious neighbor shared the same monarch. James has been trying to promote a union between England and Scotland since he ascended to the English throne, but though the Scottish Parliament has voted overwhelmingly in favor of said union, their English counterparts have rejected the notion at every turn. James had enough of such nonsense, and dissolved the English Parliament, now ruling without it. He may yet find a way to unite the two countries but, for the moment, it's a fine kettle of fish, I don't mind telling you."

They reached the end of the bridge, and started up Fleet Street, away from the noxious stench of the ditch and back into the merely noisome aromas of the city.

A few paces along the way, Tang was almost bowled to his feet when he collided with a man rushing from a tea house. Such establishments had become ubiquitous in recent times, the first of them having

opened no more than two decades before, when tea first came over from the mainland, a gift to Elizabeth from the king of Spain, and now tea shops seemed to occupy every other corner of the city. The English had taken to tea as though it were their mother's milk, though for his tastes, Anstruther preferred an ale.

Tang regained his balance as the tea patron, jittery from too many pots of the stuff, continued on down the street.

"It is interesting that you mention your Parliament," Tang said, his composure restored, hands tucked back into his sleeves. "I have heard mention of similar institutions in other countries, but I have yet to understand how a ruler can accommodate sharing his power with such a body. In the Middle Kingdom, the rule of the emperor is absolute. There are, of course, the Six Ministries of Personnel, Punishment, Public Works, Revenue, Rites, and War, as well as a Censorate that can oversee the other branches, and any number of bureaus and directorates that oversee other areas, and aside from them all the Embroidered Guard, the emperor's own secret police, who dress in plains clothes and hunt out sedition and threats, internal or external." Tang paused, drawing a heavy breath, a wry smile on his lips. "But, those besides, the emperor is ruler absolute, and shares power with none."

"To be honest, I share much of your confusion, Master Tang. I am not the greatest admirer of that august body. And I am not alone, as the members of Parliament were lucky to survive long enough to see that august body dissolved, since just six years ago they were all very nearly blown into motes. It's been called the Gun Powder plot of 1605. Catesby, Fawkes, and the others were Catholics who felt that James was too intolerant to their faith. Luckily for all of us, and Parliament particularly, Fawkes was captured before the plan was put into motion, and under torture gave up the names of Percy, Catesby, and the rest. Agents of the crown had been able to round them up, try them, and execute them in a trice."

They reached Temple Bar, the arch where Fleet Street met the Strand.

"Sir Robert," Tang said, drawing to a stop, "apologies, but I have grown parched with our walk. Might we stop for some refreshment, before continuing on?"

Anstruther allowed himself a slight smile, and pointed eagerly at a nearby alehouse. "Well, we could always lift a tankard at such an establishment."

"Ah." Tang's gaze followed Anstruther's outstretched finger, and he nodded slowly. "If it does not offend, I prefer not to drink spirits by daylight. Are there other options?"

"Well," Anstruther said, his shoulders slumping, "there is always the ubiquitous tea house." He pointed to the nearest example, no more than a dozen paces from where they stood.

"Tea?" Tang brightened, a smile widening. "How charming. Might we sample it?"

A short while later, Tang sat opposite Anstruther at a rough wooden board, a pot positioned between them. Tang sipped at the clay mug in his hands, cautiously.

"It is . . . acceptable," Tang announced, after considerable deliberation.

Anstruther rolled his own mug back and

forth before him, empty and dry. "I don't care much for the stuff, myself. The Spanish could have kept it, for all I would care."

"Actually, tea was an invention of the Middle Kingdom." Tang sipped at the cup again, his nose wrinkling again, just as it had when faced with the horse's leavings.

"Oh, indeed?" Anstruther nodded politely, unconvinced.

Tang set down his cup, and rose to his feet. "Shall we continue, Sir Robert?"

Back out on the street, they headed up the Strand, walking for a few moments in silence.

"Tea was not the only invention of the Middle Kingdom which has found its way to your shores, Sir Robert," Tang finally said, as though their conversation had continued uninterrupted. "Gunpowder, around which the plan of your Fawkes and his confederates revolved, was too a product of my country, though we originally used it only for signal flares and fireworks. It is somewhat ironic, is it not, that the English have taken to both tea and gunpowder, with such fervor, to such divergent ends."

"Hmmm." Anstruther nodded again, a faint smile painted on his lips, no more convinced by this claim than the previous. A silence fell again between them, punctuated by the shouts of grocers and fishmongers at their stalls, of carriages clattering down the cobblestones. Tang seemed serene, comfortable in the long intermission in their conversation, but Anstruther found the silence unbearable, and cast about for any other topic to occupy their time. "Well," he finally said, "Fawkes and his confederates were not alone in incurring the wrath of the crown. Nor is James's ire directed at the English alone, but as his countrymen, as well. One such is Andrew Melville, a religious reformer and fellow Scots, who four years ago was summoned to England on some pretense, and then imprisoned in the Tower of London, all for mocking James's English church. Melville was only just recently released, and I understand he's already on his way to France to teach theology at some university or other, and good riddance to him."

Their path down the Strand had brought them to Charing Cross, and they could now spy the Palace of Whitehall, rising before them.

"Too, there were the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnel, who rebelled against the English rule of Ireland. It's been just four years now since they, too, fled for Europe. They'll likely spit into their beards with anger, when they hear that James has just begun the plantation of English and Scots protestants into Ulster, to help offset the influence of such as they."

"Yes, interesting," Tang said at length, smiling serenely. "It is always instructive to see how other cultures handle such issues. In the Middle Kingdom, since ancient days, if one who foments rebellion against the emperor is taken into custody, he is tried, convicted, and summarily executed. I find your practice of exiling such dissidents . . . charming."

By mid-afternoon, Anstruther and Tang reached the royal residence of Whitehall, and were ushered into the receiving area, an open air courtyard, where Tang was eager to inspect the gifts he had brought for the English king. Anstruther lingered in an awning's shade, while Tang

busied himself, surrounded by opened crates, straw, and strange items the uses of which Anstruther could not begin to guess. In a far corner lay the cage Anstruther had seen carried from the ship, jostled occasionally by some movement within.

Tang's subordinate, in his white tunic and breeches, was involved in constructing some sort of assemblage from rods, dowels, and lengths of bamboo. Anstruther had no notion what it might be. Whatever it was, though, when completed it would stand as high as a man, three times as long and over four times as wide, a coffin-shaped frame surmounted by a wide platform a few inches high, laid across it perpendicularly at the coffin's head.

Tang busied himself overseeing the construction of another, smaller assemblage of blocks and toothed-wheels from other strange objects taken from the crates. Finally, the product of Tang's labor apparently assembled to his satisfaction, the diplomat crossed the courtyard to exchange some words with his subordinate in their native tongue.

After a few moments of angry-sounding syllables fired back at forth between the two men, Tang came to stand before Anstruther, his hands tucked into his sleeves.

"Master Tang," Anstruther said, unable to control his curiosity any longer, "if you'll forgive the question, what *are* these things?"

"I'm happy to elucidate," Tang said with a proud smile. "That"—he pointed to the assemblage his subordinate was still busily assembling—"is Flaming Crane. Its function and operation will hopefully become clear in due time."

Motioning Anstruther to follow, Tang started across the courtyard, towards the other objects scattered around. "This"—he stopped in front of the assemblage he himself had overseen, the workers who had labored under him standing close at hand—"is South-Facing Chariot." To Anstruther's eyes, it appeared to be some sort of heavy, wheeled cart, surmounted by a stylized carving of a man, his arm outstretched and his finger pointing. Anstruther realized that, in fact, the carving *was* pointing to the south, though he was convinced this must be some coincidence.

"And this"—Tang reached into a nearby case, and withdrew a tube the length of a man's forearm, with a lens of glass set into either end—"is the Remote-Viewing Mirror."

Tang presented the tube to Anstruther.

"These other contrivances require additional calibration or specialized circumstances in which to operate, Sir Robert, but I am pleased to demonstrate Remote-Viewing Mirror to you now."

Anstruther accepted the proffered object, and held it in his hands, uncertain what it was meant to be doing.

"Here, if I may," Tang said, reaching forward and placing a hand gingerly on Anstruther's wrist. He raised Anstruther's arm, until his hand was before his face. "Hold the Remove-Viewing Mirror such that its near end is just before your eye, and point the far end at some distant object which you would like to observe more closely."

Humoring the diplomat, Anstruther did as he was instructed, and maneuvered the tube's end to his eye. Suddenly, he saw

within an image of the roof of the Globe Theatre, across the Thames in Southwark.

"'Sblood," Anstruther swore in English, lowering the tube. With his naked eye, all he could see before him were the manicured hedges of Whitehall, leading down to the banks of the Thames and, beyond the river, the indistinct skyline of the south bank.

Anstruther leaned forward, peering down into the tube, but where before he had seen the roofs of Southwark reproduced in miniature, now he saw only the indistinct image of the ground at his feet.

"A most impressive trick," Anstruther said in Italian, handing the tube back to Tang. "How is the illusion accomplished?"

"It is no illusion, Sir Robert. A year ago, when I was yet ambassador to the court of Cosimo II, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, I was given such a device, and a copy of 'The Sidereal Messenger,' penned by a natural philosopher named Galileo. A courier to the Middle Kingdom transported both to the emperor, along with other gifts and items of tribute received by the other Middle Kingdom embassies in Europa. I have since had word that some of the imperial artificers in the imperial city of Northern Capital have divined the principles governing the device's operation—which, I humbly admit, are far beyond my ken—and have constructed larger versions, which allow them to gaze on the face of the moon itself, even to discern shadows on the surface of the red planet, Fire Star."

After a brief span, in which Tang and Anstruther lingered in the yard, watching idly as Tang's subordinate busied himself with the intricate assembly of the frame of rods, joints, and dowels, Rowland arrived from some hidden corner, to inform Anstruther that he and the envoy from Cathay had been summoned to court.

The others—Carr, Hay, Anstruther's brother William—all lounged in their accustomed places, waiting for James to make his entrance. Anstruther, to his annoyance, was relegated to standing beside the Cathay envoy, to act as interpreter when Tang was presented to the king. Having wasted an entire day playing nursemaid to the diplomat was wound enough; having to stand while his fellows relaxed a few short yards away was simply salt to rub into it. At least, though, he was not forced to stand in the rear of the hall, with the rest of Tang's retinue, far from the view of the throne.

It was with some satisfaction that Anstruther watched the other Gentlemen of the Bath scrambling to their feet as the herald's horn announced James's entrance to the hall, though he could not help but notice that Carr rose with less speed and care than his fellows. Tang, with precious little English, apparently knew enough of their customs to recognize the import of the notes from the horn, as he readily bowed with the rest of them as the king made his entrance, without any prompting from Anstruther.

Though he felt the bile rising in his throat to notice it, Anstruther could not ignore the expressions on the faces of the English statesmen of the court, as they looked upon their ruler with barely disguised suspicion. When the king spoke,

Anstruther knew they would curl their lips in distaste at the sound of his brogue, though they'd hide it behind kerchiefs and fans, to protect their position at court.

Anstruther had known James for most of his life, and as his king for all of it, and in private moments was willing to admit—if never aloud—that the king was somewhat pompous, full of considerable self-importance, and overly paranoid about his safety. So he could understand, in part, the English reluctance to embrace him, when first he arrived in the south. But that had been years before, and in all the time since, James had proved himself a consummate ruler, again and again, and any lingering resentments or reluctance on the part of the English was nothing but obstinance, so far as Anstruther was concerned.

The king mounted his throne, addressed a few words to the assembled court, and then the business of the court was begun.

Tang was to be presented to the king after the conclusion of the play, the latest from Master Shakespeare—latest and last, it was rumored, as the playwright's health in recent days had reportedly been in decline.

"What is the subject of this performance?" Tang asked in a low whisper, as the players arranged themselves before the king, the play about to begin.

"You should find this interesting and familiar, Master Tang," Anstruther said. "The play is entitled *Prestre Johan*, and is inspired by the legends from your own land."

"How intriguing." Tang looked to the players, and then glanced back to Anstruther. "Which legends would those be, Sir Robert?"

Anstruther looked at the diplomat beside him, puzzled. "Surely you are familiar with Prestre Johan?" Tang shook his head. "Or Prester John, as the English sometimes call him? The well-known and well-regarded Christian monarch of Cathay?"

"No," Tang said with an apologetic smile. "I am sorry to aver that I have never heard of this Prestre. Is he a figure of myth?"

Before Anstruther could explain further, the play began.

"Master Tang," Anstruther said behind his hand, even quieter than before. "If you like, I will enumerate for you the plot of the play, as best as I am able."

"Yes, please." Tang nodded, eagerly. "That would be most instructive"

Prestre Johan, a great king and priest, has pledged his daughter Serioche to be wed to the son of the Great Cham of Cathay, to ensure peace between their two nations. Prestre Johan and his daughter set sail from his island home of Pentexoire, with a small flotilla of ships. En route to Cathay, though, they are caught in a great storm, and driven off course, Prestre Johan's ship separated from their escort. The ship is driven near Adamant Island, which is constituted of that stone called adamant, which draws to it all iron. The ship founders against the cruel rocks of the Adamant coast, and only Prestre Johan and his daughter survive. Prestre Johan, though, has maintained his grip on his emerald scepter, his symbol of office, and a powerful artifact in its own right, once wielded by his ancestors, the Magi who traveled to witness the birth of the savior Christ.

Years pass, and the nation of Pentexoire is without its lord spiritual and temporal. The

Great Cham, incensed that his son's promised bride has not yet arrived, arms for war against the small island nation. A fleet of ships sets out from Cathay, led by a warship commanded by the Cham's son, a prince of Cathay, sent to Pentexoire to demand their unconditional surrender. En route to Pentexoire, though, the Cathay ship too is drawn near the attractive rocks of Adamant Island, and is shipwrecked.

The survivors of the Cathay ship include the prince of Cathay, and his uncle, the Grand Vizier. The Vizier, worried that they might be thrust into unfriendly hands, counsels his nephew to disguise his identity, posing instead as a simple seaman, while the Vizier assays the role of a merchant.

Prestre Johan, meanwhile, observing the newcomers to his island from a distance, orders his daughter to disguise herself as a boy, until he can divine the intent and the demeanor of the strangers to Adamant Island.

Prestre Johan, using the powers of his emerald scepter, summons a flock of birds, each capable of human speech, and dispatches them to bring forth from the neighboring islands a bewildering array of creatures to test the newcomers, to see whether they can be trusted. Thirty-foot tall cannibals. Bowmen who are men from the waist up, and horses in their lower regions. Women with precious stones for eyes, who can turn a man to stone with their basilisk glare.

The prince of Cathay, fleeing from the basilisk women, stumbles upon the disguised Serioche, who he takes for a simple native of the island. Serioche leads him to safety. The prince, whom Serioche believes to be a simple crewman of the wrecked ship, thanks her, but is uncomfortable with his immediate attraction for the person he believes to be a boy, as he previously had not considered that he had Grecian tendencies. The colloquy of the pair is interrupted by the arrival of the Vizier, in his guise as a merchant. He is bruised and out of breath, but alive. The prince greets him warmly, saying that he is glad that he has escaped from the gaze of the fierce women. The Vizier says that it could have gone worse for them. He says that he has heard about another island, in these waters, where new husbands enlist the aid of fools of despair to test the mettle of a new bride, to make sure no serpents nest in her loins. A man must always be watchful of a woman, never trusting her fully. Serioche, who both men take to be a youth, mocks the old Vizier, asking whether he has surrendered his manhood in the service of his emperor, as surely a man as soft and perfumed as he is has not been near a woman in his long life.

Serioche, in her guise as the island boy, leads the prince and the Vizier through the wilds of Adamant Island, until at last they reach the home of her father. Prestre Johan, his emerald scepter concealed in his sleeve, presents himself as a monastic, who has sought refuge from the sinful world on this hidden island.

In the end, the prince of Cathay reveals himself to the island boy, saying that he can no longer control himself, and that, though it offends all the strictures and mores of his culture, he must profess his love. The island boy, overcome, reveals herself to be a woman, and pledges that she returns his love.

The Grand Vizier, at this point, steps forward to interfere, reminding that prince that he is promised to another, even if she has never arrived to pledge her troth.

Prestre Johan says that the Grand Vizier is mistaken, and reveals himself as the sovereign of Pentexoire. The woman, he says, is his daughter, Serioche, who is intended for the

prince of Cathay who now stands before them.

Voices call from off stage, and a soldier arrives. He is from another ship of the Cathay fleet, one constructed wholly of wood, without a single nail to fasten its timbers, which has been scouring the islands in these waters for the lost prince of Cathay.

The prince steps forward and says that he is the prince for whom they seek. The fleet will continue on to Pentexoire, but not with plans for war, but with glad tidings, and the preparations for a marriage feast. The sovereign Prestre Johan will be returned to his throne, and his daughter will sail for her new life in Cathay with her husband the prince.

The play completed, everyone applauded as loudly and long as did James, while the playwright and the company's actors took their bows.

At a signal from the chamberlain, Anstruther motioned Tang forward, and moved to stand before the throne.

"Sir Robert," the king said, a wry smile on his lips. "We had worried you were lost to us. Your wit was sore missed when we broke our fast, this morrow."

"Your majesty flatters me," Anstruther said, with a courtly bow. "With your kind indulgence, I would present to you Master Zexu Tang, late of the nation of Cathay, official envoy from the court of that country's emperor to your own august presence."

James inclined his head, fractionally, in Tang's direction. Then he turned his attentions back to Anstruther. "Sir Robert, we understand from all corners that the vessel which bore the Cathay envoy hence is most unusual to the eye."

"It is that, your majesty," Anstruther allowed. "Exceeding strange in form and finish."

"And such a large vessel, with such a small draft, or so we are told, festooned with such savage finery. We cannot help but wonder"—James smiled, good-naturedly—"whether we should begin to worry about a fleet of such, sailing one day up the river Thames."

Anstruther laughed, along with the rest of the court, when James indicated he had uttered a witticism. When the laughter had stopped, after an appropriate interval, James motioned for Anstruther to continue.

"You are introduced," Anstruther said in an aside to Tang, in Italian. "What would you have me say?"

"If you wouldn't mind," Tang asked, "what words did your sovereign just speak, so that I could address them if necessary?"

Anstruther explained about the king's jest, and a worried expression crept across the Cathay diplomat's face.

"Please, Sir Robert," Tang said, his tone deferent, "explain to your king that the Bright Dynasty has always preferred to spread its influence in other nations through trade and diplomacy, not through military aggression."

Anstruther, sighing, did as Tang asked, and when he was through, James pulled a face, as a though he considered the envoy's remarks a jest in poor taste. Then the king motioned for Anstruther to continue, growing visibly impatient.

"Sir Robert, if you please," Tang said, "inform your king that my emperor has arranged for several gifts to be sent him, as tokens of good will, in the hopes of

fostering relations between our two peoples."

"Yes, yes," James said, once Anstruther had translated the envoy's words. "Here." James snapped his fingers, and a page rushed forward, holding in his arms a bound copy of the newly completed Authorized Bible. "Do you present this to the envoy, with our compliments, the Holy Writ given as a gift to his people, that they might find their way through the darkness to the true light of the divine."

When Tang had been handed the heavy tome, the envoy bowed deeply to the throne, and then turned briefly towards Anstruther.

"Sir Robert," Tang asked in Italian, his voice low, "is this something of value?"

"Well," Anstruther said with a slight smile, "it is worth twelve shillings, ten shillings if loose-leaf, if you purchased a copy from Robert Baker. But I suppose its worth is measured in more than just specie. It was the work of fifty-four translators over the course of seven years. The king himself ordered that one uniform translation of the holy writ be produced, by the learned of both universities, to be reviewed by the chief learned of the Church and ratified by himself. This is the fruit of those labors, the word of God himself."

Tang regarded the heavy book in his hands, and offered a weak smile. "Many thanks. I'm sure that my emperor will find this most . . . enlightening?"

Tang signaled for one of his crewmen to come forward from the rear of the hall. He handed the man the book, then spoke a few quick syllables at him, at the conclusion of which the man hurried back to the hall's rear and began to coordinate the movements of the other crewmen waiting there.

"If you please, Sir Robert, explain to your king that I have brought with me several of these gifts, which I would now present to him, with his permission."

When Anstruther had relayed the request, James granted the envoy leave to proceed. At a motion from Tang, the crewmen in the rear of the hall began to bring forward the gifts, one at a time.

The first was a strange animal on a leash, who heretofore had no doubt been the cause of the growls, scratches, and movements which had jostled the cage on the dock and, later, in the yard. Tang introduced the animal as native to the far flung region of Fusang. The natives of that distant land, on the far side of the world, midway between Cathay and England when traveling from the latter to the east, had named the beast a "capybara," but to Anstruther's eyes it resembled nothing so much as an enormous, overfed rodent.

Next, Tang presented the Remote-Viewing Mirror. When Anstruther had explained to his king the basic uses of the device, James marveled as, through its length, he was able to see faces at the rear of the hall as though they were no more than a hand's span away.

Finally, Tang's crewmen brought forth the wheeled cart he called South-Facing Chariot. As Tang provided narration, the crewmen turned the cart on its wheels, first this way and then that, but no matter how the device was maneuvered, the carved man on its top seemed fixed in space, its constant finger forever pointing towards the south.

"Remarkable," James said, truly impressed. "How is it accomplished?"

"Abject apologies," Tang said in Italian, bowing slightly, when Anstruther had relayed the king's inquiry, "but this one is but a lowly servant of my emperor, may-he-reign-ten-thousand-years, and it is not given to me to understand all the workings of these mechanisms, but I have been assured by the finest artificers of the Middle Kingdom that there is no trickery or supernatural agency involved, only the function of finely tooled mechanisms."

Tang then clapped his hands, and barked a few syllables at his crewmen, after which they bowed low to the throne and hastened back to the rear of the hall, leaving the wheeled cart and the tethered rodent at the king's feet, the farseeing tube still in James's hands.

"Now, if you please, Sir Robert," Tang said, "there is one final gift which is to be presented to your sovereign, but this gift is a performance of sorts, after the fashion of your play, and not an object which can be left in his possession. But for this performance, I must humbly request that your king accompany me outside, where my subordinate even now is preparing the demonstration."

As Anstruther translated the envoy's words, he recalled that the strange assemblage of rods Tang had called Flaming Crane was nowhere in evidence. It must be this the use of which they were to witness outside, but Anstruther could not begin to guess what that use might be.

James allowed Tang's request, and the court slowly made their way outside. It should have been a simple matter, to travel a distance of no more than a few hundred yards, but questions of rank always governed such situations, and the maneuvering of the courtiers and sycophants meant that it took five times longer to reconvene outside than it would, had they simply moved in a random dash. It was by then near sunset, the sky already dimming, the sun fat and low to the west beyond the bulk of Whitehall.

They gathered on the eastern side of the palace, on the slopes leading down to the banks of the Thames. A considerable distance away, to the south, Tang's subordinate stood beside the strange assemblage, still wearing his white tunic and breeches, but now with a cloth tied around the lower part of his face, obscuring his mouth and nose. Two of the other crewmen who had been assisting him stood to his left, one holding a bucket and the other a lit torch, while another crewmen stood on the far side of the assemblage.

"Sir Robert," Tang said, his tone solicitous, "I am pleased to present the last of the gifts sent by his celestial majesty, the Wanli emperor, ruler of the Middle Kingdom. This is the Flaming Crane."

While Anstruther translated Tang's words, the envoy signaled to his subordinate. The subordinate responded with a kind of salute, and then crawled under the assemblage, climbing up and into its framework. Sliding between the rods and dowels, the subordinate stretched out lengthwise, head forward and face down, his hands and feet set into straps and buckles with the assistance of the crewmen.

The subordinate barked a short syllable, carried faintly to Anstruther's ears on the breeze, at which the crewman with the torch moved to the rear of the assemblage,

and after touching the flame to a protruding cylinder, sparks began to fly forth. Then, all three crewmen quickly stepped back, though the one with the bucket kept alert, his bucket held at the ready.

The assemblage juddered, violently, and then began to inch forward, gliding on boards curved like a sleigh's runners. The assemblage moved forward further, and quicker, moving faster and faster. It was heading right for the congregation of courtiers with James at their head.

Anstruther was frozen to the spot, unsure what to expect. From around him came shouts and warnings, and a few of the courtiers turned and fled. Having covered half the distance to the congregation, the leading end of the assemblage began to rise up off the ground.

"Master Tang . . . ?" he began, his tongue thick in his mouth.

Anstruther watched, eyes wide and disbelieving, as the assemblage rose even further into the air, and its rear began to lift off the ground.

"By Jesu!" Anstruther swore in English.

Sparks shot from the rear of the assemblage, and the Flaming Crane rose up into the sky.

Anstruther looked to Tang, who only smiled, beatifically.

"Is it not remarkable?" Tang said. "The imperial artificers of the Middle Kingdom adapted some designs Tang had been given in the court of the Grand Duke, penned by an architect from Vinci. The design was found capable of gliding on air currents, if dropped from a height, but when propelled by one of our gunpowder rockets, the Flaming Crane is capable of taking off from the ground."

The other courtiers had erupted in a riot of shouts, some of wonderment, some of alarm. James himself had staggered back, fingers dug deep into Robert Carr's arm, gasping for breath.

Anstruther looked up, as the shadow of the Flaming Crane passed over him, his thoughts racing.

Tea, gunpowder, devices which allowed a man to see for miles, gears and contrivances that simulated intelligent agency, and now the ability to fly as only birds had before. Tang insisted that his culture was one interested in spreading its influence only through trade and intellectual exchange. But what if such power and innovation were to fall into the hands of a more warlike nation? What then?

The Flaming Crane arced over the Thames, casting a shadow over London Anstruther suspected would only lengthen with the coming years.

'Variant' sits on the periphery of Mr. Utley's "perennially soon-to-be-finished series of Silurian Tales", but really partakes of Sue Kaufman's Diary of a Mad Housewife *and the author's all-time favorite grade-B science-fiction movie,* I Married a Monster From Outer Space *(1958). "Leavened," he adds, "with some asides about comic books, metafiction, and the care of fine cutlery." Crumbs . . . what's not to like!*

Variant

Steven Utley

Dr. Larson asked today if I have begun keeping a diary, as I agreed to do at our last session. I lied and said yes and felt terrible about it, but now that I have retroactively canceled out the lie by beginning this diary, I still feel terrible.

Perhaps if I try disassociating—

You still feel terrible.

She still feels terrible.

Damn all personal pronouns anyway.

You wake up convinced that the thing to do is to see The Great Man himself (as my husband and now I refer to his project director), who has become famous in the last few months for having answers. My husband and others will have taken all the risks, but The Great Man will get all the credit. The Great Man's reputation will long outlive him; educated people will speak of him and his spacetime anomaly the way Newton and his apple are spoken of, or Darwin, or Einstein.

Well, whatever. I wake up thinking I must go speak to him. I'll tell him, "It's a matter of the greatest importance," but even as you think this you can imagine The Great Man's frown. You've seen him on television often enough, heard enough about him from your husband and other people who work with him. You imagine getting to him and speaking to him. "Everything is changed," you imagine yourself telling him. "Everything has been taken away and replaced with something almost, but not exactly, like it. I can't tell you why everything is strange, but it is."

But you can't imagine anything in The Great Man's expression, not impatience, really, not contempt, not complete lack of interest, but there is no mistaking the feeling that you are only the latest in an interminable series of interruptions of Important Work, of intrusions into his precious private space. (He is said to be an agoraphobe, the perfect ironic quirk in one who dabbles in the complexities of the infinitesimal and the nearly infinite.)

The prospect of actually getting to talk to The Great Man isn't very encouraging, though. You can already imagine the obstacles. The great man is notoriously difficult to see if you aren't a fellow scientist or a reporter. You probably would have to get past his secretary, and probably he has a bodyguard now, and maybe a wife, too, and negotiating your way past them all without your husband ever hearing of it would be difficult.

So, instead, you finally start keeping the diary as you promised Dr. Larson you would.

If there are millions of me, I am we and them and language breaks down under the weight of so many of me. Are they each as unhappy as I am? Inside the skin (which by the way has finally if only for the time being ceased to crawl) personal pronouns are too hard to keep track of right now. I am s/he and we are they and each/both/all of us are not having a good day. Not at all. We are having a bad day. We don't want to, but we are anyway. Still, we try to keep up appearances. We try to help our older daughter with a short written theme she must present in class the next day. We peer desperately peer at the text, keep fastening our attention on a stray comma only to lose it, repeatedly. Finally it seems to go into hiding and we can't find it anywhere. We say the theme is perfect as it is, and know that we lie.

We are having a very bad day indeed. See how our hand trembles as we begin to chop vegetables for dinner. Gravity almost suffices to pull the big heavy triangular blade with its minutely serrated edge down through the mushrooms. Only a slight increase in pressure is required to chop carrots and celery just like a television chef. How much more pressure might be needed to slice off a finger? Not much, surely. Are we or is she or am I even certain that this is the right piece of cutlery for the job? It's part of an excellent set, a wedding gift (or birthday anniversary or something not important any longer), but there were no instructions. The Thing won't care. The Thing will just expect its dinner to be on the table when it gets home. The Thing might but then again might not notice, let alone remark upon, the presence of a severed digit in the salad bowl. Clean the blade carefully (no dishwasher for this honey, a good knife, an *excellent* knife) and make sure it goes into its proper slot in the big wooden block that holds its mates. Make an effort to straighten up the place a bit. Kids drop things everywhere, knowing stuff magically finds its way back to where they can find it next time they want to drop it somewhere. Before, it was *Mustn't let hubby come home from his hard day to a pigsty.* Now it is *Mustn't give The Thing any reason to suspect that I/we are on to him/It.*

Usually he didn't talk about his work, save in the most general way, and of course he sometimes made fun of The Great Man, but around the time of the breakthrough he couldn't contain himself. Even then he tried not to violate security, yet he was so excited he had to drop hints. It was big, whatever it was. And then, finally, there was the big press conference presided over by The Great Man, and we learned that he and his colleagues (prominent among them, beaming for the television cameras, my husband) had somehow discovered or created or captured or stabilized (in any case, *some*thinged) a weak spot in spacetime. That they could push things through this weak spot and then pull them out again, to all appearances unchanged, unharmed. That there was another world on the other side, another entire universe, like ours in all fundamentals, unlike it in

many details. That our universe and this other one had probably split off from each other, or split off from still other universes that had split off from each other at some remote nano-moment deep in the past, and each universe in this infinite, geometrically replicating succession of universes was slightly or enormously different from all the rest.

After a point I could no longer follow it (marrying a physicist is no royal road to understanding quantum physics), but nevertheless I grasped the essential idea, grasped also that people were determined to visit that other world. Grasped, finally—though I arrived at this conclusion myself, independently of my oh-so-percipient husband and his colleagues, to whom it seems never to have occurred—grasped finally that if people from this universe could go in, people from that other universe could come out. When I cautiously asked what sort of people might inhabit other universes, he said the point was moot because there were no people in this particular other universe. "It's just sand and rocks and lichen. Think primeval—no, not even primeval. Think *primordial.*" When I pointed out that if people from our universe could enter this wasteland, people from other universes could, too, in which case wasn't it just a short hop, skip, and jump to our universe? He laughed again and said, "Yes, they could at that, and yes, I suppose it is just a hop, skip, and jump, but what are the odds?"

I don't *know* what the odds are. I'm *not* the mathematician in the family. Still, I wanted to ask him: What were the odds of finding a weak spot in spacetime?

Not long afterward he dropped his bombshell. "I've told them I want to be the first to go through," he said, smiling to let me know that there was no cause for anxiety, "but they're thinking maybe it'd be best to let someone without a family go through first. Not that they don't think it's perfectly safe."

"Why do they think that?"

"The probes, the test animals, they've gone through and come back out okay. The animals were a little disoriented at first, but only a little and only at first, and that's to be expected. Soon it'll be about as exciting as walking through a door, from one room into another."

"Tell me, honestly. How safe is it?"

"Very safe. Perfectly safe."

"Nothing is perfectly safe."

"Well, it's as safe as stepping into an elevator."

"Sometimes," I said, "elevators fall and crash."

"Well, this is *safer* than stepping into an elevator, then. Safer than stepping out of a bathtub. A lot safer than driving an automobile. If there was any doubt in anyone's mind, we wouldn't be thinking about sending a human volunteer through."

I could tell from his face, I could see it in his eyes, he wanted to go through, he really wanted to go, he meant to go, he wouldn't rest, he'd never be satisfied until he went through himself.

And then he did. Go. Through.

I should really have started with the comic book. It didn't really *start* with the comic book, the comic book just gave definite form to the idea which till that moment we had only sensed lurking in the back of our head or just behind our shoulder. No idea where the kids might have got a comic book. We certainly don't buy the things for them, and it hardly seemed like the kind of thing they would have bought for themselves. Perhaps one of their friends left it, though their friends hardly seem like the kind who would buy such things.

But you never know.

Anyway, we sat by ourself in the breakfast niche and idly flipped the pages while the coffeemaker burbled on the counter like a moron. Comicopolis, we discerned, is sort of a self-referential metafictitious Metropolis Gotham City Duckburg Riverdale all in one, and more densely populated than any of them, because it is home town to all the characters in comic books, or at least all the characters owned by this particular company, an orthodox assortment who somehow understand that they are comic-book characters. Most of them, in fact, either work directly for or else are indirectly beholden to a brace of more or less ethically challenged comic-book publishers, and some but not all of the problems they face derive from their employers' avarice and insensitivity. Which is not to discount the power lust of villains, though even they often find themselves at the mercy of canny businessmen with lawyers. (One of the lawyers is named Remora.) Responsibility for dealing with your more *outré* type menace often falls to the book's nominal star, Doctor Iron, who cuts a dashing figure in his dressed-down way: under his lab coat (which he sheds whenever he's about to wade into a trouble spot) he wears a teeshirt, jodhpurs, riding boots, as though he just wandered off the polo field to battle evil. He is first and foremost a scientist, however, and dislikes having to take time off from his "real work," a generalized sort of scientific experimentation involving unlikely-looking machines, to thwart the machinations of typically sociopathic comic-book villains such as Professor Entropy, Desiree Carrion, or The Devastator; he would rather leave crime-fighting to characters who enjoy it, such as Bobcat (in reality millionaire philanthropist Robert Katt, though nobody makes the connection) and his two young assistants, Ocelot and Margay. Fleeting appearances are made by other costumed characters such as Lithium Lass, whose secret identity is known to everybody but her, and there is a subplot involving a pubescent girl who used to be the superpowered (albeit prepubescent) Dynamic Doll but now wants only to pursue "a career with a real future" as the heroine of either a teen-comedy or else a teen-romance comic. A second subplot pertains to the efforts of a talking dog named Sam and a talking cat named Pam to avoid being returned to FunnyVale, evidently a ghetto or asylum for anthropomorphized animals. It is certainly nothing like the comic books I remember from my own childhood, though it seems to be about those comic books. It is textually and visually dense, extremely intorted satire by and for people who have read entirely too many comic books.

And yet I keep going back to two pages having to do with Doctor Iron's secret origin (so secret that it is hidden in the middle

pages of a comic book). This resonates terribly for me. Doc has invented a matter transmitter by which he means to travel great distances, between the stars.

"The object to be transmitted," he explains, "is scanned at this end—call it Point A. The scan serves as a template. The object is then disintegrated and transmitted to Point B, where it is reassembled according to the template."

Of course, Doc then steps through the transmitter in his laboratory (Point A), and of course something goes wrong—the template isn't perfect. When he emerges at Point B, our hero is not quite himself, or, rather, he is quite a bit more than himself. Somewhere in transit he has picked up extra mass or energy, every atom of his original being has been replaced by the atoms of his new being—in any event, he is now superhumanly strong and impervious to harm.

Apart from such things as the teeshirt, jodhpurs, cleft chin, multiple degrees and concurrent careers in several branches of science, Doc before he goes into the matter-transmitter has a lot in common with my husband before he went into the spacetime anomaly. Likewise, afterward, except for Doc's becoming, however reluctantly, the superpowered champion of Comicopolis while my husband simply became The Thing That Looks And Acts Like My Husband.

The Thing comes home to wife, children, dog. Children and dog greet Thing at door. Wife hangs back under the pretense of attending to dinner. Children are fooled and who's to blame them? Not like they can have ever even heard the words, *implications, quantum, physics*, let alone heard them in tandem, never mind grasped the implications of the phrase "implications of quantum physics." There is for them, there can be only the one world, the only Daddy. But a dog should not be so easy to fool. Dogs are supposed to know better, to be able to scent trouble (trouble? *danger!*) and warn people that all is not what it seems to dull human senses, whether it's prowlers on the property or earthquakes simmering underfoot or an alien masquerading as one's husband and the sire of one's children. But no, damn dumb dog is right in there competing with damn darling daughters to get under Daddy-Thing's feet. Daddy-Thing stoops, pats the dog, scoops up a squealing giggling child in each arm, advances on wife to collect a welcome-home-how-was-your-day kiss (first the dog, then the children, finally the wife: a man's priorities, please note, and perfectly simulated by The Thing That Walks Like The Man I Married). Well, wife does not want any part of it (It) but also doesn't want to let on that she knows what's what, who's whom, because she is outnumbered, the children flesh of her flesh have gone over to the creature, the damn dog, too. So she submits to being kissed, forces herself, just as, a moment earlier, she made a smile when The Thing came through the door. "Did you miss me?" It asks his hysterical girls. "Was I gone for a long time?" Only for the weekend. Only for four hundred million years. Only for as long as it takes an adult male human being to be replaced, atom for atom, by something that looks walks talks exactly like him and has his habits and memories and yet isn't him at all.

Dinner, his favorite foods for his favorite meal. The girls have calmed down, have helped to set the table, the dog finds its favorite spot in a corner and settles down for a snooze. The masquerade has succeeded with everyone except she who is not to be deceived. She, too, masquerades. She serves dinner. She smiles. She loads the dishwasher. She gets the children ready for bed.

She hears the bathroom door open behind her and turns deliberately in her chair. He is wearing pajama bottoms and slippers. He looks at the collection of plastic vials on the nightstand. Picks up one vial, shakes it, holds it up to the light. "Honey," he says, "are you taking your medicine the way you're supposed to?" Those things, comes the reply, make me feel like, like, make me sleepy. "They're *supposed* to help you relax." I am relaxed, see how relaxed I am, but it's a lie and it's obvious that he knows that it's a lie. "When's your next appointment with Doctor Larson?" I say, I saw her just this morning, after I dropped the girls off at school. She refilled my prescriptions.

I don't go on to say, Or maybe it was yesterday morning. Or maybe it doesn't matter.

Night comes, as night always does, and everyone who can sleep does. Even Things can sleep. Those of us who cannot sleep, we lie in the darkness, listening to It breathe, and we think our thoughts, which are as follow, though in no particular order:

Perhaps I should call Dr. Larson in the morning. Perhaps it is just me.

Perhaps not. In which case, where is my husband, Thing? To what hellhole has he been sent so that you can take his place? You are a good copy, but now I see that you are not a perfect one.

But perhaps it *is* just me. Perhaps I have this all backwards. Perhaps *I* am the one who's not in the right world.

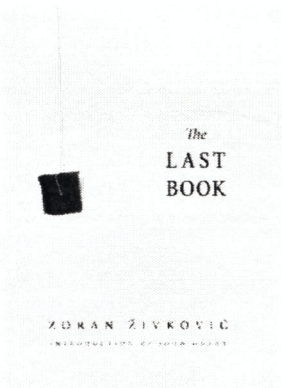
How would you know if things (not just Things, but things) were not on the right world? You would, she thinks, you would keep noticing things that, if they are not wrong, nevertheless are somehow not right. You'd look at the books on your shelves and they'd be the books you remember but the copies would seem unfamiliar. And the clutter on your desk would be an uncharacteristic clutter, not the sort of mess it had ever been your habit to create. You've always been a stacker, this is an untidy mound. Familiar recordings of favorite music would sound somehow unfamiliar, too fast, too slow, too shrill, too something. The trees outside the window would not quite be your trees, flowers would smell, well, off, food would taste off.

And how would you know if something else was not on the right world? You look at your husband and try to remember if that mole he's had since childhood isn't supposed to be smaller or bigger or located a centimeter lower or to the left or maybe he didn't have a mole after all. Moles change, but do they migrate? Even while making love to your husband you cannot shake the feeling that you are with someone whose movements scents sounds textures are not those you remember from before the time he went to that other world.

Finally, we slip out of bed and glide through the darkened but entirely familiar house, past the girls' bedroom door, down-

stairs, past the dog which grunts sleepily, and record all the thoughts we have thought for posterity, or at least for Dr. Larson. Then we face a terrible choice. We will either simply wait here like a dumb beast for day to come, as day always does, or we will get up and go into the milkily illumined kitchen. The big heavy knife will gleam as we draw it carefully out of the wooden block. We will try one last time (for surely it is the last time) to put everything in order.

Zoran Živković At PS Publishing



The Last Book: a brilliant surrealistic thriller from the author of *Impossible Stories* and *The Fourth Circle*.

A series of mysterious deaths in the Papyrus Bookstore brings literature-loving police inspector Dejan Lukic to investigate. Here he meets the attractive owner, Vera Gavrilovic, and learns that the only thing the victims have in common is that in the moments before their deaths they were reading an elusive and unidentified volume—the Last Book.

Is a literary madman on the loose, murdering readers according to the method laid down in *The Name of the Rose*? In a final race against time, Inspector Lukic must discover the secret of the Last Book and the reason why he feels as though he has already read everything that is happening to him. The extraordinary denouement reveals hidden truths about the clash of realities and the awesome power of the creative imagination.

Available in a jacketed slipcased hardcover and trade hardcover.

***12 Collections* and *The Teashop*... Copies Still Available**

What lies behind the human urge to collect things? What is the true psychology of the kleptomaniac? These questions bear on all of us; within every person there lurks a fanatical philatelist or a monomaniacal lepidopterist, just waiting to burst forth. In his new story cycle, *Twelve Collections*, Zoran Živković, the master of mind-bending surreal fantasy, applies his fertile mind to this problem.

Also in this volume: *The Teashop*, a superb new novelette about storytelling and the miraculous weavings of Fate.

And coming soon: *The Book, The Writer, The Reader*, and *The Bridge*; please check www.pspublishing.co.uk for details.

The author tells us that the following story germinated from two sources. "The first," he says, "was an article I read somewhere about a church that claims legal ownership of its believers' bodies; and the second, a belief that behind glamorous SFnal futures there will always be machines that break down just like machines do now. I mean, obviously, right?" Currently Mr. Irvine is working on a near-future noir called Buyout, *due to appear in spring or summer 2009. "Also there's another comic project in the pipeline," he adds, "and the usual assortment of short stories and probably never-to-be-realized flights of fancy." Never to be published? We very much doubt that.*

Shad's Mess

Alex Irvine

There was a goddamn mess down in the F compiler. Shut right down in the middle of tooling a group of Lodestar Church missionaries from someplace back in-system, Copernicus or Chicago maybe, Shad couldn't remember and anyway it didn't matter now except that once he finished wading through the muck he'd have to make sure the incident report got back to the originating station. He suited up and sealed the door behind him, tongued his comm to his personal channel and started his report. "Shad Pickler, Bradenton Station, five July two two one nine, time stamp. F compiler malfunction during transit, from . . . " He stumbled, not knowing exactly where the missionaries were coming from. "Hang on." At the wall terminal, he brought up the transit logs. It was Copernicus. He noted this in the report and went on. "All sixteen berths in F compiler went out at once. Jesus, what a mess. Strike last sentence. Travelers were arrested at approximately, ah"—he peered into the nearest berth—"sixty percent reconstitution." He made another quick circuit of the compiler. The Christmas-tree status screen looked more like a jack-o'-lantern: everything that could have gone wrong apparently had. Shad uploaded a diagnostic creeper into the compiler. While it was creeping, he manually popped the lids on the berths. The filters in his exchange system didn't quite eliminate the abattoir smell. Good thing this happened before lunch, Shad thought. He'd tossed his cookies in a suit before, and that was the one thing in the world more revolting than a morning spent shoveling out compiler berths. Just the memory turned his stomach.

His intercom buzzed. "Tell me sixteen missionaries are okay, Shad," said Nancy Ayegbani.

"Wish I could," Shad said. "There's a lot of meat down here, but none of it's moving." Considering the situation, that was a good thing. If one of the partly-assembled missionaries got up right now, Shad thought, I'd get religion first and a heart attack five seconds later.

Nancy's resigned sigh had a wheeze in it. Her asthma kicked up when entropy gremlins got their little claws into the compilers. "They're all dead?" she said.

"What did I just say?" A secondary effect of entropy on the compilers was that it compromised Nancy's ability to deal with things. Put her in a boardroom, a training seminar, a strategy session, and she was an absolute pro; but anything having to do with the compilers gave her the heebie-jeebies. Shad was privately of the opinion that Nancy was a little religious, and had some kind of conflict over the transit process since there was no quality-control process on the reinstantiation, or transmigration or whatever, of the soul. Metempsychosis, or something.

"I know what you said," Nancy snapped. "I'm processing, Shad."

"Wish this compiler was," Shad said. "You better call Copernicus and tell them to start notifying next of kin."

"I hate this job," Nancy says, and broke the connection.

Shad started his report rolling again as he eyeballed the diagnostic creeper's results on the wall terminal. "Initial analysis by the creeper finds no defect in processing systems," he said. "Repeating analysis, and adding query to encryption algorithms at originating station." This was a hopeful maneuver, but not one likely to succeed. Ninety-nine percent of the time, when a transit went gooey it was because of a problem at the receiving end; still, the creeper said everything was fine on Bradenton's part, and Shad's report wouldn't be complete without a glance at Copernicus' encryption. It would piss off the station manager back there, but that was Nancy's problem. She was without peer in the arena of interstation politicking and blame-shuffling. Also she was honest, a superficial contradiction but one Shad knew to be accurate.

Again the creeper said F compiler was in tip-top shape. It also said that the encryption algorithms at Copernicus were of impeccable quality. Shad reported both of these results, then sighed. "Time to get shoveling. Strike that last sentence. Report to be continued." He tongued off his comm. and went to the utility closet.

Oops. Forgot the pathogen screen. Next to the wall terminal was a small intake fan. Shad activated it and got a list of every microbe in the room. None of them were unusual, or unusually virulent. With a sigh much like Nancy's, he popped his helmet off and held his breath while he rooted in the utility closet for a filter mask. Then he shed the rest of the hazard suit and slipped on plain nylon coveralls.

He'd only had to do this once before, and that time there were only four berths and the compiler hung up at around ten percent. Mostly bones, still slick with the biogoo the compiler used to put bodies together. Twenty minutes of tossing the bones into a wheeled bin he borrowed from housekeeping, and he was done. Not this time; now he had sixteen berths full of approximately forty kilos of meat apiece. Then he had to sterilize each of them so no remnant DNA got into the next passenger; among compiler techs, this was called gene therapy and had caused the compiling of some truly freakish people. Shad got to work. The easiest way to remove each partial from the berth was just to get it in a bear hug and horse it into the bin. It was fast but messy; bits fell off in the berth and on the floor, and after the first two Shad knew he

was going to be seeing these almost-faces in his dreams. "That's why I make the big money," he said to nobody, and wheeled the bin to the next berth. Maybe he could apply for university anatomy credits.

Six partials filled the bin to overflowing. Shad stuffed the dangling bits down inside the walls and found a tarp to put over the whole mess. He wheeled the bin down to the disposal chute behind the kitchen, whistling tunelessly along the way, nodding hey to people he saw in the halls. When he removed the tarp, he was momentarily overcome by desire for a pitchfork, but there wasn't one handy and he couldn't leave the bin unattended while he went to look for one, and anyway by the time he found one and got back, he'd already have been done. So he wrestled the partials into the chute and they slid down into the bioslurry from which came Bradenton Station's food and water. Ashes to ashes, meat to meat, he thought, sketching a sardonic cross before heading back to F compiler.

On the way, Nancy pinged him, but he ignored her despite the fact that in the normal course of things, interaction with the lovely and imperious Nancy was the highlight of any given day. Right then, however, the last thing in the world Shad wanted to do was deal with administrative crap. Whenever one of the compilers malfunctioned, shit rolled downhill to Shad. Look at the logs, he said every time. They're perfect. Every check, every scheduled refurbishment, every scheduled update.

Not that it ever made a difference. Bradenton Holdings was a big enough company that everyone could always find someone else to blame, except Shad, because when you got right down to it, he was the one maintaining the compilers. Didn't matter if he was doing it by the specs; the guy with the wrench in his hand was always the guy who went out the lock when things went wrong. Shad had lost track of the number of times his job had been threatened—which number exactly equaled the number of times the union steward Vic had egregiously failed to demonstrate any stewardship whatsoever—and it wasn't much consolation at all that he hadn't yet been fired. Often it seemed to him that he remained at Bradenton solely as a scapegoat-in-waiting.

Having built up a suitable armature of resentment, Shad got back to the compiler and rolled the bin to the next berth. A little trail of translucent goo, threaded with red, dripped over the edge; Shad darkly imagined it as the residue of a fleshless hand, gripping the side of the berth before the unfortunate pilgrim gave up the ghost. Even in his most foul moods, he couldn't help trying to scare the bejeezus out of himself; it was a kind of light held up to the crannies of his psyche populated by memories of other partials. If he thought of his job as one ongoing zombie vid, his nightmares took on the goofy atmosphere of *Space Station Revenant* or *World of the Fleshless*.

"You can only destroy them with a head shot," he said to nobody, right before something moved in the berth.

Shad froze, looking at it out of the corner of his eye. You're seeing things, he told himself. Then he told himself that it was just a bubble of gas from some uncompleted process, a chemical reaction caused by the change in pressure when he opened the berth.

When the face peered up over the rim,

he tried to scream, but his body failed him. He couldn't move, he couldn't speak, he couldn't breathe. All he could do is look at its glassy eyes, its domed skull with little tufts of black hair, the thin-fingered hand it rested on the rim of the berth right at the drip he'd noticed when he came into the room. When it winked at him, something broke loose in Shad's mind and floated away, trailing a hiss as if his head is deflating.

It was the Entropy Gremlin. Shad passed out dead on the floor.

He woke up to find Nancy patting his cheeks. "Shad. You okay?"

"Huhwherezit?" he said, looking wildly around the room.

Nancy put a hand flat on his chest and eased him back to the floor, where he lay panting into his mask. She took it off, and as the smell rolled over him he wished she hadn't. "Gah," he said.

"Yeah," she agreed, wrinkling her nose. It was a strong, broad nose, a nose of African queens. Shad had a secret crush on it, along with the rest of her. In his daze he almost confessed this, but then the specter of the Gremlin rose up and blotted out his devotion. Nancy saw him start to lose it again, and she slapped him. "Shad! I said are you okay?"

The sting on his jaw brought him around a little. "Yeah," he said, getting up on one elbow. Nancy wasn't asking about the Gremlin, so Shad was damned if he was going to say anything about it. Probably just too much thinking about one of the partials getting up and walking around, that and an empty stomach made him lightheaded. Right. "Think I just got a little dizzy," he said.

"Incisive as always, Captain Obvious," Nancy says. She let him sit up, and he got to his feet with no trouble other than a creeping sense of mortification.

"I'm gonna get a drink of water," he said.

"You do that." She waited while he went into the control room and came back with a bottle, then she said, "So I see four of them in the bin there, and six still in the berths. Where are the other six?"

"Down the chute," Shad said around the mouth of the bottle.

She buried her face in her hands. Strong, wonderful hands. "Tell me you didn't just say down the chute," she says.

"What was I supposed to do with them? Call an undertaker?"

"Shad, I was just on the comm. with their church. Missionaries, remember? These people still bury their dead. They want the bodies back. We're supposed to ship them to Mars."

"We're supposed to waste compiler time shipping partials to Mars?" Shad said.

"Church, Shad. They have a lot of money. And I already told them we'd do it."

Shad swallowed. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. If I didn't like you, Shad Pickler, I swear I'd knock you out again. Do you know how much of a hassle you just made for me?"

"Truth is," Shad said after considering the issue, "I was kind of preoccupied with the hassle down here."

Nancy narrowed her eyes at him. "If you don't have a concussion, I'm going to give you one."

Shad sucked down a little more water. "You know, Nancy, I hit my head pretty good. Think I might have a concussion. Okay with you if I go to the clinic?"

"That's a good idea. Get a scan, take the rest of the day off." Nancy shook her head in disgust. "Let the rest of us clean up the rest of your mess."

A little dispirited by Nancy's temper, Shad wandered back to his quarters and stepped into the shower, letting the ultrasonic buzz all of the blood and goo off him and then splurging on water as a second course. He walked into his living room clean as a man could possibly be, except for the tendrils of fear still wrapped around his hypothalamus. Time to look for another line of work, he thought. Fixing shuttles or something. Anything that doesn't involve hallucinating little monsters in a room full of dead almost-missionaries.

It was a sign, he thought, a revelation . . . although the religious overtones of those words make him nervous. He reoriented his self-analysis around a psychological lexicon. What he'd seen was a message from the basement of his mind telling him that he should be doing something else with his life. Face it, he told himself. The only reason you stick with the compilers is because Nancy's around a lot.

What the hell better reason, he answered himself. Am I supposed to look for job satisfaction on an orbital station doodling its way along the equator of a planet given over to strip mines the size of Pluto? Why are you giving me trouble for letting a little crush make the day go by quicker?

He could make more money down in the mines, but he didn't like the idea of on-planet life. Too much time underground, too many ambient toxins, too many idiots hiding out from one law-enforcement agency or another and spoiling for a chance to add one more count to their criminal records. No, Bradenton Station was the place for him. Could be he was right about looking into a transfer, though. Shuttles. Or work on the elevator . . .

He walked into the kitchen and found the Gremlin going through his fridge. It seemed to like pickles, and Shad suffered a small psychic earthquake when he connected this preference to his surname.

Ha. Just a joke.

Shad was in the middle of composing an internal response to this when he realized that he was no longer just having a conversation with himself. The Gremlin was grinning at him.

"Did you just talk to me?" he asked it.

"Yeah," it said.

He closed his eyes. "Wait," he said. "Either talk in my head or out loud, but man, don't do both."

"Okay," the Gremlin said.

Shad waited to see if it's going to say anything else, but it just looked at him. "Hey," he said. "Are you—I saw you down at the compiler. How'd you get here?"

The Gremlin grinned and stuck its hand through the refrigerator door, coming out with the jar of pickles. "Whoa," Shad said. "Do that again."

"Nah," the Gremlin said. "These pickles are good as hell."

"So you just kind of floated up here from the compiler, went through walls and the whole bit?"

"Guess so," the Gremlin said. "Didn't think about it much."

"Uh huh." Shad poured himself a glass of water and was suddenly self-conscious about being naked save for a towel in front of the Gremlin. He tried to reason with himself. If it could walk through walls—and move jars of pickles with it—it could probably see through the towel. "Go ahead and finish the pickles," he said. "I'm going to get dressed."

"Okay," the Gremlin said.

Shad put on work coveralls even though he wasn't going back to work. When he came back into the kitchen, the Gremlin is nowhere to be found. "Shit," he said, feeling stupid for not making sure it was going to stick around, and also because it occurred to him that if it could see through his towel, it probably didn't have any problem with his pants, either. The processes of reason were often delayed in Shad's head. He knew this, and kind of liked it; better to be intuitive than cold-bloodedly assessing probabilities all the time. But there was no denying that his X-ray vision fancy had let the Gremlin escape.

Wait; another belated dispatch from the land of sequential logic. If it could walk through walls, it was going to leave whenever it wanted to. Shad realized that he must have hit his head harder than he'd thought, and paradoxically this made him feel a little better. Just to make sure, he said, "Hey, Gremlin."

It came out of his oven.

"What are you doing in there?" Shad wanted to know.

"Shouldn't I be?"

"I—well, I don't know. No reason, I guess. It's just odd to sit in an oven." He'd been considering a question, and decided that now is the time to ask it. "So what were you doing in the berth?"

The Gremlin shrugged. "I was just there."

"Right. You didn't crawl in while I was gone?"

"Nope. I was there the whole time."

With deep unease Shad followed this line of thought to its only conclusion. "So the compiler, ah, compiled you in there?"

"Looks that way," the Gremlin said.

"Man," Shad said. "That's some error."

It was, in fact, almost enough to make a guy religious. What are the odds? How many molecules had to be shuffled in exactly the right way? This was no accident, Shad concluded. He was the target of forces beyond the ken of humankind, and he didn't like it.

But there was no time to think about it because Nancy pinged him right then to tell him that the Lodestar Church people were suing Bradenton Holdings, Bradenton Station, her, and him. Mostly him, because after all he was the guy who dumped six partials into the bioslurry. "This is bad, Shad," Nancy said. "These people have a lot of money, and if we were going to piss off some Christians, we picked the wrong ones."

Shad protested that he wasn't going to piss off some Christians, it just turned out that way. "I know that," Nancy said. "But the fact remains, we're getting sued, and these folks aren't your enlightened twenty-third century kind of Christians. These are the burn-people-at-the-stake, bring-on-the-Rapture kind of Christians."

"And they were coming after the miners?" Shad wondered.

"They like to work the tough crowds," Nancy sayid. "Lodestar's all about the evangelist Everest. Who can tackle the worst bunch of sinners, and all that. Except now they're distracted because you recycled six of them."

"Oh, man," Shad said.

"Yeah."

He had an idea. "Listen," he began.

"I wouldn't," the Gremlin said.

"Listen what?" Nancy said.

Shad looked at the Gremlin. "Nothing," he said. "Never mind."

"You have a lawyer?"

"Why would I have a lawyer, Nancy?"

"Get one. Bradenton house counsel will probably recommend someone."

"Recommend someone? Why won't they be my lawyer?"

Nancy laughed. There was pity in it. "Shad. They didn't get to be Bradenton house counsel by taking on doomed clients. Talk to them today, though. They'll have ideas."

Then she was off the comm., and Shad said to the Gremlin, "What?"

"You sure you want to tell her about me?"

"Believe I am. I'm about to get my ass sued off by the Lodestar Church. You'll take some of the heat off me."

"Let me get this straight. Lodestar Church. These are religious types, right?" the Gremlin asked. When Shad nodded, it went on. "If you go tell them that I popped out because your compiler made a mistake, what are they going to do?"

Shad hadn't thought things through that far ahead.

"They're going to—"

There was a knock at the door. Shad froze, besieged by images of lawyers serving him papers via proxybot. He woke up the doorway camera and saw that indeed there was a proxybot waiting in the hall, but its display was turned away. Must be a lawyer, he thought. Normal people would want their faces seen.

"It's a lawyer," the Gremlin said.

Shad reminded himself to make better use of the Gremlin's abilities. The proxybot knocked again. "What do I do?" Shad whispered.

"Call a press conference," the Gremlin suggested.

"No, I mean right now," Shad said.

"Call Vic."

Right, Shad thought. Vic. Vic was the last guy in the world who would step in front of powerful Christian lawyers for Shad Pickler. But he pinged Vic anyway, and left a message, looking over his shoulder at the door as if the proxybot might blow it off its tracks at any moment.

The speaker attached to his doorway camera popped, and Shad almost had a heart attack. "Shad Pickler," the speaker said. "You are avoiding service of a legal action. This is prohibited under the statutes of—"

Shad jerked the door open. "Okay, okay," he said, and slapped his palm against the proxybot's display. "There. I'm served. Now go away." He slammed the door and went over to the tablet on his kitchen table. It showed the text of the lawsuit. He read it over, then blanked the tablet and sat down.

"Oh, man," he said. "Oh, man."

The Gremlin walked up next to him and climbed up onto the table so it could look at the tablet, which lit up again without Shad telling it to. The lawsuit text spun

past, faster than Shad could have read it; and the Gremlin said, "Are they serious?"

"They're missionaries."

"But the legal stuff. Does anyone really take that seriously?"

"You've never been to Earth, have you?"

"Tough question," the Gremlin said. "I've sort of been everywhere, or maybe it's everywhen. Language doesn't really get itself around the idea. But you can't expect me to remember all of it."

Shad figured that made sense, at least if you were going to grant the existence of the Gremlin in the first place. "You're not doing as much walking through walls," he noted.

Didn't want to freak you out, the Gremlin said in his head, and cracked up.

"I need a lawyer," Shad said.

"So they're saying that they own you?"

"Part of me, at least," Shad said. "Wonder if I can just nick a little fat from my gut and give it to them." He gave his waist a contemplative poke and made a stab at the math. Six missionaries, maybe forty or forty-five kilos each, divided into the thousand tons of bioslurry kept in Bradenton's tanks. So maybe a tenth of a percent missionary, tops, figuring some variance in the distribution. Shad had eaten nothing since the compiler collapse, but some of the bioslurry had probably been cracked for oxygen, so it was pretty likely that Shad had breathed in some missionary. But only a few molecules, and what kind of basis was that for a claim?

"You better not eat anything," the Gremlin said.

"Damn right," Shad said, and called Nancy.

She answered audio-only, and Shad knew he was in trouble. "I don't want to talk to you," Nancy said.

"How was I supposed to know?" Shad said.

"Did you see the database at the end of the lawsuit, Shad? It updates itself every mealtime based on one of the proxies observing the cafeteria. I got a glass of water while I was passing by on my way to the office, and now I'm on the list. Apparently there's about half a milliliter of missionary in me now. Do I want to have to think about this? No, I do not. And I have you to thank."

Shad went and looked at the database. He wasn't on it. "I'll be damned," he said.

"Quaint," the Gremlin observed.

It didn't figure, Shad thought. How did he not have any missionary in him? Unless . . . right. He looked through the whys and wherefores attached to the lawsuit, and found that the Lodestar people were admitting that they couldn't track isotopes of oxygen with enough confidence to tell whether Bradenton personnel were "implicated" solely by respiration. "Sweet," Shad said.

"Better not eat or drink anything," the Gremlin said.

"Way ahead of you," Shad said. He was already figuring ways to get his water from off-station sources, and his food from the emergency stores. "And what were you talking about, press conference?"

An hour later, Bradenton Station was nearly shut down because nobody onboard wanted to eat, drink, or breathe—this last because even though the lawsuit explicitly renounced claims

solely on the basis of metabolized gaseous oxygen, rumors to the contrary had overpowered the text of the claim itself. Also, a codicil recently added to the claim suggested that a newer and more rigorous spectrometry might enable oxygen-based claims, and pointed to another legal matter currently being contested in the courts of the trans-Kuiper. Shad tried to get in touch with Bradenton house council, and was stonewalled at the menubot every time. "Can I please talk to a human being?" he pleaded, and was denied. Cursing, Shad bludgeoned his tablet with knuckles already aching where he'd cracked them on the edge of the compiler while passing out. Desperate, he called Nancy again. While he was waiting for her to connect, the Gremlin said, "Love. Hate it."

"You do, huh?" Shad said. He was too distracted to worry about the Gremlin.

"Yep," the Gremlin said, and Shad's call connected. The voice on the other end was dulcet, welcoming . . . and at the same time, brisk and professional. In other words, utterly unlike Nancy.

"Lodestar Evangelical Church, this is Extraterrestrial Outreach," the voice said. "How may I direct your call?"

Shad shut down the connection. He breathed heavily for a minute or so, petrified at the possibility that Extraterrestrial Outreach would reach out to him. But his tablet stayed quiet. He turned to the Gremlin and said, "You . . . "

"Press conference," the Gremlin said.

"I don't want a press conference!" Shad screamed. "I want a lawyer! I want out of this! I want someone to tell me that I was just doing my job! And I want you to stop playing stupid jokes!" His vision swam, and he realized he was on the edge of hyperventilating. Holding up one hand, he calmed himself down by counting a full ten seconds on each inhale and exhale, all the while trying not to think about how many missionary molecules were introducing themselves into his personal ecology. Meanwhile the Gremlin shrugged, and reached for the pickles. "If that's a joke, it isn't funny," Shad said. The Gremlin made no reply.

"This is the twenty-third century," Shad said. "And I may be a wage slave, but I'm not a slave. They can't claim my body. How is it legal that they own their own people, anyway? Anybody who would sign away rights to his own body isn't mentally fit to make the decision. None of this makes any sense. Because of some probability distribution about missionaries in the bioslurry, I'm supposed to, what, be a missionary myself now? Go down planetside and talk to the freaks about their immortal souls?" Shad realized that he'd gotten a little worked up again, was pounding the table every so often for emphasis, and the Gremlin was looking at him the way it might have regarded an unexpected plot twist in a vid: head slightly cocked, eyes widened fractionally, something anticipatory about its posture. "You did this," Shad said. "If you hadn't shown up in the compiler, none of this would have happened."

"Can't reverse-engineer time," the Gremlin said. "How do you know?"

"Because I know enough math to figure that there's just no way in hell that an error like that might happen in two different ways at exactly the same moment," Shad said. "Don't treat me like an idiot."

"It's all in your perspective," the Gremlin said.

"Come on," Shad said. "I know you're entropy and all, but that doesn't mean you get to be wishy-washy."

There was a knock at the door. Shad went over and opened it to find another proxybot. "You already served me," he said.

"Mr. Pickler?" the bot said. A face appeared on its screen: jowly, unsmiling, female. "Sorry we can't do this in person, but as I'm sure you know, all hell's breaking loose on the legal front around here. Elaine Gupta, BH Legal. Just letting you know that we haven't forgotten about you. Listen, I want to do this via proxy because I'm not sure about the security on your tablet or any of your room terminals."

"Um," Shad said. "Okay. Come on in." He closed the door behind the bot and said, "So what do we do? I thought, um . . . " Not wanting to mention Nancy, he didn't finish the sentence, which would have continued along the lines of: *thought you were going to throw me overboard.*

"Thought we were going to throw you overboard?" Gupta said. She chuckled in a placatory and extremely lawyerly fashion. A cold bubble formed in the pit of Shad's stomach. He looked off to his left and saw the Gremlin munching pickles. You, he thought. And how many pickles were in that jar, anyway?

Gupta saw his look. "Is someone else here?" she asked. "There are privacy considerations at play in what I am able to talk about."

"Nope," Shad said. "Just you and me. Well, just me, really. Where are you, anyway?"

Ignoring the question, Gupta said, "Now, Mr. Pickler. BH Legal has determined that conflicting legal precedents involving freedom of religion and corporeal commodity law make the outcome of this suit extremely uncertain. Our bots are telling us that the odds are literally fifty-fifty, which is what they usually say when precedent is conflicting or absent. In cases like this, we tend to suggest making a settlement offer." Shad's vid-saturated mind ran away with this idea, and he envisioned himself cutting off a digit and presenting it to a leering Yakuza evangelist.

"Settlement?" he said.

"The part of Lodestar's claim that we believe to be the weakest is their assertion that the souls of their missionaries are contained in each molecule of the missionary's corporeal body. If the soul is indivisible, as their doctrine claims, it clearly cannot inhere in divided parts of the body the soul animates. So we're figuring that their claim on your entire body is a deliberate overreach, and that they'll be willing to bend there."

"Bend how?" Shad asked. "Like they'll only want part of my body?"

"Please, Mr. Pickler. They're not barbarians. They'll bend on the time, is what we're thinking. We ran this idea past the bots, and they returned a fairly confident prognosis. How many years would you be comfortable offering as a starting point?"

"Wha—?" Years? How many years? "Are we talking about some kind of indentured servitude here?" he asked. "This is your best idea?"

"What we're talking about is reparations," Gupta said, a bit testily. "Their claim that you improperly disposed of the missionaries is, unfortunately, fairly well tested in other courts. I can send you prece-

dent material if you'd like to be informed. On that basis, they can seek redress. Since what they have lost is members of their church, and the services those members would have provided, they are on solid ground in seeking replacement of those services. That means you."

At a loss, Shad tried to project a thought to the Gremlin: Does this make sense to you?

Thought you didn't want me to talk in your head, the Gremlin said.

Don't get literal on me now, Shad thought.

Okay, the Gremlin said. Then sure, it makes sense.

"Is this like a symbolic reparation," Shad asked Gupta, "or are we talking about me really taking the place of one of the missionaries? And wait a second—this is ridiculous anyway. They were all dead before I put them in the hopper. What kind of service was Lodestar going to get from dead people?"

"Well," Gupta said. "If you've read the complaint, you know that they're claiming negligence on your part."

"Right, but the diagnostics all came back clean. I did everything by the book."

"Until you disposed of the missionaries before finding out whether their religious affiliation dictated a specific procedure for the remains," Gupta replied, looking a bit smug. "They'll use that error to cast doubt on your other actions."

Shad started to hate her. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Ultimately, Bradenton Holdings' side. To the extent that your actions increased Bradenton's exposure to legal liability, I will be protecting their interests, which may not always correlate entirely with yours. Of course, you are entitled to certain services and protections due to your employment with Bradenton. This consultation is one of those services."

Shad sat down on his couch. The proxybot reoriented its display. "I feel so much better now that I know you're not going to space me. Figuratively, of course," he said with all the sarcasm he could muster.

"Legal proceedings are difficult for everyone concerned," Gupta said smoothly. "I'll be in touch as soon as there's something you need to know."

The proxybot's display blanked out and it walked out the door, leaving Shad to look gloomily at the Gremlin. "You're my secret weapon," he said. "And this is all your fault anyway. So get to it. Start secret weaponing. What do we do?"

Told you, it said in his head, which irritated Shad all over again because it wasn't necessary anymore. Press conference.

"Right," he said. "How am I going to get people to come to a press conference? And what am I going to tell them? 'Hey, look, it's the Entropy Gremlin, live and in the flesh. That's why those missionaries got scrambled, see? Not my fault.' I mean, so what? What does that have to do with Lodestar wanting them buried?"

You want the missionaries back? the Gremlin asked.

"Do I? No. Why should I care? You're the one who got them scrambled," Shad said, but as the words left his mouth he thought: zombie missionaries. That would show those bastards. He about-faced. "Can you really do that?"

The Gremlin shrugged.

"Is that a sure-I-can-do-it shrug

or a don't-know shrug?" Shad wanted to know.

It shrugged again.

Shad threw up his hands and went to the fridge to get a beer. He noticed that the pickle jar was full. "What is the," he started to ask, then realized he had no idea how to finish the question. "I mean, you can make pickles, right? So maybe you can make missionaries."

Could be, the Gremlin said.

"We could put on a little resurrection show for Lodestar, is where I think you're going," Shad said.

Could be, the Gremlin said.

"Ah," Shad said, and opened his beer. "Now I get it."

"So listen," he said a while later. "Why do you hate love?"

The math doesn't work, the Gremlin said.

"Your math doesn't work either," Shad said. "I mean, you're entropy, so disorder, et cetera. But the transmission error that scrambled the missionaries created you. That's order, right?"

It breaks out about even. Me being put together, them being scrambled. Comes out a little on the minus side, which is what's supposed to happen over the long haul. Love, now . . . The Gremlin made a face. It was ugly to begin with, and the face was memorable. Love is one of those unaccountable pluses.

Shad went back to the fridge for another beer. The first one he opened was flat. So were the other three. Suddenly suspicious, he started opening containers. His cottage cheese was green. His milk was sour. His rice pilaf gave off an odor of corruption.

He glared at the Gremlin and said, "Why do you have to take out your moods on my rice pilaf?"

Love, the Gremlin said. Unaccountable pluses make for random minuses.

A thought occurred to Shad. "Just you stay away from Nancy," he said. "No random minuses in her direction. I mean it."

Your metaphysics doesn't mean anything to me, the Gremlin said.

This made Shad nervous, and he sat up late that night worrying about it in between bouts of obsessively researching Lodestar dogma. First of all, he was worried that the Gremlin thought love was metaphysical. Hadn't the evolutionary biologists settled that one a long time ago? Survival of offspring, stability of social units, and so forth? If they hadn't—or if they thought they had, but the Gremlin was telling him it wasn't true—then Shad didn't have to go far down that particular string of ifs and thens before he was forced to confront the fact that the Lodestar kooks might have a better grip on the mysteries of life than he did. He was disturbed enough by this idea that, half-drunk on flat and sour beer, he pinged Nancy.

"It's after midnight, Shad," she said. Voice-only. He was disappointed.

"Nancy," he said, "I might never be able to say this again, but I'm saying it now. Whatever happens with Lodestar and random minuses, it's not going to change how I feel about how I feel about you."

"What?" she said.

Knowing she could see him, Shad gazed into his monitor, imagining his face to be filled with devotion. Then he broke the

connection. Ten minutes later, he was asleep and dreaming strange dreams about disintegration, metempsychosis. Look for me under your bootheels, he remembered thinking when he woke up in the morning to find the Gremlin gone.

He looked everywhere. The Gremlin wasn't anywhere in his cabin, it wasn't down in F Compiler—which was up and running again—and it wasn't in the neighborhood of the bioslurry vats. Shad did run into Nancy down by the compiler, but that didn't go the way he might have hoped, either.

"What was wrong with you last night?" she demanded.

"Nancy, the company wants me to enslave myself to Lodestar," Shad said. "That's what they're offering me as a way out. So I guess I decided I might as well get some things off my chest. One of which is that I'm kind of in love with you, and I don't think that's a bad thing. However you feel about it. You know where Gupta is?"

She blinked as his sudden change of subject. "Gupta the lawyer? In her office, I'm guessing."

"And that's downstairs, right?" Shad was already on his way to the ILP. Something was coming. He could feel it. He could also feel Nancy watching him as he got to the ILP portal and dropped through.

Barging into the offices of Legal Counsel, Shad said, "I'm here to see Attorney Gupta," to the first person he saw who resembled an assistant.

"You're Shad Pickler," the possible assistant said. It was difficult to judge his tone of voice; it could have been disdain or just surprise. Shad chose disdain because it fueled his resolve.

So what now, he asked himself. His lawyer wanted to enslave him to a bunch of religious zealots, his inamorata thought he was crazy, and what he really wanted to know was how was he supposed to stage a resurrection show if the Gremlin wasn't around? Only it was around, he thought. Looking out for Shad Pickler until its entropic nature got the better of it and its attention wandered to sowing disorder somewhere else, leaving Shad with the orderly and deeply undesirable consequences of its intrusion into his life.

And he was late for his consult with the shop steward. If I was the Gremlin, I'd just appear there, he thought. I'd just drop through the floor and poof! There I'd be, on the outer ring. He picked up his pace, feeling suddenly as if he was trying to walk through shin-deep water . . .

. . . *look for me under your bootheels* . . .

Shad looked down, and for the second time in his life fainted dead away.

All this would have been enough, but to have the first face he saw upon regaining consciousness be—once again—Nancy's was more than Shad could handle. I'm a compiler tech, he thought, on an ordinary station orbiting an ordinary planet with an ordinary heap of dirtbag miners needing salvation. What have I ever done to deserve these kinds of coincidences?

"Nancy," he said. "Coincidences scare the shit out of me."

He did not add that the shit was further

scared out of him by the fact that he'd seen his own feet—his feet!—sinking slowly into the ceramic floor, and presumably into the steel beams below it. Nancy, he felt, wouldn't react to this news in the way Shad needed someone to react. Better to keep it to himself until he could talk to the Gremlin.

Except . . .

"Oh," Shad said.

"What?" Nancy had knelt beside him, and now she placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm calling the medics, Shad."

"No. Nope, not necessary," Shad said. He sat up fast, made himself dizzy, and forced his body through the dizziness until he had achieved full verticality. "Whew," he said. "Stress must be getting to me."

He was thinking something different, however, which was: If my feet were sinking into the floor, either the Gremlin is haunting the station, or it's inside me. He mulled that one over for a while, dazed by the scale of this new knowledge—which is what it felt like, knowledge, not like a guess or even a hunch. It's natural, he thought.

(Natural?)

I'm the vector.

More Whitman skated through Shad's head: *For every atom belongs to me as good as belongs to you . . .*

The dreams. The Gremlin had left Shad clues in his dreams. "Nancy, I've got to go," he said. "Meeting with Vic."

"Vic's not going to help you," Nancy said.

"I know that," Shad said. "But he wants to meet, and I'm not really in a position to say no to anyone who might conceivably, possibly, be on my side."

"Vic's not on your side," Nancy said.

Shad was already making tracks down the hall. "Well, who is?" he called back to her.

And realized, after he'd gotten all the way to Vic's office only to be told that his appointment was rescheduled, and then gotten all the way back to his room just to have a minute to himself, that he was a fool. Who was on his side?

Nancy was on his side. She was the only one. Even though he said crazy things about love to her, and screwed up the way the compilers ran (no fault of his own there, but still, he was the one on duty when it happened), and generally brought chaos and confusion to what should have been a smoothly boring operation, she was on his side.

Wait a sec, he thought. Maybe she was there both times when I woke up because she goes looking for me once in a while the way I go looking for her. Shad caught sight of himself in a window on the way by some lab or another. He wasn't a bad-looking guy. A little too tall, maybe, a little too thin. Nose a little too big for the rest of his face. But he had a strong jaw. He'd always liked his jaw. It was the only thing he let himself be vain about. Maybe Nancy liked it, too.

A test, Shad thought. And said, though no one else was in the room and he'd always believed that only crazy people talked to themselves (this despite the fact that he routinely talked to himself when he was performing tasks such as cleaning the compilers), "Pickles."

In the refrigerator, the pickle jar was full.

That did it. Now Shad knew for sure

what had happened to him, and what he had to do.

He pinged Gupta, and got an assistant. "I need to talk to her," he said.

"Attorney Gupta is busy for the rest of the day," the assistant replied.

"Attorney Gupta will want to hear this," Shad said. "We'd been discussing possible settlements, and I want to propose an arrangement."

"I'll pass your message along," the assistant said, and broke the connection.

Fine, Shad thought. He went to the table and pulled up *Leaves of Grass*, just to be sure.

And there it was, right after the bootheels line that had been looped in his head ever since he woke up that morning:

> *You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,*
> *But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,*
> *And filter and fibre your blood.*

Shad jumped up and spun in a tight circle. Yes, he thought. Filter and fiber my blood! There's sixteen missionaries in me, and they want to get out. He spun, he spun, he had to get this done before entropy, being entropy, made it all impossible. How much time did he have? What did time even *mean*, when the Gremlin was using a four-hundred-year-old poem to talk to him?

"What does it matter?" he asked out loud.

Twenty minutes later, wearing his best suit, Shad barged back into Gupta's office, and by sheer luck (coincidence?) caught the lawyer out in the reception area. "Listen," Gupta said. "They're not asking for you to be buried back at Copernicus. That would be excessive."

"Is anyone from Lodestar on-station right now?" Shad asked.

"They're not going to talk to you unless I bring you together to finalize a settlement," Gupta said.

"Sure they will," Shad said. "They're Christians, right? Testifying, confessing sins, and forgiveness is all Christian, right? Tell them I want to meet them down by the compiler." He was already back out the door. "Tell them I want to confess to something, and that I want to testify."

Out in the hallway again, he headed around to the other side of the station, toward the compilers and the bioslurry reservoir.

And ran square into Vic, who was standing in front of the door in the control room where the bioslurry was managed. Under normal circumstances, Shad was mortally terrified of Vic, but right now he didn't have time for terror, so he got aggressive. "You know, Vic," he said. "When you're going to reschedule someone, union regs say you have to let them know." Shad waved his comm. around. "I've had this all day," he added.

"Are you kidding?" Vic said. "You, of all people, quoting regs at me? Which regs were you following when you minced the missionaries?"

"I could grieve this, Vic," Shad said, ignoring the fact that Vic had him dead to rights on the missionary question. "I could grieve it and claim that you're deliberately avoiding me and not fulfilling the union's

responsibility to its members because of political pressure. In fact, I like that phrasing. I think I'll use it."

Vic's voice went up half an octave. "Are you *kidding* me?" he said again.

"Do you think I'd put on a suit just to kid you, Vic?" Shad answered. Always answer a rhetorical question with a rhetorical question, he thought.

"Unbelievable," Vic said. "All this because I didn't call you."

"No, all of this because you and I both know you didn't call me back because you were hoping I'd give up and settle without you having to put yourself on the line. Dereliction, Vic. There's no other word for it."

"Look, what do you want?" Vic said.

Without missing a beat, Shad said, "Fifty milliliters of slurry." During the time it took for Vic to process this, Shad reconsidered. "No, better make it a hundred. Just to be sure."

And so it was that three days after an unfathomable irruption of strangeness into his life, Shad Pickler stood on a catwalk over a vat containing roughly ten cubic meters of bioslurry, holding a small beaker in his right hand. The bioslurry was kept at a temperature of forty degrees, and Shad was sweating rivers in his suit. If this works, he thought, the first thing I'm going to do is take a sledgehammer to F compiler, just on general principles. Watching him were Gupta, Vic, and three representatives of Lodestar Evangelical Church. Shad cleared his throat. He had butterflies in his stomach, and not just because of what he was about to say. He looked at the faces of the five people standing with him on the catwalk.

"I didn't come here to explain anything," Shad said, "because I can't. And I didn't come here to get religious, really, or to testify. I came here because these past few days, I've learned a little about faith, and that's what I wanted to show you."

"Gupta, can we dispense with this charade?" one of the Lodestar people asked.

"Ask him," Gupta said, pointing at Vic. "He's the one who cleared this. I'm only here as counsel and observer."

"Usually this is where someone says this is my body, right? But here's what I'm going to say instead: every atom belongs to me as good as belongs to you."

The bioslurry tasted awful. Shad's throat seized up, and tears sprang from his eyes, but he forced it down in one gulp, then spent a good long minute making sure he wasn't just going to bring it all up again. Filter and fiber my blood, Gremlin, he thought, or maybe prayed.

"Now," he gasped. "One."

A hand reached out of the bioslurry and gripped the edge of the vat.

Shad had never seen anybody move so fast as Vic did right then. He was down the catwalk, out the door and gone before Shad had even gotten tongue to palate for the number two. The other four looked down in plain astonishment.

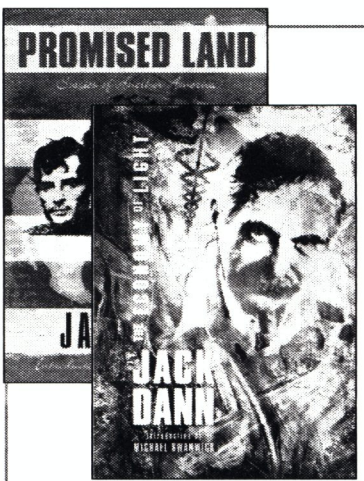
"Two," Shad said. And kept going.

When he'd counted to six, and six Lodestar missionaries hung on the edge of the bioslurry vat like exhausted swimmers puking their guts out, Shad said,

"There. There's your missionaries back. Now leave me alone."

Gupta had the top of the catwalk railing in a death grip. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing as if she was afraid she might inhale whatever had happened to Shad. The three Lodestar people stared down at the bioslurry vat. Two of them were praying in a whisper, lips and fingers moving unconsciously together. The third spoke the names of each of the reborn missionaries, as if reciting a litany. And then, all together, they looked at him with an expression, the same on each face, that he'd never seen aimed in his direction. It terrified him, this shine of annihilating devotion. He had to get out. This was belief, thought Shad Pickler. This was what it was like to be believed in—and believed in too late, after the wellspring of that belief had dried up, or dissipated back into the soup of probability that churned up universes and entropy gremlins and women named Nancy Ayegbani. It's all over, Shad thought. There's my little brush with the ineffable.

The missionaries started to speak. "What are we doing in *here*?" one of them demanded. Shad forgot about the sledgehammer, forgot about F compiler, and went to look for Nancy. Maybe the math didn't work, but she was something he could believe in.



TWO BY JACK DANN AND PS

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

Now, Promised Land expands on that premise, offering brilliant insights into Dean, the Kennedys, and others, both as they were and as they might have been.

The Economy of Light is Jack Dann's magnificent new novella: a journey into and beyond the heart of darkness . . . .

Stephen is a retired Nazi hunter, divorced yet living happily enough on his ranch on the fringe of the Amazon jungle. But when Brazilian police unearth the alleged remains of the detested Auschwitz camp doctor, Josef Mengele, Stephen's life is immediately and traumatically transformed.

Promised Land • Slipcased Hardcover £50.00 [$100.00] / Hardcover £25.00 [$50.00]
The Economy Of Light • Jacketed Hardcover £25.00 [$50.00] Hardcover £10.00 [$20.00]

"I was probably pushing the envelope with 'Under the Shadow of Jonah'," the irrepressible Jack Dann explains, "but I just couldn't help myself. It's a first-contact story about using Renaissance magic as practiced by Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, and Pico Della Mirandola to foil an alien invasion. A sort of Leonardo da Vinci meets Stanislaw Lem meets J.G. Ballard story." Well, at least nobody can accuse the author of repeating himself.

The multiple-award winning Mr. Dann has written or edited more than seventy books, including the international bestseller The Memory Cathedral*;* The Man Who Melted*;* The Silent*, a novel of the Civil War;* The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean*; and a number of short story collections:* Timetipping, Jubilee, Visitations, The Fiction Factory*, and, from here at PS,* Promised Land*, a companion volume to* The Rebel. *His most recent publications include the short novel* The Economy of Light *(PS again);* Dreaming Again*, the sequel to* Dreaming Down-Under*;* Wizards *(also titled* Dark Alchemy*) with Gardner Dozois; and a new release of* The Man Who Melted*, which the* Washington Post Book World *compared with Ingmar Bergman's film* The Seventh Seal. *The author lives in Australia on a farm overlooking the sea and "commutes" back and forth to Los Angeles and New York.*

Under The Shadow Of Jonah

Jack Dann

A sadder monster, or more cruel plague so fell,
Or vengeance of the gods, ne'er came from Styx or hell

—Robert Burton

And so did the rich merchants, guildsmen, landowners, moneylenders, ambassadors, courtesans, the archbishop and his retinue, well-to-do churchmen of the variant faiths, courtiers, the priors of the Chancery, and the ruling families flee the shadowed palaces, villas, and cathedrals of the greatest city in the world. Not that it would do any of them any good, for the many-eyed monster that blocked out God's own sun in His sky above could see them all—would find them all—at least according to the hellfire preaching of Father Savonarola.

The monk stood on the perron steps of the great Cathedral of Saint Maria del Fiore and told the kneeling crowds of penitents that there would soon be dying and great hunger, flames and sacking and a scourging of the pious and profane alike, that the churches would be ruined and the priests dispersed, that two thousand devils were to be unleashed from the great object darkening the sky over the city, that this dark, hovering imminence was the Devil's own form, and the sparkling iridescences that flickered in the poisoned sky were indeed his manifold eyes. Just as the Lord God was omniscient, so could His enemy direct igneous rays of unholy, poisonous light to see into our darkened souls. Pico Della Mirandola, physician to Lorenzo the Magnificent and the greatest philosopher since Democritus, had already predicted that the igneous rays of demons could

cause earthquakes and burn all flesh and material with cold melancholic vapor.

And so in the manure stinking streets and alleys around the Via De Servi, did buildings began to shake and collapse and burn with a cold fire.

Lucian Heliogabalus sat atop the high banks of the newly built canal that connected the mighty Arno River with the sea and watched the high-masted ships being pulled toward the light of day by a seemingly endless procession of horses and mules straining against the leather webbing of their towlines. The ships were all sailing away from the burning city. Although it was midday, the sky above was dark, covered with Savonarola's cloud of devils; yet far away and in all directions, the sun was unbearably bright and poured its golden rays upon distant fortunate lands. Only Florence and its green hills seemed to be under interdiction, but that was probably illusion. Although Florence was a large, encompassing country, the light of day, which appeared to be a hot, narrow, circular band, was many stadia away.

Lucian looked up into the darkness, looked up at the creature—or was it some great ship or edifice of angels?—and tried to make out the textures of its surface. He took notes, scribbling in his own shorthand Cyrillic, and made sketches in the margins. The flickering, coruscating lights reminded him of fireflies, yet the dark massive thing was shadowed, wrinkled and pocked like skin. Perhaps Savonarola was right; perhaps it was the devil, a cloud . . . a mass of devils, Satan's own shape. He preached that the many was in the one, that one thing different was another thing the same. The priest was, of course, crazy.

Or perhaps not.

The truth would be known soon, for even as Lucian gazed upwards and sketched, the floating beast continued to descend; in just hours it would touch the earth, scorch it, perhaps destroy it; and Lucian, this Greek Jew who had been accused of murder, simony, and usury in his native land, who had taught the children of Florentine burghers, craftsmen, and the lower clergy the exquisite delights of natural science, mathematics, and the three categories of philosophy, would take notes until the end of the world.

He had been considered no better than a slave in Venice, Naples, and Genoa; but in Florence he was respected as a Bookman and able to earn enough to survive. Hadn't Lorenzo the Magnificent praised him in a speech to the Signoria and referred to him as a revenant Socrates? But Lorenzo had fled the city, leaving it to Savonarola and his followers. The great and faithful Leonardo da Vinci accompanied Lorenzo, while his dear friend and fellow artist Sandro Botticelli remained with the priest and was no doubt praying for miracles right now. Leonardo, however, would not be praying; like Lucian, he would be watching the sky, wondering, reasoning, taking notes, sketching.

What else could a scientific man do when confronted with devils and miracles?

Church bells rang, and Lucian could also hear a distant moaning: the citizens of Florence praying, screaming, begging for forgiveness. Or perhaps it was just the earth groaning in self-pity. The object above was now almost touching the great copper

cupola of the Cathedral of Saint Maria del Fiore. Lucian's eyes squinted as he tried to make out more details. Indeed, it looked like some foul, live thing come to crush everything beneath it; it seemed to be covered with some sort of mottled flesh, rather than a capping of bronze or wood or iron; and a smell of sulfur permeated the air, drying the mucous of his nose and throat and burning his eyes. He coughed and wheezed and could not resist the urge to run. But there would be no place to run. All he could do was slide down the steep embankment and pray that would give him some protective distance from whatever was descending upon the earth.

As he moved to the embankment's edge and looked for the safest way down, the thing above extruded huge shoots. These roots, if that is what they could be called, were the size of tree boles, and their glittering striated surfaces looked suspiciously like bark. Bole after bole shot downwards, each one hitting the earth with a hollow, drum like sound; and then, a moment later, the boles lifted their bottom edges from the earth.

Lucian pushed himself over the crest of the embankment, slid over rocks and roots that tore his clothes and his skin, and landed right beside a bole that seemed to hover like a live, percipient thing beside the fast moving water flowing through the canal. It was as if the bole had known Lucian's path of escape and had positioned itself accordingly. Reflexively, he looked for his satchel and notebooks, as if the feel of leather and paper could somehow remove his fear and panic. His breathing was ragged, his heart beating fast; blood pounded in his throat, yet he was fascinated. He looked this way and that, and saw what could only be described as an inverted forest, the huge trunk-like extrusions above and around him; they seemed to cover the world, but, of course, his field of vision was very limited. He reached out and touched the bole beside him. It felt warm, satiny. He shivered, revolted.

No, not satiny . . . slippery, slimy.

The sky above was the creature; the suffusing light was alien; it came from the boles and from above, a grayish, blue-tinged twilight, which was somehow satisfying to Lucian, for it mirrored the time of day when the world turned blue for a few moments before dark; and Lucian was sure that this thing would indeed bring some endless night. Nevertheless, he was a man of learning and perhaps there was some wisdom to be learned from all this before the world ended in fire and ash and suffocation. In fact, he wondered if the boles could be burned like trees. He stepped under the extruded bole, bowing his head, for he was taller than the average Florentine man. He smelled something metallic, the familiar tingling odor that always occurred before storms; and, yes, there was also a slight sulfurous smell. Not quite sulfur, but neither was it the good smell of God's incense. It was also cold under the bole, and dark, pitch dark . . . and it was only the sudden vertiginous sensation in his stomach and a subtle change in the density of the air around him that hinted at ascension.

Lucian was rising.

He could feel a chill on his face, could feel the subtle and quick motion, yet his feet were heavy, as if his boots were still standing on the loamy earth beside the flowing water of the canal. Only now the

water was flowing upwards . . . and it wasn't water anymore. It was air, and he was rising through the tenebrous black air of the pit, of unholy places.

He tried to move, to shift his balance, but he was caught, as the proverbial fly in amber. And then he was not.

When Lucian came to rest in the body of the beast, he looked around him; but it was as if he was blind. He could see blackness and a few gauzy red and green retinal afterimages, which he considered to be visions that couldn't quite be made out. He shouted, but his words were swallowed in the thick cold darkness. There were no echoes in this place, or in this being. Careful not to fall, he took a step, and then another. It was like walking on ice. He wondered if there was endless empty space around him, or whether he was imprisoned in a small room, or some sort of horrid, stone-cold intestine. He stood still, listening, trying to peer out of his blindness; then he carefully kneeled and sat down. He felt the surface of the floor, which was smooth and cold, slippery to the touch—perhaps it *was* ice or wet glass—and he could feel soft vibration.

Suddenly he felt dizzy, as if he was tumbling, sliding across the floor; and he could not tell which direction was up, or which was down; and as he was about to scream in sheer terror—as if fear had finally found him, revealed itself to him—he discovered that he could make out faint objects, lines of perspective. It was as if he were looking at a silverpoint etching, only the silverpoint was silvery darkness superposed over a deeper darkness. But there was depth created by the lines and edges, and although Lucian could have no knowledge of photography, he grasped that he was staring into negative spaces. He could make out a geography on a grand scale: hills and rivers, ravines and mountains, paddocks, but nothing that breathed, no living thing as he knew it, just an impossible country that rose and fell as far as his eyes could gaze, a country of black and silver. Could these shapes be the outlines of the organs of an impossible creature? Could they be some dark reflection, some dark twin of his own world below? As if to get a better perspective on this dark domain, he stood up. He called out again into the massing darkness, and he was answered, but not with words, not with breath, but with pure intelligence.

Then the hard, cold surface he was standing on suddenly gave way, parting like wounded flesh, and he fell backward. He flailed his arms and screamed, for surely he was falling to his death . . . into his own dark epiphany.

His screams now echoed through the vast body of the beast, magnified into what Lucian could only believe to be the music of the spheres, the synesthetic sounds and shapes of pure mathematics itself. As he fell, or as he imagined he was falling, he felt something being taken from him. Something that resided in his mind and heart, something that connected his flesh and blood and organs with the ectoplasmic *pneuma* that was the living stuff of his spirit, something pure and vital had been siphoned out of him.

And now he lay on the ground, the real ground comprised of dirt and stone and rotting branch, beside the rushing, gur-

gling, whistling water of the canal. Now he looked up into the bole above, but the world entire had shifted.

The bole was still there, but it was merely an outline, a shadow. Similarly, the beast above was now nothing but a faint outline of itself, bleached and rendered faint by the warm sun.

As Lucian stared up into the now transparent belly of the beast, he *knew* it was somehow alive and intelligent. He could not yet speak to it, could not yet see into it, but he was part of it, every bit an extension of its own foul pneuma as the bole floating above him. Fearful that his blasphemous thoughts could release the bole from the beast to crush him, Lucian rolled away from it and climbed up the bank of the canal to where he had been sitting and writing earlier. The sun warmed his face, but he felt cold. He looked at the disappearing constructions of beast and bole superimposed on what was now a beautiful June afternoon and tried to think his way back into the creature.

Tried to imagine what he had lost in the silvery darkness above.

The beast, however, was closed to him. He could still barely make out the sparkling iridescences in its ghostly superstructure above. They were its eyes, watching him; and Lucian now had a strong desire to be in the city, to be among people, to talk and to touch. He mistrusted those feelings, but could not repress them.

He desperately needed time to think, to consider.

But he felt a cold, numbing darkness welling in him like joy.

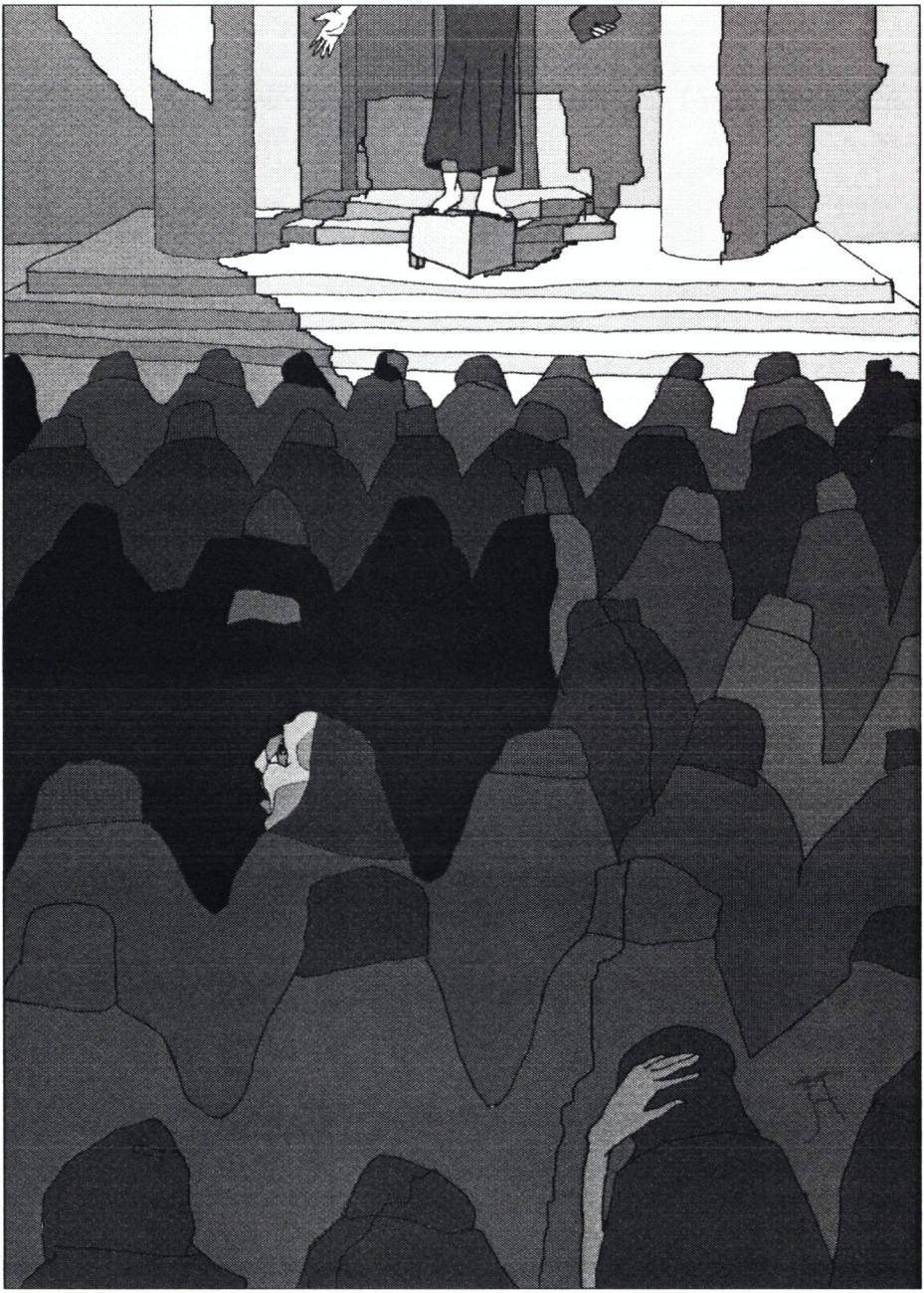
The beast was now all but invisible.

As Lucian walked through hilly meadows and grassy fields, past copses of pine and chestnut and the shimmering leaves of olive trees, he felt like he was walking out of a bad dream and into the literal, all-encompassing light of day. The Tuscan light was soft and scented as a courtesan's perfume. He gazed out over the red tiles of a farmstead roof, looking for the beast that had swallowed and expelled him; but, try as he might, he couldn't see it. The world had been cleansed. Yet he felt hollowed out, and cold, even with the sun warm on his face; and as he walked, he noticed that he did not perspire.

He could hear bells ringing as if it was matins and compline combined; all of Florence's churches and cathedrals reaching into the clear, blue sky, rejoicing. Lucian continued along the dirt road, rutted by ox carts and pack trains. It was as if he were being drawn to the city for some contrary purpose he could not comprehend.

Three peasant cutpurses, their bare arms calloused and dirt-encrusted, stood on the stone path, blocking Lucian's way. They were all shorter than he was, but all were stocky and well-muscled; Lucian was tall, a long drink of water, as his blessed mother used to call him; but he was skinny, frail as the stereotypically poor, peripatetic scholar.

The oldest peasant, a man in his forties, his head and face shaved clean as an egg, stood behind while the two younger men came toward Lucian, one to his right, the other to his left. The cutpurse to his right



had greasy, sandy hair; the one to his left was overweight and as bald as the older man, who was probably his father.

Cutting around the boy on his right, Lucian made a dash toward a winding line of mulberry trees. Beyond were dense woods. Lucian had an unerring sense of direction and would easily find his way out; but the overweight cut-purse was deceptively fast and caught Lucian, pinning his arms, pulling him up short, squeezing the life out of his lungs. Then, as if burned or scalded, the boy suddenly let go and stumbled backward. He let out a soft cry, more a sigh; and Lucian turned toward him, breathing deeply, inhaling the cutpurse's *pneuma*, inhaling his spirit, his life. He stared at the boy and tasted blood, but he knew immediately that he wasn't tasting blood, but the subtle vapors of the boy's soul. He felt the shock of inverted sight, of seeing into the boy's dark, silvery thoughts and humours. He could also taste the cold black bile that poisoned the boy's organs and spirit; yet Lucian was nourished by it . . . by all of it. He felt full, as if after eating a heavy, unhealthy meal, and strong, and connected to the invisible, negative presence above. He also felt cold.

Then he reached out to the cutpurse with the greasy, sandy hair, who was kneeling beside his brother.

"Poppa, Piero is dead."

But Piero wasn't dead. Lucian could see him as a dark shape superimposed on the silvery darkness that seconds ago was sun-drenched grass beside the stone trail.

Lucian was seeing with the eyes of the beast now.

He tasted blood and vapor again, as he breathed in the soul of Piero's brother. Then he turned to the boys' father, and, full to bursting, inhaled his spirit.

Thus did Lucian discover exactly what he had lost to the imminence above.

Pico Della Mirandola, the young theurgist and philosopher to the court of the Medici, traveled back to Florence from Lorenzo the Magnificent's villa in Careggi alone. Since the mad priest Savonarola now had control of the city and the hearts and minds of its citizens, it would be too dangerous for Lorenzo and his advisors to return. So they sent Pico back to the anathematized, excommunicated city as a spy, for he claimed he could see things other men could not. Niccolo Machiavelli had offered to accompany him, but Mirandola told him the city was poisoned and that the humours in which Machiavelli's soul dwelled were too cold to give him protection.

"But you can protect me," Machiavelli said, as they stood on the great purple-colored perron steps of the villa.

"No, Niccolo, I cannot."

"And your humours, they are not cold?"

"They are as hot as your temper, Niccolo."

"How do you know that *you* will be protected?"

Mirandola glanced knowingly at his patron, Lorenzo, and said, "I had a dream, an intuition last night. I dreamed that the Black Reaper was walking the streets of Florence again. I also dreamed of his companion, the hag Lachesis, who is thought to follow after him, weaving her tapestry of death. Only in this dream the hag had taken the dark, celestial form of the cloud

that lingered over the city, and her black thread extended from the cloud that was her form to the Black Reaper like an umbilicus."

"Then it *is* plague," Machiavelli said, secretly making the sign of the cross.

"Of a sort. But I know this Reaper."

"As we all do."

"No, Mirandola said, I know him. He's a true acquaintance of mine . . . "

Once in Florence, Pico Della Mirandola—the only magician who had ever unlocked the secrets of the Jews' Cabbala, sorted and catalogued the myriad of supraterrestrial beings, and discovered the single great secret of demons—searched the streets for the Reaper.

It was a pellucid afternoon. The sky was pale and cloudless, and the edges of villas, churches, ramshackle houses, streets, courtyards, and piazzas were soft, as if slightly out of focus. Mirandola could smell dampness and the acrid odor of ash, ozone, sulfur, and smoke; and, indeed, as he walked down claustrophobically narrow streets darkened and cooled by arches and overhanging walls, he could discern those who had been touched by the Reaper. He had learned to see the pneumatic soul-stuff that flowed around all men; he could read the ordinarily invisible networks of rays emitted from the celestial stars and from every bit of matter, living or not, that comprised the city and its surrounds.

He passed through the artisan's quarters, past the stalls of blacksmiths and furriers and vegetable vendors. Soulless wraiths crossed his path: peasants, vendors, merchants, cutpurses, beggars, and those from great families. They looked like ordinary men, women, and children, but they were hollow, emptied, and silent. They had the aspect of shadows and nightshades, dark, inferior forms silhouetted against the white hot radiations that flowed between the higher beings and the world. But what of those who still had their hearts and souls? They talked and shouted, bargained and bought and sold; were intent, as always, on commerce, comfort, time, and habit; and were oblivious to the wraiths searching for something they could not know they had lost.

But the theurgist was beginning to understand what was happening: He could see through the air around and above him, could see that it was choked with the usual multiform spirits; with archangels and angels radiating their characteristic soft, ocher light; beneficent demons always eager to interact with men, their tenuous pneumatic bodies so dim as to be practically invisible; and he could also see the dusting of malevolent demons who are invisible and utilize cold passion to cause violent and permanent destruction.

He could also sense (rather than see) the bloated spirit or creature made of eyes that still floated in the heavens above the city . . . the creature that had become invisible to other men after it extruded a forest of tentacular boles that hung only meters from the earth, and were now also invisible. The monster did not fit into any of the celestial categories, nor could it belong to those sublunary demons who feast and fast in the cleansing fire found only above the highest regions of air.

No, this demon, if it could be called that, must be a stranger to God's perfectly

wrought cosmos, an invader, an enemy of everything that Christ had built in the world and the heavens above.

Mirandola was now in the goldsmiths' and jewelers' district. The smells of smoke and burning were overwhelming. He passed Andrea Verrochio's scorched and gutted three-story workshop in the Via dell'Agnolo. It was here that he found the tiles and walls of the closely-built houses and bottegas splattered with molten gold. Exploded shards of glass and crystal were strewn about in the twisted, broken alleyways. And something else: transfigured gems that would have once been smooth and faceted now lay in thin sheets, broken mirrors of sapphire and amethyst and beryl impossibly reflecting the poisonous wan light of the cobblestone streets. Ahead, along the route leading to the great cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, was desolation: burned out buildings, collapsed arcades, ash floating like mist in the air. Fire still played in the empty streets, fire that had wrecked and burned, but it was no ordinary fire. This fire was cold . . . the fire glimpsed only in gemstones such as sapphire and amethyst and beryl . . . gemstones of affinity . . . gemstones that could mirror the soul and attract celestial presences.

Mirandola picked up a shard—for that was what it was—of sapphire from the cobbled alleyway. It was thin as parchment and light as frost on a pane of glass. But its affinities were not with the cold and dark humours; the blood purple wafer attracted heat and light as a furnace drew air. He looked upon its dark, mirrored surface and let his mind rest while his eyes projected the invisible white hot light of igneous rays onto the wafer. He called upon Saturn's angel Oriphiel, who was his intermediary, to help him locate the Black Reaper. But concentrate as he might, Mirandola could not feel the familiar hot presence of the angel. Still, he continued to gaze into the wafer, conjuring images, phantasms of the imagination that correlated to the sensory world.

But the only image that reoccurred in the purple depths of the gem was that of the nearby cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

Perhaps Mirandola's angel *was* present, for he could hear the faint yet bombastic voice of the priest Savonarola calling.

Like iron filings being pulled and ordered by a great magnet, all of Florence was being drawn to the wounded cathedral. Its sweet sounding bells had flowed like water, as had the great, bronze palla that topped its dome. Its stained glass windows had dissolved into crystal tears; and the very stones of the cathedral, the foundation that contained all of God's prayers, had melted into grotesque new shapes.

Lucian, too, was being drawn to the cathedral because the cold, jittering intelligence—the poisonous soul, the phantasm that had replaced his own soul—needed to devour and consume this swirling soul mass of cold energy.

Cold drawn to cold, Lucian thought, aware of the irony that warm flesh and hearts pumping warm blood could have such affinity with cold humours . . . and with the beast watching and feeding above. Lucian, for his part, was aware and yet

trapped by his irresistible compulsion to feed on others, to taste the silky bitterness of their souls and their sad, poignant memories, to feel the twinkling brightness of their intelligence and the heated, coarser stuff of their emotions. He needed ever more souls to fill the aching void of his own loss; he needed to be satiated with souls, and satiated as he would be, he would then be emptied, evacuated by the many-eyed creature above. The cold, alien intelligence that commanded him had not and would not speak to him; it remained as a subtle but painful presence that informed his every movement and desire. It dampened his emotions and cleansed any untoward, independent thoughts that might be dangerous to its existence and unrelenting need. And Lucian, who was replete with souls one moment, would be empty and benumbed the next. Would remember and grieve for the loss of his own mirrored soul.

The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.

But absolution and surfeit were once again at hand.

Lucian strode into the crowd. Extending his arms, he brushed against beggars and guildsmen; passed liveried retainers and processions of brigand riders that represented the great competing families: the Neroni, Pandolfini, Acciaiuoli, Alberti, and Rucellai. He pushed past priests, priors, nuns, and the hated Dominican *inquisitore* who were also known as Companions of the Night. The brigands were outfitted in armor and livery of red velvet and gold; and their horses were clad in the same cloth as their riders. The clergy wore black robes, and, indeed, appeared to be manifestations of death themselves; but as Lucian feathered past them, he stole and inhaled their tepid souls, tasted their yearnings, frustrations, petty grudges, and small, whimpering lusts. The souls of the *inquisitore* were devoured in like fashion, as were those of merchants, guildsmen, prostitutes, beggars, children, and brigand riders. The children's souls were incandescent, as if made of the same stuff as the cold fire that had devoured brick, stone, and mortar; and as Lucian tasted each small, bright soul—like a supplicant standing before the altar and accepting the body of Christ as a wafer—he felt brighter, colder, less hollow and more complete. He didn't even need to touch the riders high on their armor-studded horses; he merely needed to imagine them being captured by the vapors and radiations that poured out of him.

In moments, he was glutted with them. His weakening heart, which had once translated vital information from his senses into messages only his soul could understand, pumped and fibrillated to bear the invasions of these captured spirits. But no amount of rich, pure blood could fill the hollow where his soul had once rested. His mortal body would not cope for long with these transfusions and infusions of foreign souls and spirits.

Full to bursting, he walked toward the cathedral. But now he was the magnet; the cathedral mere destination. He could hear bells, but there were no bells ringing at Santa Maria del Fiore. He was hearing the thoughts of the many-eyed beast, hearing its exultation. Lucian looked up into the slippery dark mouth of one of the many tentacular boles that hung over Flo-

rence . . . the inverted forest of the many eyed beast. The extruded boles were invisible to all but him. He imagined that he was staring into a conduit created out of darkness itself; and he was suddenly, traumatically emptied.

As a multitude of souls made their ascension through the invisible bole, Lucian was left once again empty and exhausted. Finished.

And so he would remain until he could find enough strength to press forward.

His mortal heart made a hurried descent from his throat to its rightful place in his chest . . . and as his heart slowed, so did his intoxicating hunger quicken.

He heard music, but it wasn't the chromatic music of the spheres vibrating his senses; it was the antiphonal voice of the priest Savonarola. The voice was as dark and cold as the priest's soul, a soul that was colder than any of the souls Lucian had stolen; and the intelligence above wanted to feel the texture of its thickening chill.

It *wanted* the crystalline jewel that was Savonarola's soul.

Pico Della Mirandola held the shard of sapphire tightly as he hurried to the cathedral. The stone absorbed some of his body heat, as if tasting it; then it returned the damp energy as hot humours that kindled him, focused him . . . and would make him as dangerous as the quarry he was seeking. The stone was a living presence, purple as the darkest, coldest, and most melancholy of humours, yet hot as a stoking iron. Although it would not *physically* damage his fleshy palm and long, feminine fingers, he knew that he would not be able to able to draw or press the strings of his lyre for a long, long time. The jewel wafer—along with Mirandola's incantations, prayers, and the ingestion of a purifying herb—had indeed lured the mediating angel, temporarily trapped it within in the stone.

Mirandola closed his fist even tighter over the gem.

The angel whispered its counsel to him. It penetrated his deepest thoughts, luxuriated in his fears and yearnings and secrets; but didn't manifest itself as an occultation in the network of invisible rays that vibrated and oscillated around him.

He had tricked the angel and forced it into submission.

Now he would have to trust it.

The angel directed Mirandola through the huge crowd that had gathered around the black-outlined steps of the cathedral to hear the celebrated friar Savonarola, who stood with his back to the great carved doors, which were wide open; inside, in the magnificent shadowed confines of the cathedral, the wealthy families and high clergy stood cheek to jowl, separated from the rabble and the castigating friar. Savonarola had a powerful, yet intimate voice, and he could be heard across the piazza, or so Mirandola assumed . . . perhaps the angel was whispering Savonarola's words into Mirandola's ear, perhaps the theurgist was too far away to hear clearly the words of the black robed, asthenic-looking prophet.

"People of Florence, you have been granted a reprieve from the darkness of the many-eyed beast that wished to swallow you. Christ has vanquished your enemy, and all he asks in return is your fidelity. He is your champion, but he has a just grievance against you. He has

worn himself out calling out to you. He has made his voice hoarse, for all day long he cries through the mouths of his prophets, yet no one hears. Well, those who turn back to their avarice and usury . . . "

Mirandola could clearly see the boles that had descended from the sky; they appeared like striated, crystal columns floating over the piazza. The boles had also penetrated the great dome of the cathedral to hang unseen over altars, naves, and chancels. Mirandola could also see pneumatic mist rising through one of the boles: souls that the Black Reaper had stolen; and there, with the help of his intermediary, the trapped angel Oriphiel, he could see the icy pneumatic thread that connected his old acquaintance Lucian Heliogabalus with the many-eyed beast that had invaded the heavens above Florence.

Mirandola made his way through the crowd to the Reaper, who was standing still and exhausted under a crystalline bole; and when Lucian raised his arm, greedy to touch him, Mirandola pressed the sapphire wafer into his open palm.

Lucian shivered, as if the gem pressed into his palm was burning hot . . . or burning cold. He stepped back and uttered a soft mournful cry. Then, slowly and painfully, like an old man trying to spread arthritic fingers, he opened his hand and let the stone drop.

Mirandola caught it before it could shatter on the cobbles of the piazza.

"What do you want?" Lucian asked, but his eyes weren't focused on Mirandola. He extended his arms and inhaled deeply. He inhaled the frost-frigid souls of the penitents standing near him, gained temporary strength and succor, and for a split-second, he filled the empty cavity where his own soul once resided.

"Lucian, look at me," Mirandola said, as he watched a wisp of smoke or dusty light curl into the soul stealer's eyes. He could see this transiting soul as plainly as he could see angels. The theurgist tried once again to touch his friend with the gemstone wafer, but Lucian stepped quickly out of reach. Before he could disappear into the crowd, Mirandola said, "Wait, you must hear me, or you will remain cold and empty."

"I am far from empty," Lucian said.

"But you will be soon, won't you. The thing above will empty you like a draught."

"Pico, you can't help them"—meaning the soulless crowd around him—"or me." Lucian stared hard at Mirandola, as if he had suddenly found sight and memory and perhaps humanity. "No one can."

"*You* can," Mirandola said, extending his hand to Lucian. "Take the stone."

"I can't, Pico, nor can I stand here without breathing in those around me . . . including you."

"Don't concern yourself with me. Just take the stone."

Lucian shook his head. "It burns me."

"I can *see* the thread that binds you. The sapphire will disconnect you from the beast . . . at least for a moment."

"And what will that gain me?"

"Clarity."

Lucian accepted the gem. As he held it, he grimaced in pain and breathed heavily. Choking. "It is so very hot."

"Just a bit warmer than your own frigid humours . . . and that of the beast. That's the gem's affinity."

Lucian nodded. He looked at those around him, those who were now like him, bereft of their souls. Again he choked. "I can't exhale their souls," he told Mirandola. "I can't—"

"Tell me what you know of the beast."

"Nothing, except that it is cold and empty, and has a plan."

"Tell me of its plan," Mirandola asked.

Lucian looked at his friend with hollow eyes, then shook his head. "I can sense its intelligence, hear its music of pure mathematics, feel its hunger . . . my hunger now." His face looked like stretched parchment, as if all warmth and moisture had been leached away from him. Tasting the word, he whispered it again.

"Hunger . . . "

Lucian reached out to Mirandola, who stepped back.

"Get away from me while you can," Lucian said, his face contorted in pain.

"Try to concentrate on the jewel in your hand, Lucian. Tell me more about the beast."

"It is a world like ours, only dark and empty. Our shadow." Lucian laughed and said, "But soon the beast will be full, and we will be the shadow." Suddenly flushed with strength, overwhelmed and washed clean with cold darkness, Lucian crushed the sapphire wafer in his hand, crushed it to powder; and feeling what could only be described as God's power flowing like cold black bile through the aetheric umbilicus that connected him to the beast, he flung himself at Mirandola.

Crushing him in viselike arms.

Shuddering as he inhaled Mirandola's white-hot soul.

Feeling the quake and convulsion of Mirandola's hummingbird heart.

Inhaling Mirandola's soul was like breathing fire. Lucian coughed, vomited, tried to exhale it; but it caught in his throat, in his lungs, liver, and spleen. It burned him, seared him. Lucian cried for the beast to take his friend's soul. He stood under one of the beast's myriad crystalline boles and felt a momentary shadowed coolness, but the burden would not be lifted.

Mirandola's soul burned so very hot and painfully inside the Reaper.

There was but one way to quench the fire: Reach the priest and inhale his cold essence. The many-eyed beast above would not help him. On the contrary, it would let him burn until it got what it wanted: Savonarola.

Lucian made his way across the crowded piazza toward the priest. He inhaled every soul around him, but they were tepid; not nearly cold enough to absorb the heat of his friend's soul. The closer he got to Savonarola, the hotter the soul fire in his chest. It was exhausting him, taking him down. He wanted to pray to the One God, but that in itself would be blasphemy.

"*Pico, for the love of God, leave me*," he pleaded. "*Tell me how can I expel you . . . ?*"

And in that last instant—as he rushed up the black-edged perron steps of the Cathedral of Saint Maria del Fiore and embraced the priest Savonarola, the priest who was the coldest of currents, whose soul was ice and snow and silvery darkness, whose spirit was so like the silvery negation of the beast above—Lucian realized that he had

inhaled much more than the white-hot spirit of Mirandola.

In that last instant—when the Reaper embraced the angry, excommunicated priest who tried to step away from him . . . when the Reaper finally inhaled Savonarola's ice-shard of a soul—Mirandola's angel exploded inside him.

Oriphiel . . .

Mirandola, who was across the piazza, felt the impact.

He staggered backwards, just as he had when Lucian had ripped his soul away from him. Once again he felt bereft, felt the aching, empty-hollow pain, as if his own pounding, flesh-bloody heart was being pulled right out of his chest cavity.

Once again he screamed, screamed for his angel.

Oriphiel . . .

And in that ratcheting telescoped instant, he realized that he had never actually seen his intermediary. He had only felt it as a white-hot presence, heard it as the soft voice of reason and loneliness, the voice that had spoken to him from inside his head when he was a child.

Oriphiel . . .

The voice that spoke to him now, spoke to him from the proximity of his chest, where his restored soul once again resided.

When Lucian crushed the turquoise wafer, the angel Oriphiel was released . . . and when Lucian inhaled Mirandola's hot coal of a soul, Oriphiel insinuated itself into Lucian's cloudy *pneuma* and soul-poisoned flesh. The angel had no *need* to reside in crystal; it could reside in itself, in any matter, or any flesh.

And in that last instant of Lucian's bookish and perhaps noble life, when he inhaled Savonarola's icy soul like a beast ravenous for oxygen, his already weakened heart exploded.

No mortal could long withstand the reaction of Savonarola's icy spirit with the searing fires of Oriphiel and the still-burning soul of Mirandola.

As Lucian fell dying to his knees, cracking his bones, Saturn's angel Oriphiel carried the displaced souls from the dying bookman to the theurgist Mirandola on the other side of the piazza.

Mirandola: *Oriphiel . . .*

Yes? answered the angel.

What have you done?

Returned your soul. Animarum venator.

What?

Was it not you who discovered the divine secret of demons and higher beings?

To hunt souls.

No, young theurgist, you forget yourself . . . it is to place souls into earthly bodies. And so I did.

Oriphiel, I am so cold . . . and hot. I am burning and freezing. With what have you infected me?

With the souls that your friend contained.

And my friend, is he—?

He is dead, as you might soon be, theurgist. You murdered him.

One without a soul cannot be murdered, but, yes, I did. To stop him, to collect the soul of the priest, and to save you.

Save me?

For a purpose, theurgist. Now you and the cold soul of Savonarola are the lures . . . and now you must leave this place. Can you not hear the beast? You are being called.

Mirandola could indeed hear the beast, but it was not words that entangled and captured him; it was music and mathematics, elegant equations perfectly balanced, enough harmony, measure, and mathematics to fill a cosmos, to fill all vacuums and all eternities. Mirandola was the lure and the lured . . . fascinator and fascinated; and he was enraptured by the geometrical music and ratiocination of the beast, by its inductive need, by its calculus of the void, its dark Boolean choruses of emptiness filling emptiness with ever more hungry emptiness: equations of cold agony and filament hot pain.

Cold fire . . .

The music of the spheres.

The music of the beast.

Mirandola could feel the connection with the beast, could feel the aetheric thread that had once connected his friend Lucian to the many-eyed monster. It knew that Mirandola contained the souls it desired. Mirandola was the angel Oriphiel's cloak and disguise; and if they could fool the monster, perhaps they could foil it. Perhaps the angel could save the myriad of souls Lucian had stolen for the beast. But whatever Oriphiel did, Mirandola would have to release the souls trapped inside him, or he would certainly die. He could see the ghostly boles hanging above the piazza, a crystalline forest that extended past the cathedral, where a soulless Savonarola gaped at the crowd; and behind the priest, in the cathedral, the scions of Florence were also lost, were also quiet. The world had come to silence.

Paused . . .

Mirandola stepped under the nearest inverted bole to release the trapped souls and save himself; but Oriphiel carried him upwards, as if he, Mirandola, was as light as his soul, as all the souls he carried combined; and up up up into darkness and chill, up up up into the belly of the beast, into the country of the beast; and the beast, all mathematical need and godforsaken emptiness, was the vacuum sucking theurgist, angel, and souls upward into itself, through its barked membranes, into the silverpoint blackness of its negative spaces . . . into its country . . . its world . . . itself . . . its soul.

Mirandola: *Oriphiel . . .*

Do not speak. Give the beast what it wishes.

Mirandola tried to stand upright, but the glassy surface upon which he stood was dangerously slippery. He fell and spun on the fleshy ice, on the innards of the creature that might be beast, country, and world combined. When he came to rest, he tasted bile and smelled sulfur—or was it his own sweat?—and desperately wished to retch, to release the poison inside him, to flood the glacial darkness with fire. But he choked instead. He strained to breathe, but his lungs were stone; and he felt shackled, shackled to the slithery, slightly undulating floor, which was as cold as time itself. As he stared fixedly into the vertiginous depths before him, shapes resolved, as did color and light; and as Oriphiel whispered to him, he could see that the souls the beast had stolen were now germinating this shad-

owed country, this cold reflecting terrain, this place that was a reflection—or would soon be a reflection—of all that was below. And when this world became bright and visible and alive, the world below, the earth and its local heavens populated by the hypercelestial gods, archangels, angels, demons, principalities, and human disembodied souls would cease, would be emptied.

Now, Oriphiel whispered. *Now. Give the beast its due. Give up your insides to its insides*; and Oriphiel did so command Mirandola's mind and nervous system that the theurgist could do nothing but comply.

He retched ectoplasmic streams of the good father Savonarola, cold riverun streams of Savonarola's ice-caressed soul . . . Savonarola the pious and unforgiving, the desired familiar of the many-eyed beast.

And as the young theurgist collapsed and died, releasing blood, shit, piss, more captive souls, the angel revealed itself in all its white-hot strength and burning beauty. With a breath, it shattered the cold glass reality of the beast and its intended familiar Savonarola. With a glance, it boiled the silverpoint mountains and burned through the very being of the beast.

The many eyes of the beast darkened, became the dead portals through which the trapped souls of the Florentines escaped. The souls feathered down to earth, seemingly from the eggshell empty sky. They were swept along invisible networks of vibrating and oscillating rays of air and spirit. They swirled earthward and settled like thick fog drifting into morning green valleys, souls searching for the flesh in which they had once inhered.

Lucian lay on the steps of the cathedral where he had died. His kneecaps broken, his skull cracked and bleeding, he stared upwards into the clear Florentine sky. His eyes—the waiting windows of the soul—had long glazed over; yet even as the bile and humours thickened in his stilled body, as his blood coagulated and flies crawled into his nose and mouth, he could glimpse a pneumatic wisp of soul-stuff settle upon his face like the lightest of autumn leaves. It passed through his eyes, penetrated him, and then snaked back in the aether.

As Lucian gazed mutely into the dissolving atmosphere above, he could see the myriads of angels, spirits, demons, and released souls that inhabited the stellar light and airy regions; and as the eternal darkness descended, his last, splintered thoughts were of his mother and father, his youngest sister who had died as a slave, his friend Mirandola, and the demons whose celestial task was to place souls into earthy bodies and, in turn, free them.

Oriphiel . . .

"I have always enjoyed writing crime stories," Mr. Hughes tells us, "especially the kind written from the criminal's pov. It's probably because a certain amount of legal looseness surrounds my forebears (I'm the white sheep of my family). Writing Luff Imbry tales scratches my itch."

The author's third Henghis Hapthorn novel, Hespira, *will be out in hardcover in August. The first two,* Majestrum *and* The Spiral Labyrinth, *are available in trade paperback. And, of course,* Template *will be available from PS by the time this edition of* Postscripts *hits the newsstands. For the record, Mr. Hughes considers* Template *his best work. You've been warned—miss it at your peril!*

The Eye of Vann

Matthew Hughes

The market for offworld curios in the louche and gaudy city of Olkney occupied a narrow niche. Old Earth, grown smug and insular in its penultimate age, cared little for whatever might happen on the myriad of worlds that it had long ago seeded with those who would not—or could not—remain rooted in ancestral soil. But some few of Olkney's wealthy aesthetes did take an interest in the products of the disparate cultures sprawled and speckled across the Ten Thousand Worlds of The Spray, and among that few were a dozen or so who took a very great interest indeed.

One of these was Baltazo Meagh, scion of an ancient and well funded line of second-tier magnates. Meagh resided—when he was not offworld, collecting—in a compact mansion built of livestone on a tree-lined boulevard in the Amaranth district. He had filled the house with a range of objects, from crudities to exquisites, that had piqued his fancy on a thousand planets: cultic totems of the nomadic tribes that wandered, though always along carefully plotted routes, the windy deserts of Lith; delicate altar dishes from the Grand Thedra on Prynach, fashioned from sacred clay mingled with the powdered bones of saints; scintillating thunder stones from Kurbelow.

And soon, it was whispered in places where such whispers were to be heard, Meagh would take possession of the Eye of Vann, purloined from its temple right here in Olkney by hired agents of the Green Circle syndicate. When the whispers intensified into murmurs, a spokesperson for the Vannian cult scoffed that Meagh must be the gull of forgers, for did not the true relic rest secure in the Holiest of Holies?

This fact was attested to by the Most Sublime First Enunciant himself; he was the only soul routinely permitted into its presence, except for the highest of holy days, when all the faithful attended on the Eye for the ritual known as the Lavishing.

Baltazo Meagh, for his part, said nothing, but only smiled a quiet smile.

Luff Imbry had no doubt that the true Eye would soon repose upon a plinth in Meagh's mansion. Imbry was Old Earth's premier purveyor of artworks and

other valuables to persons who paid handsomely but required no receipts or documents of provenance and who never advertised the transactions. But the master thief had had no hand in the lifting of the Eye; his certainty that the Green Circle had stolen it for Meagh came from a visitor Imbry had recently received in one of the back rooms of Bolly's Snug.

"The Eye must be restored," said the sepulchral voice of the cowled figure seated across the table from the corpulent thief. "The Rite of the Lavishing looms."

"I cannot inject myself into the Green Circle's doings," Imbry said. "They are far too fond of the vendetta."

The First Enunciant of Vann showed more flexibility in his judgments than most chief priests of secretive cults, Imbry thought, as he heard the hierophant declare that he, too, desired no complications with the Green Circle. "I consider them merely the instrument," he said. "Baltazo Meagh is the author of the sacrilege, and must die."

"I undertake operations that result in persons becoming separated from their possessions," Imbry said, "if the fee and circumstances are in order. I do not normally separate persons from existence, though I can recommend some reliable specialists."

"I will take care of Meagh. Since he has profaned and polluted the most sacred, the manner of his demise must be appropriate to the dastardliness of his trespass." The high priest's sharp-nailed fingers curled around an absent throat. "I look to you only to recover the consecrated object. And soon."

Imbry gave his nose a reflective pull. "The work will surely require my touching the Eye. I would hate to deliver it to you, only to learn that I must follow Meagh in whatever doleful procession you plan for him."

"It is within my authority to grant you temporary standing in the faith," the visitor said. "But for your own sake, I advise you not to look into the Eye."

"Why? What would I see?"

The ascetic face within the shadow of the cowl took on an even grimmer aspect. "Most see nothing but their own reflections. Some, however, experience a connection that can be unsettling, especially for the uninitiated."

Imbry was not sanguine about the proposed operation. He had been inside Meagh's walls three times, delivering items the collector wished to acquire. He knew that the house's standard defenses were strong and sophisticated, though the thief was confident that he knew how to suborn and delude them.

"I usually argue for the minimalist approach," he told the First Enunciant, "but in the circumstances, specifically the need to overcome the resistance of livestone, perhaps a direct and sudden assault on Meagh's premises might be more productive. Your temple has an all-male congregation, most of them in the prime of life."

His visitor's face drew back into the shadows of his cowl, but the previously grave voice took on a note of suppressed alarm. "No, no. Discretion is of the essence."

"And speed?" said Imbry.

"Oh, yes. Very much so."

From this exchange, Imbry deduced that the First Enunciant had been less than entirely candid with his fellow Vannians as to the whereabouts of their most sacred relic.

This realization was an important factor in the thief's negotiating of a substantial fee for his services, plus expenses, with half payable in advance.

The next day, Imbry put aside other projects and focused his faculties on the task at hand. The thorniest problem derived from the fact that Meagh's manse was built of livestone.

There had been a brief vogue for the uncommon building material a decade or so before, when samples were brought to Olkney from Hoff, the distant world on which livestone originated. The stone was the accreted product of tiny creatures that formed huge colonies, billions of individuals strong. The collective grew an extensive root-mass formed of hair-thin cilia that penetrated deep into the ground to find subterranean waterflows. From the hidden waters, the colony extracted an array of minerals, transporting them back to the surface, where they were blended before being secreted to form a dense, hard shell, like that of Old Earth's coral reefs. On their home world, the creatures' land-reefs grew in convoluted patterns, with twisting tunnels and hollow chambers that attracted higher life forms seeking refuge from predators and safe places to bear young.

A symbiotic relationship had evolved between livestone and its tenants: the sheltered brought in nutrients; the shelterer defended its symbiotes by attacking unwelcome entrants to its tunnels. Human settlers on the home world had adapted these natural attributes to create dwellings for themselves that repelled Hoff's deadliest fauna, with which the planet was more than usually stocked.

The drawback to living in livestone was that the semi-sentient creature that built and maintained the colonies had a limited ability to learn. A small, house-sized colony could be brought to recognize, at the most, seven individuals as its rightful protectorate. Any other persons who came to visit took their chances. On each occasion when Imbry had visited Meagh's manse, he had been required to tread only on a raised wooden walkway that led from the foyer to the drawing room in which he was received. The room, too, was floored, ceilinged and walled in the same dark, lustrous wood, the source of which was a tree selectively bred up by Hoff's settlers from a native shrub that was antithetical to livestone's chemical arsenal. Had Imbry's foot or hand touched a floor or wall of livestone, the implications would have been immediate, painful and likely lethal.

He repaired to his operations center, concealed in an unremarkable small house in one of Olkney's least fashionable precincts. In a small, windowless room that did not appear on the house's architectural plans, he approached what looked to be a piece of battered furniture and touched it in a way that caused it to unfold into a sophisticated information retrieval matrix. He had intended to reacquaint himself with the intricacies of handling livestone, but as he brought the device to full sentience, curiosity emerged from the back reaches of his mind and tickled his awareness. He instructed the matrix to first give him a comprehensive run-down on the Eye of Vann. The screen filled instantly with text and images. Imbry interwove his

plump fingers, placed his thumbs beneath his multitudinous chins, and began to read.

A few non-human civilizations lay scattered among the Ten Thousand Worlds of The Spray. The ultramondanes, as they were called, pursued their own ends in their own fashions. On some worlds, even including Old Earth, human and non-human populations lived in adjacent territories. But they did not much intermingle; their respective ways and aims were so mutually alien that it was easier to abide with each other in the way that different species of beasts had once grazed beside each other on the long vanished savannahs of the dawn-time Earth.

Humanity was a latecomer to the business of civilization-building. Old Earth's fading red sun was a fourth-generation star, formed from the debris of ancient suns that had been born, lived through their aeons, and exploded to strew their substance back through the commonality of the galaxy. Long before humans had come tripping down The Spray, during the time known as the Great Effloration, a myriad of non-human species had emerged, flourished and declined. Some had left behind vast, inexplicable monuments. Some had left only charred bones or heaps of shattered chitin. The presence of others could be deduced only from the faintest traces on worn-out worlds.

The Eye of Vann was unique. It had been found on Charrakin, a world that was so far down The Spray as to be arguably part of the galactic body proper. Charrakin was a dry and desert sphere, its air chilled and its wide, unwatered plateaus bereft of life. It offered nothing of interest to the explorers who first located it, neither minerals, nor biota, nor even ultramondane curios—though it had been well populated once, by a species so long since vanished that they left virtually nothing to show they had ever come up, thriven, and gone down.

In some sheltered areas, though, where the mountains had not yet been ground level by hundreds of millions of years of wind-borne grit, there remained a few low walls to suggest that once there had been sprawling cities. And in one of those corners, atop a heap of eroded rubble, lay the Eye.

All around it were wind-scoured and crumbling heaps of masonry and brick, yet the Eye remained pristine. It was a lens-shaped object, elongated to tapering points at either side, of a deep and lustrous blue. Its true origin and purpose were unknowable, but somewhere a fanciful tale sprang up, telling of how it had been the single eye of some great stone idol. The cyclopic statue, it was said, had loomed over an impossibly ancient city, a cult center to which the god's devotees crept on their knees—though whether Charrakin's city builders had traveled on jointed limbs, or flailing tentacles, or even wheels, would never be known. It was assumed by those who rejoiced in such assumptions that orgiastic rites or blood-spattered rituals, if not both, must have transpired beneath the eidolon's unwinking azure gaze.

What was known for sure was that the original locator of the Eye did not tuck it into his specimen satchel and bring it home. Instead, he left it where he found it. When asked why, he said that when he looked into its depths, he felt an urgent need to put dis-

tance between the object and his own flesh, the latter having begun to crawl.

The tale had spread, as such tales always did. Others had come to Charrakin, trudged across the shifting sands and gazed upon the Eye. Some responded as had its discoverer, with a horripilating desire to be gone; others reported that the object was over-rated, for they had looked into it and found nothing more than their own reflections and that of the high, white sky of the dead planet.

Eventually, however, someone had come with a more deliberate purpose. His name was Ekkun Batternan and it was not recorded how he reacted to the Eye, nor even if he had looked into it. It was known, however, that he had scooped it up and carried it back to Old Earth, where he installed the object in a temple he had had commissioned in a select arrondissement of Olkney. He then invited all who craved a revelation to join his new cult, which he described as the revived worship of the alien god Vann (for so someone had named the alleged idol from the old tale), a mystery cult that had flourished when humankind's ancestors had yet to achieve multicellular organization. There was always a market for new gods in Olkney, especially if the new could be presented as inconceivably old; Batternan's congregation was soon oversubscribed.

Luff Imbry grunted and paused to reflect on what he had learned. After a brief mull, he decided that the Eye's numinous qualities, whether true or sham, were irrelevant. He returned to the challenge of the livestone.

The first time he had become acquainted with Baltazo Meagh's mansion, he had made preliminary inquiries about its nature; the information might someday become useful. He now called up his notes and reviewed them. As he remembered, the sheer simplicity of the creatures that created the stuff made them difficult to suborn: unlike sentient watchers, they could not be bribed, beguiled, diverted or drugged. They reacted out of reflex, and the distance between stimulus and response was too short to be interfered with.

Still, there was one possibility. No more often than once in a century, wild livestone colonies filled the air with thick clouds of spores called jasm. These seed-stuffs rose in their trillions into the upper atmosphere of Hoff, where they swirled and eddied for years, intermingling and cross-fertilizing to form primitive zygotes that fell with seasonal precipitation. New colonies formed and the cycle was renewed.

During the few hours when spores were emitted, the livestone organisms paid no heed to any predator that might brave the choking spore-storms and enter the tunnels where the symbiotic tenants dwelt. In that fact, Luff Imbry sought to find a means of entering Meagh's manse and departing with his skin unscorched and his liver unassailed by lethal pollutants.

His research revealed a complication: in domesticating livestone, Hoffians had edited its reproductive function, the spores being liable to trigger horrific allergic reactions in a significant minority of humans. Considerable ingenuity had gone into suppressing its natural processes, creating a variant that could not produce spores except by artificial stimulation. The tailored

pheromone that provided the trigger was a closely guarded treasure of the livestone architectural profession on Hoff.

Dipping into the First Enunciant's advance on expenses, the rotund thief made arrangements, packed a valise, and departed for the space port out on an island in Mornedy Sound. He had long maintained, under the name of a proxy, a small spaceship that was now capable of greater speed and far less detectable than had been envisioned by its original designers. Imbry went to where the vessel stood in one of the less visited areas of the spaceport, boarded and departed. Before he broke orbit, he contacted his client and found him grown more anxious.

"Time grows short," the hierophant said. "The Eye must be restored for the Lavishing."

"Can you not postpone the ceremony?"

"There is no provision in the scriptures."

"I have heard of instances where inconvenient passages are clarified by new revelations," the thief suggested.

"No, the Revered Batternan's strictures are irredactible."

"I will do my best," said Imbry, "but overcoming livestone is not easy. Again, I suggest you consider a direct assault. Or even contact the Bureau of Scrutiny and seek to recover the Eye through 'proper' channels."

He heard a hiss of indrawn breath. "No," said the First Enunciant, "the faith of the general congregation must not be shaken."

"I will be as quick as I can," the thief said.

A note of suspicion now crept into the client's tone. "You are not deliberately dawdling, intending to wring a higher fee from us?"

Imbry treated the suggestion with the scorn it deserved. "As quick as I can," he repeated.

"See that you are," said the client, but the utterance held more prayer than threat.

Upon his return to Olkney, Luff Imbry made inquiries in certain quarters and confirmed that the transaction between Baltazo Meagh and the Green Circle had been completed. He next attempted to contact the First Enunciant, but the secure connection the client had given him was answered by a new voice, gruff and unresponsive to Imbry's inquiries. Indeed, whoever was answering at the temple had questions of his own to put, concerning the caller's connection to the hierophant, who was referred to in scatological terms. Imbry drew the appropriate conclusions and broke the connection.

Still, a contract was a contract. Besides, Imbry had always wanted to evaluate Baltazo Meagh's most loved possessions. Accordingly, at the smallest hour of the following night, he approached an alcove-shaded side door of Meagh's great house.

He wore an elision suit, a one-piece garment that covered him from toes to crown and could deflect light, the most common inquisitive energies and all but the most corrosive chemicals. In a slit pocket over a well padded hip was a pressurized vial of concentrated pheromone that had come from one of the least successful livestone architects in a provincial city on Hoff.

The supplier had been difficult to find, requiring much gentle sifting of possible

sources without provoking any of them to call Imbry's importunings to the attention of the authorities. In the end, the cost had not been too great but the operation had taken a considerable time.

Imbry applied a small device to the side door's who's-there and activated it. A brief struggle ensued between the guardian's perceptions and the impressions Imbry's device sought to impose upon them, but in a fraction of a blink the who's-there became convinced that an expected delivery of provisions was on the doorstep. The portal cycled open and Imbry was in.

He paused as the door shut itself and the who's-there lost all memory of the last few moments. No alarms sounded, nor did any automatic defenses engage him. But the instant he stepped off the wooden dais just within the door, a subtle shimmer past over the livestone floor, like a flicker of light across the bottom of a pool of clear water when a faint breeze ripples the surface. The glimmer raced away down the corridor before him, at the same time spreading to the walls and the high, arched ceiling, all of which now began to glow a lurid shade of pink.

Imbry extracted the vial from his pocket and activated its disperser. A colorless liquid atomized into a mist that clung to the porous surfaces. The thief advanced into the hallway, applying the vapor to the walls and floor, and wafting it toward where the upper air touched the lofty ceiling.

The garish pink that had appeared on the livestone now faded and ceased to spread. Instead, wherever the mist touched, the stone turned a deep mauve. Imbry brought out a speculum to inspect the nearby wall closely; he saw that the color came not from the stone itself, but from a multitude of tiny hollow spicules that were emerging from the myriad pores that covered the surface. The minuscule tubes themselves were crystal clear; the purple pigmentation was from the billions of spores that the livestone was now generating.

As Imbry went deeper into the house, spraying to all sides, the discoloration intensified. A glance back told him that the air through which he had passed was now being filled with swirls and eddies of minute particles, so that looking down the formerly well lighted hallway was now like peering through a deep summer twilight. Imbry held up one arm and noted that the stuff was even filling the tiny striations in the fabric from which his elision suit was made, so that his corpulent form was now outlined in purple.

The vial's contents were almost completely discharged, but the job was done. The organisms in the walls were now responding to the pheromones carried by the erupting spores themselves, causing a chain reaction that was already making the livestone far ahead of him blush a rich purple. The ceilings disappeared behind densifying clouds of seed-stuff.

With billows of jasm erupting from all surfaces, the thief consulted his memory for a schematic of Meagh's house and moved quickly. He turned left at the end of the corridor, took a right and crossed a dome-covered courtyard, entered another arched passageway and stopped at a sealed door. He applied another of his custom-fabricated devices to its lock and, immediately after, passed into a small strongroom.

Baltazo Meagh turned, mouth opening in astonishment as he saw a plump and

purple man-shape step into his most private sanctum, followed by roiling wafts of livestone spores. Unfortunately for the householder, he must draw breath before challenging the intruder, and the intake of air carried with it a host of purple motes. In the ensuing moments, both men learned that Meagh was among those who reacted badly to livestone seed-stuff, but Imbry's lesson was far gentler than that received by the collector.

The thief considered doing something about the swelling, twitching, mess of spasming limbs and streaming orifices that Meagh had become, but his informant on Hoff had advised him that no antidote to a livestone spore allergy had ever been found. Instead, Imbry resolutely turned his eyes from the unhappy scene and let them fall upon the object of his quest, which rested upon a damask cushion atop a truncated pillar.

The Eye was as his research matrix had described it, an elongated lens of dark blue, about the size of a human head and tapering out to sharp points at the sides. Its surface glistened with a light that seemed not a reflection of the treasure room's illumination, but an emanation from deep within the Eye itself.

Imbry unsealed a pocket in the front of his elision suit and withdrew a folded wad of the same material as his garment. This he shook out to make a carrying bag. Mindful of the First Enunciant's warning, at first he only side-eyed the object and did not let his gaze linger. But then he reminded himself that he would not be Luff Imbry if he had not the fortitude to confront reality on its own terms. He faced the Eye directly and stared into its depths.

His gaze was not returned, though he did note that the surface of the lens offered no purchase to the swirls of motes that sought to alight on it. The Eye retained a translucent clarity, while everything else in the room was becoming shrouded in purple. Imbry brushed a gloved finger over the smooth roundedness, wondering if the object generated a repellent charge. Then he looked closer and was surprised to find that the gleaming surface was not, in fact, repulsing the livestone jasm; rather, the Eye was osmotically absorbing the stuff, as if the smooth hardness were a permeable membrane.

And now, as more of the drifting spores settled on the blue lens, Imbry noted that the action was not passive. A purple vortex was discernible in the mote-swarmed air above the object. Spores that had settled in the microchannels of his elision suit were now lifting free of the tiny grooves and flying toward the Eye. *It draws the stuff to it,* he thought, though the means by which it did so were not apparent.

The great blue lens still rested atop the plinth where Baltazo Meagh had placed it. Imbry could not calculate how much of the seed-stuff it had by now absorbed, though the quantity must be considerable. Yet the Eye had not changed, and did not change, even as the vortex became larger and stronger, growing exponentially, so that purple spores were now darting toward, and disappearing into, the object at such a ferocious rate that the thief could hear them slithering over the skin of his suit like a blizzard of fine powder.

He looked again into the blueness and, though again nothing looked back at him, he felt a sudden shift in perspective. It was

as if he was no longer gazing into a lens no thicker than his head. Instead, he felt as if he were peering down a hole of vast, even infinite, depth—*or*, the thought suddenly struck him, *into an appetite of insatiable hunger, and this is its feeding tube.*

And still the whirling purple vortex grew stronger, so that the sound of livestone jasm passing across Imbry's elision suit had become an audible hiss. As if borne on a powerful wind, the spores poured into the treasure room from throughout the manse, called to the Eye that drank them down and wanted more, and only more.

Imbry recalled the image of lifeless Charrakin and wondered if he was now seeing the process by which it had become a wholly barren world. He looked down at Baltazo Meagh, now thoroughly dead, and saw a discoloration at the front of the body's breeches. A moment later, he no longer needed to wonder as the corpse joined the livestone in making a small contribution that fed the ravenous hunger behind the blue lens.

Yet Imbry noticed that he felt only a slightly disturbing sensation in his own tender parts. He reasoned that the energy-resistant fabric of his elision suit must provide some insulation against the Eye's pull. Without it, he had no doubt he would be as susceptible as the livestone and the dead Baltazo Meagh.

The thin bag was still in his hand. He spread its mouth wide and moved to make it swallow the Eye. But the torrent of livestone jasm now flowing into the room, swirling and funneling toward the blue adit to *somewhere else*, had become a maelstrom. The force of its passage, close to where it entered the Eye, buffeted and thrust aside his hands. He set himself and drove his arms toward the lens with all his strength. But the concentration of spores where the spiral met the Eye was now so dense as to be virtually solid.

Imbry stood back to think. The density was thickest at the point of entry, becoming gradually thinner as the vortex widened above the lens. He conceived a plan and looked about for something to climb on. The room contained several other plinths of different heights and widths, some square in cross-section, others circular, each supporting an object of great value. The thief chose several, carefully removed whatever stood atop them, then arranged them in order of ascending height, with the tallest overlooking the Eye and its still tempestuous vortex.

Laboriously, he began to climb. He had just mounted from the floor to the lowest step when the floor shook to a heavy concussion. Above the hiss of the livestone spores passing over the fabric that covered his ears, Imbry heard the multiple thuds of masonry collapsing. He moved more quickly, grateful now that the increasing strength of the inflow toward the Eye had stripped from his elision suit all of the purple motes that had originally clogged its micro-grooves. He was, once again, effectively invisible.

Beyond the room, over the susurration of the flowing jasm, Imbry could hear other sounds. Muffled voices, choking sounds, the clatter of several persons forcing their way through the blinding mass of spores that still erupted from the walls, floors and ceilings of Meagh's manse. He paused to listen, then continued to climb.

The brouhaha approached the treasure

room as Imbry reached the last of his stepping stones. As he had expected, the swirl of spores up here was less dense. He looked down into the vortex and did not hesitate, but launched himself, the bag spread in both hands, so that he fell straight down through the purple whirlwind. The momentum of his considerable mass, assisted by gravity, was sufficient. The bag's open mouth encompassed the blue lens, and instantly the inrush of jasm ceased, the spores hanging loosely in the air as before.

Imbry landed heavily, bruising his arms and probably a rib that had caught the edge of the plinth that had supported the Eye. He ignored the pain and swiftly cinched the bag shut, even as he rolled toward a corner of the treasure room and silently rose to stand utterly still.

The door to the room immediately filled with the jostling bodies of several persons. Each wore a curious costume: an ankle-length cowled robe, belted at the waist, but with a section of material cut away below the waist. It was unmistakably evident from what was visible through the holes that each of the newcomers was male. If there had been any doubt as to their sex, it would have been erased by the way each man now took hold of himself with one hand, while elevating the other with fingers arranged in what Imbry took for a ritual sign. Despite the spores that still filled the room and caused the devotees of Vann to cough and splutter, they took up a guttural chant as they advanced into the room.

But after a few syllables, the paean died away as the celebrants sought in vain for the focus of their devotions. They felt about, each with one hand, for the thing that, until moments before, had been drawing them toward the treasure room. In the purple twilight, they blundered and groped, knocking over part of Baltazo Meagh's collection.

The sounds of shattering fragilities caused Luff Imbry some grief, even as he sidled along a wall toward the door. Now that the Eye was no longer energetically drawing jasm toward its unfillable maw, the motes were beginning to resettle in the grooves of his elision suit. Soon, he would become once more a dark-pigmented man-shape, easily visible as he moved through the less dense cloud of spores.

But then one of the faithful came across the corpse of the defiler where it lay in the middle of the room. His cries of hate and kicks of savage retribution drew the others, and while they wreaked their revenge on Meagh's unfeeling remains, Imbry exited the room, not forbearing to pocket a few small but precious items on the way. He swiftly found the nearest exit—not a difficult exercise, since the explosives with which the incomers had blown in a door had also demolished a wide stretch of the surrounding wall.

As Imbry stepped into the night air, accompanied by wafts and eddies of livestone jasm, he could see two Bureau of Scrutiny volantes, lights and screamers at full admonition, sliding down from the brightly ornamented sky. He stepped briskly to a nearby park where, in the concealment of some bushes, he shed his elision suit; the scroots had the means to see through its concealment. Then, ambling at a relaxed pace, he departed the area before the air-cars alighted on the street outside Meagh's broken home.

Over the years, Luff Imbry had formulated a philosophy of life that allowed him to make fine distinctions that would have eluded the mental grasp of the greater mass of persons. For example, he strictly honored every agreement; he would have handed the Eye over to the Most Sublime First Enunciant for the agreed-upon fee, regardless of how his views on the object might have altered since their deal was struck. But the hierophant had been found just outside the temple's Holiest of Holies, abused beyond hope of resuscitation, and thus the issue became moot.

Imbry set the lens, still wrapped in the muting fabric of the elision bag, on a table in his operations center. He then lined up the five items he had acquired while departing Baltazo Meagh's premises. One of them, a thunder stone that glistened with metallic sheens and sparkled with scintillants in four colors, the thief had himself provided to the magnate some years before, and for a handsome fee. It might now bring even more from one of the aficionados who had envied its recent owner's collection. The other four pieces, including a smoothly worn icon of the Blessed Seer, graved into a plate carved from the dense black horn of a long-since extinct megafaunum from Ullber's World, were worth more than a small fortune, if the right buyers could be found. And Imbry was the one to find them.

He captured images in the round of the five pieces, then activated his secure communications system and sent messages to a number of contacts who would bring the availability of the items to the attention of those who would take an interest. That work done, Imbry returned his attention to the thing in the bag.

He was confident that he could sell the Eye back to its erstwhile owners, using cutouts that would insulate him from any retribution for his sacrilege in having handled it. He could also think of several other potential buyers; he might even convene an auction. He tapped his pudgy fingers on the tabletop as he contemplated these options, the arithmetical portion of his powerful intellect automatically generating the cost-and-revenue factors inherent to each alternative.

After a long moment, his fingers ceased to drum and he sighed. His mind kept wanting to break out of the channels to which he normally confined it—questions of what and how, of where and who and, especially, of how much. He remembered the sensation that had possessed him as he felt the Eye's muted influence upon his body. The image came again, of the lens being only the visible end of a feeding tube that was connected, he was sure, to something that he would not care to meet. Something unsavory. Something, to use a word Imbry rarely employed, evil.

Where that something was, in space and time, he had no idea. He remembered, from his school days, abstruse discussions of other planes of existence—nine of them, if he recalled the lesson. But none of that childhood esoterica had ever stepped forth into the welter of phenomenality and declared itself relevant to the to-ings and fro-ings of Luff Imbry. Now, he supposed, he had felt its touch, a touch unsought and unwanted.

The more he allowed himself to think of it, the deeper and more complex grew his appreciation of the thing on the table. *No, not a feeding tube,* he sensed. Whatever was

at the other end of the connection was not doing anything as simple as feeding—rather, it was *collecting*. It had tried to *collect* from Luff Imbry, would have indifferently carried off his most intimate plasm, and was only foiled by the properties of his elision suit.

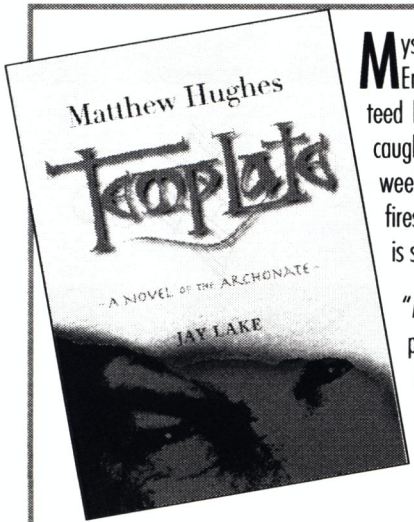
But for what purpose? What did whatever was at the other end of the collecting tube do with its gatherings? Here, Imbry's imagination conjured up suggestions that he was surprised to find, for all he prided himself on an exceptional tough-mindedness, he did not care to examine. But he was not surprised to discover that he deeply resented the attempt that had been made on him.

He remained seated at the table for quite some time, letting his thoughts take him where they would. A sophisticated man, he had long accepted that the way of the world was that we all use and are used. "Still," he said, at last, to the object on the table, "limits must be set."

He arose and left, taking the bag and its contents with him. Several days later, on an airless speck that orbited a dying star at the edge of the Beyond, he placed the Eye, still in its camouflaging fabric, in a deep hole at the bottom of a narrow crevice where not even starlight reached. He covered over the excavation and began to return to his ship.

Halfway up the wall of the canyon, he stopped and retraced his steps. Near where he had buried the object was a substantial boulder. Imbry applied his full strength to roll the rock over the burial place, then smoothed the surrounding dust to remove all trace of its relocation.

He contemplated the boulder and said, within the privacy of his helmet, "After all, if we set no limits, what are we?" ⊠



Mystery surrounds Conn Labro: he was sold to Horder's Gaming Emporium as an anonymous infant, a circumstance that guaranteed he would never escape debt slavery. Now the mystery has caught up with him: he finds an old man with whom he plays a weekly game of strategy dead of torture. And an orbiting space ship fires an energy weapon at the roof-top dueling ground where Conn is scheduled to meet an offworld opponent.

"Matthew Hughes's Template is many things - including a template others should follow to produce outstanding writing. Hughes has been the best-kept secret in SF for far too long: he's a towering talent, and Template is his best work to date. Bravo!"

—Robert J. Sawyer, Hugo Award-winning author of Hominids.

Slipcased Hardcover £50.00 [$100.00] • Hardcover £20.00 [$40.00]

In our illustrious managing editor's eyes, doing a special all-SF issue of Postscripts *without a story from Ray Bradbury would be like a burger without a bun. The small fact that the following story isn't exactly SF didn't deter him one jot—"Well, it's got some big trucks in it!" he muttered as he disappeared back into his office. Then again, if maybe we had made this an* all-Jazz *special issue . . . (read on)!*

Juggernaut

Ray Bradbury

The whole thing was so fantastic, so beautiful, so unbelievable, so *nice*.

Roscoe Hammond was moving his big two-story house.

I was there the night the truckers came with their big wheels and listened as Roscoe phoned three-dozen pals.

"Arnie," Roscoe cried, "what are you doing at midnight? We're trucking the damned house two miles uphill. Going to paint it all kinds of Hindu Bombay colors. You ever see those juggernaut films? The big icons? They roll through the streets, all different colors, and the wheels, Jesus, five feet round, like circular rainbows, with legs and feet and big mascara eyes.

"So what we got here is a juggernaut housemoving-housewarming. But hey, Arnie, you still play trombone? Can you call the guys? I need a trumpet, a drummer, piccolos, an oboe, hell, an accordion. We'll fill all the rooms with liquor and pals, playing Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. We'll gas the big bungalow and make it jump. Okay Arnie? Yeah!"

Roscoe hung up, all smiles.

Arnie showed up first, playing that brass, making us yell Dorsey, not dead.

By 11:15 we had enough brass for a quintet, but we waited for Artie Shaw's Johnny Beckett and his clarinet, thinking *Frenesi* might be the fire to run our juggernaut.

"Hell, no," cried Arnie. "We need something wild. It's gotta be *Chattanooga Choo Choo*."

The truck drivers, all baby boomers, heard us start shouting *Chattanooga* and tromped on the gas.

The juggernaut wheels creaked and groaned, its arms and legs spun, the big dark mascara eyes glared, and we were off.

Just then, the ladies began to appear in twos and threes, dropped off by rambling cars.

There were great shouts of hilarity mixed with brass, as the girls climbed aboard, carrying lit candles, like lunatic nuns.

I jumped off the juggernaut and photographed the big house moving by, like a big birthday cake, candles lit in every window.

So now we were playing and drinking and squeezing the ladies and shouting with laughter as the big bright colored Indian wheels rolled with its arms and legs and big staring eyes. The juggernaut shrugged like an elephant in heat with a beautiful burden

of people who got louder and louder as we wheeled toward the sky.

By 11:20 Arnie moaned, "Hell, I know what's wrong. We need real gas!"

He shouted out the window at the nearest liquor store, "Beer!" and "Vodka!" and then "Jack Daniels," and the drinks came running.

At the same time, more musicians piled on, including Biggs Bromwell and his drums.

We were rumbling through ramshackle neighborhoods and people came, yelling, to the curb.

Blues in the Night. Love Me or Leave Me. Stormy Weather. Am I Blue?

And then from each room a different player picked up a tune like *Moonlight Serenade* and flung it on to the next room for variations, and the whole house was shivering and roaring and shaking.

Things got more wild, more frantic, because even more cars were zooming up and dropping guys with their ukuleles or kazoos.

By one o'clock we were taking on strangers from every jazz joint in town and people, we heard, were on their way from San Clemente and were calling ahead to reserve a room on the juggernaut and provide a portable piano.

By 1:30 the house was so crammed with wild singers and players that we began to worry about the drag. When you've got sixty people in a house, that's close to ten thousand pounds. Add five or ten more and the whole thing begins to sink.

I climbed and sat with Arnie on the roof because there were too many elbows with the crowd down below.

So Arnie was up there, swinging his trombone, and I was there with my flute, and we were waking neighbors all along the way. You could see the lights going on in the houses on both sides as we rumbled past and people stared out at this great big Indian elephant rolling by long after midnight.

At a little after two o'clock Arnie got a worried look. "My God, we gotta be careful. If we overload this beast, we might just break free and head back downhill."

Which is exactly what happened.

Molly, a lady friend of Arnie's, arrived around 2:31. She was a really big lady, 250 pounds on the hoof.

Arnie cried: "Wait! How much you weigh?"

She shrieked: "That's like asking a woman her age!"

She jumped and landed and that did it. When her body hit, our Indian elephant shivered and froze.

All the wheels creaked, the legs stopped running, the mascara eyes stopped staring, and the whole house, for a terrible instant, stood horribly still, as if it had suffered a heart attack.

Everyone sucked their breath, and we waited to see what might happen next.

Then, by God, a screeching of those big, giant, painted, multi-legged, mascara-eyed wheels. The connection to the trucks came loose and the juggernaut, in the middle of our house warming, started to wheel back downhill.

Nobody knew what to play. There must have been a lot of talk, a lot of shrieking and jibbering, and then a genius thought why not play Khachaturian's *Gayne*, which was a storm inside of a hurricane inside of a cyclone.

The faster the house ran, the louder the music of Khachaturian.

People leapt out of their houses, trying to run and latch on to our elephant, thundering by. We thought they were trying to stop us, but no, they just wanted on for the lunatic ride.

So, with screaming and yelling, we sailed back though the middle of the night streets, past all the dark houses, waking people along the way, playing Khachaturian even louder, all the way to the sea, and out along the pier, and then to the end of the pier and off and into the night tide.

Our juggernaut wheels spun off, all arms, legs and eyes, and *Gayne* stopped dead. From all the rooms we heard seaside music, or ocean-liner music as the juggernaut became a houseboat with all its candles flaming, every room bright as we sailed out into the bay and strangers on the wharf waved their handkerchiefs and sang *Farewell to Thee.*

Up on the roof I stared back because I'd heard something very faint and beautiful.

A rowboat was following us, with the promise of dawn ahead.

Straddled in the rowboat was Eddie Roark, stutter-plucking his big harvest moon banjo. His wife rowed as he picked and plucked *I Get the Blues When it Rains.*

"Oh, no," I bleated. "The blues I can't lose when it rains."

By the time the rowboat caught up with us I was crying.

I thought I would never stop.

COMING SOON FROM PS!

Ray Bradbury Gift Set—A special three-volume set comprising:

Something Wicked This Way Comes
The Hallowe'en Tree
The October Country.

Available in a signed and lettered 26 copy edition and an unsigned slipcased 274 copy edition.

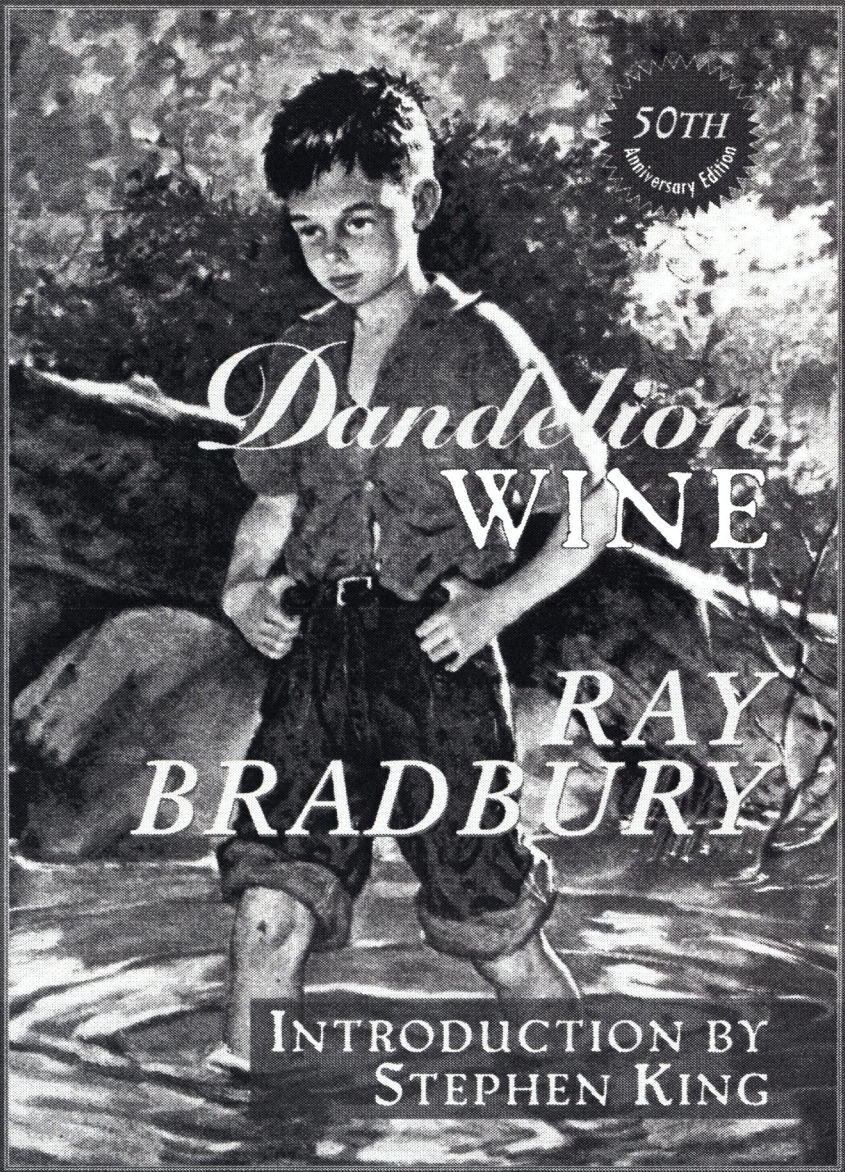
AND

The Day It Rained Forever (available in a deluxe version with ***A Medicine For Melancholy***, and separately in slipcased and trade editions.

AND, FARTHER ALONG:

The Machineries of Joy and ***Long After Midnight***

Please visit pspublishing.co.uk for details.



DANDELION WINE *50 Years Later*

'The Best of Both Worlds' follows the recent trend of the author's work being set in the past—"... because the future is too bleak to contemplate," he adds. Mr. Stableford is currently busy translating the classics of French scientific romance into English for Black Coat Press; recent titles include Gustave Le Rouge's The Vampires of Mars, *Charles Derennes's* The People of the Pole, *Felix Bodin's* The Novel of the Future *and Henri de Parville's* An Inhabitant of the Planet Mars.

The Best of Both Worlds

Brian Stableford

Since Emily had died I had become exceedingly restless, unable to settle to my own work—indeed, I no longer found it possible to think of writing articles for *Blackwood's* and the *Monthly Review* as "work"—and equally unable to take solace in the genius of other men that was stored in my father's library.

My father was away in London, attending to business, but I was glad of that, for his innocently cheerful presence would have seemed an insult. Had he not lost the love of his life too, albeit twenty-and-one years before? How could he tolerate his own comfortable contentment, with that kind of void at the core of his existence? How could he bear to look at me, let alone love me, knowing that it was in giving birth to me that his wife had died?

Emily, dear heart, had not lived long enough to celebrate our wedding, let alone to give birth to my child, but that did not make my pain one whit less intense. I felt that my soul had been ripped apart, and could never be healed

I had taken to wandering on the moors every day, whatever the weather. At first, I had done so merely in order to walk from our isolated house at Stonecroft to the village churchyard in Haughtonlin, where Emily was buried, but it had become so very difficult to tear myself away from my meditation in order to return to the awful normality of home that I had taken to going further on rather than reversing my direction. Nor did I stick to the path that wound around the hillside before crossing the beck at the little wooden bridge and making its way back to the York road. Instead, I plunged into the wilderness of gorse and heather, punctuated by hawthorn spinneys and outcrops of black rock that dressed the slopes above the boggy basin whose broken granite rim served as a source for the rills which combined their trickling waters lower down to form the beck. It was desolate land, impossible to cultivate, into which sheep were reluctant to stray, and it suited the temper of my moods very well. The cloud which, by some freak of nature, always dressed the summit of Arnlea Moor came to seem strangely welcoming, although I usually refrained from going so far up the hill as to immerse myself in its mists.

My father had been a soldier, and had commanded a company in the Crimea before his marriage. He had hoped that I might make a soldier too, but my childhood dreams had been fantasies of explo-

ration, following in the footsteps of James Cook or Mungo Park. Had I not fallen in love with Emily, I might have taken ship for the Pacific isles or the shores of darkest Africa, but she had kept me at home, and kept me still now that she had been laid to rest in the soil of Arnleadale. It was easy enough, however, to imagine myself as an explorer whenever I ventured into the upper reaches of the vale, struggling through what was, in a literal though perhaps rather trivial sense, trackless wilderness. There were foxes and pheasants living wild on the heath, but no hunt or shooting-party ever came this far from either of the manor houses that presided like Medieval forts over the valley's neck. Stonecroft, which had once belonged to one of Lord Arnlea's stewards but had been sold off fifty years before, was the limit at which sport stopped and untroubled Nature began.

My father, a devotee of natural theology, had often said that there was far more to be learned about the mysterious mind of God in the bleak and misty head of the valley than there was from its carefully tamed and excessively man-handled mouth. I was not so sure that what was revealed there was the mind of God, but I thought the judgment likely to be truthful even before I lost my lovely Emily. Afterwards, I became convinced. Even so, I had difficulty following my father's perennial advice to see the Divine Plan in everything that existed or occurred upon the Earth. What kind of divinity could possibly manifest itself in the premature death of such a charming soul as Emily?

I was never intimidated in my excursions by the weather, although the moor could become a direly dismal place when the ever-present cloud turned to drizzle, or when a brisk west wind brought darker clouds scurrying from the distant Atlantic Ocean to unleash a deluge on the slopes. There was no man-made shelter in the wilderness, but there were natural coverts formed by overhanging rocks, and clefts that sometimes extended back into the hillside to become pot-holes. I knew many of them, though by no means all, and regarded them as my own . . . until, one day, I raced to the remotest of them all to escape a sudden squall, and found it already occupied, by a young woman dressed in black.

I had never seen her before, and was quite at a loss to understand how she had got there, since I would surely have caught a glimpse of her had she come by way of Haughtonlin. When I saw her, I hesitated at the mouth of the cave, and was actually about to turn around and go back into the storm when she spoke.

"There's no need to get wet on my account," she said, in a soft and strangely musical voice. "The shelter is narrow, but there's room enough for two. The shower cannot last long at this level of violence."

I hesitated still, studying her carefully. Her coat was long, and bulky enough to conceal the precise contours of her body, her walking-boots sturdy. Her bonnet was as black as her coat, and so was the hair tucked up within it. Her complexion was pale—which made her eyebrows stand out remarkably—and her eyes were grey, completing the strange impression that she was a figure drawn in monochrome, a charcoal sketch rather than a portrait in oils.

Eventually, I bowed, and said: "I'm Edward Grayling of Stonecroft. I apologize for

my rudeness, but I was startled to find anyone abroad in this lonely region—especially a woman."

"My name is Mary McQueen," she said, lightly. "I fear that I'm a little lost. I'm staying at Raggandale Hall, and I do not know the county at all."

"Raggandale Hall! Why, that's six miles away even as the crow flies, and you must have come over the crest of the moor through the fog. Did no one warn you not to come this way? The ridge is rarely free from its shroud of low-lying cloud, and the damp ground on this side is treacherous even for sheep."

"No," she said, "no one warned me. I'm quite used to taking six-mile walks at home, in Suffolk, although I will admit that the ground is much flatter there, and I never lose my bearings to the extent of not knowing when and how to turn around. The mist on the heights of the moor is very deceptive, and I was surprised to find that I had come out on the opposite side."

"I'll take you home when the squall bows over," I said, compelled to play the gallant in spite of my dark mood, "but it's a long way, and far from easy. There's very little chance of reaching Raggandale by nightfall." I paused again, for reflection, and then said: "In fact, it would be foolish to attempt it. You must come the other way, at least as far as Haughtonlin. The innkeeper at the Black Bull has a fly, and might be willing to lend you his servant to take you home by road. It's a long way round, but it's safe. If the fly's hired out or the servant can't be spared, you can stay overnight at the inn—or come back to Stonecroft with me, if you prefer. The scullion can be pressed into temporary service as a chambermaid. I can drive you home myself tomorrow."

"That's very kind," she said, "but quite unnecessary. I'm sure that I can find my own way home."

"I'm perfectly sure that you cannot," I told her, insistently. "I have never been to Suffolk, but I know how different this moorland is from most of southern England. Whether you know it or not, Miss McQueen, you're in an alien land here. This rain is not the first we've had this week, and the bog will be exceedingly treacherous for some time to come. There's no question of your going back that way this evening. You must come with me, at least as far as Haughtonlin."

"Very well," she said. "Since you insist, I must bow to your superior knowledge of this alien land, and accept your guidance. I shall stay the night in Haughtonlin, if there is room at the inn, and make my way home tomorrow. If the weather is fine, though, I shall go on foot. I may be resident in the vicinity for some time, if my cousins at Raggandale are willing to accommodate me, and I ought to get to know the country—especially its dangerous regions."

I had to be content with that, for the time being. When I eventually left her at the Black Bull, however, I told her that I would return in the morning, and that if she really were intent on going up to the head of the valley and over the clouded moor, I would go with her, to make sure that she got safely back to Raggandale Hall.

"That's very kind of you, Mr Grayling," she said. "I would doubtless benefit from the services of a guide, and I shall therefore accept your offer to see me safely home, if I will not be causing you any inconvenience."

"None at all," I assured her. "I come to Haughtonlin every day, and walk further up the valley whenever the whim takes me. It might be to my advantage to pioneer a trail that might take me all the way to Raggandale in future." I said it carelessly, and only realized afterwards that it must have sounded like an expression of my intention to visit her there—but she only thanked me courteously, and smiled.

I was back in Haughtonlin bright and early, but I went to the graveyard before presenting myself at the Black Bull. I was kneeling by Emily's grave, oblivious to all else, when I was interrupted by a voice from behind, which said: "I thought it was you, Mr Grayling."

I turned to look at Mary McQueen. In her all-black outfit she seemed every inch the mourner. Her expression was equally somber.

"I would have come to the Black Bull within the quarter-hour," I said, a little stiffly. "There was no need to come to find me."

"I'm sorry," she replied, "but I felt a little uncomfortable at the inn. Even though you were so kind as to explain my situation last evening, the landlord and his wife seemed a trifle put out by the presence of a female guest with neither chaperone nor luggage. I can't imagine why—this is Victorian England, after all, when ladies may take the Grand Tour unescorted."

"This is Yorkshire," I reminded her. "An alien land."

She nodded in vague agreement, and then looked pointedly at Emily's grave.

"She was my fiancée," I felt bound to explain, although she had not voiced a question. "She died of a fever shortly before her nineteenth birthday. I wanted to bury her at Stonecroft, next to my mother, but her parents would not hear of it."

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you in your mourning," she said, politely—but she made no move to leave.

I got to my feet, and walked back with her to the Black Bull, where I had a brief word with the landlord to make sure that he understood the reason for my presence and why I was heading the wrong way along the valley in the young lady's company. There was gossip enough about me in the region, without generating more of a less respectful sort.

The day was bright enough when we started out, but the cloud-cap on the ridge was even lower than usual, and we were surrounded by mist even before we had reached the lip of the granite basin that held the bog. The light of the sun made the white mist sparkle slightly, but the vapor was so thick that we could hardly see the ground beneath our feet, and I knew that navigation would be direly difficult. I thought that I had been there often enough in recent weeks to find my way, at least until we cleared the moist ground and had to clamber up the remaining rocky slopes to the crest of the moor, but I was too optimistic. By the time that the hands of my watch indicated noon I was quite lost, and no longer knew in which direction the ridge lay.

Had I been alone, I would have turned back an hour earlier, when I was still sure in which direction Haughtonlin lay, but I had represented myself to Mary McQueen as a guide, and had promised to get her home;

pride delayed me until I had no idea where I might be. I was about to call a halt and take stock of whatever clues I could find, hoping to recover my bearings, when I found myself confronted by a wall of granite, so dark in hue as to be almost black. It loomed up at least ten feet, and then was lost in the mist. I was sure that I had never seen it before—nor had I ever seen the crevice that gave access to a cave not unlike the one in which I had found Mary McQueen sheltering the day before.

"We had better rest for a little while," I said. "The sun is at its zenith now, and there is a chance that the cloud will lift, or even dissipate altogether, giving us an opportunity to see where we are."

The woman in black laughed softly, but not unkindly. "It's a poor explorer who forgets his compass," she remarked. Without any hesitation, she stepped into the dark opening in the rock-face.

I started to protest, on the grounds that it would be pitch dark inside the cave, and that I had no more brought a lantern than a compass, but her black form had already vanished into the interior. Instead of calling after her, I followed her into the darkness.

I had expected it to be cold inside the cave, but no sooner was I within it than my face was bathed by a draught of warm air. If that were not surprising enough, the air was strangely scented, not with the animal reek of a fox's den or a wildcat's lair, but with a curiously sweet perfume, like the odor of warm honey. I stopped dead, but I did not turn back towards the silvery mist. Instead, I said: "I must confess, Miss McQueen, that I am quite lost. I have let you down, and I'm sorry."

I heard her laugh again, but the sound seemed to come from a distance, and it was as much a trill as a laugh, more akin to birdsong than any familiar expression of human merriment.

"I must confess, Mr Grayling," she said, then, the words flowing like a cradle-song, "that I have deceived you. Although I really am in residence at Raggandale just now, I am no stranger to this cloud. I am not lost at all—but I hope that you will forgive me for my deception very soon."

I had not the least idea what to make of this speech, and my confusion was further augmented by a strange sensation that stole over me, which I attributed to the effects of the sickly air that I was breathing in. I felt unnaturally calm—inwardly more peaceful than I had felt in months, certainly since Emily had died and perhaps far longer than that. When a hand took mine and drew me further forward into the darkness, I went meekly, with not the slightest pang of anxiety.

The floor of the cave sloped downwards, and felt somewhat slick underfoot, but I did not slip or stumble as the invisible hand drew me on. My calmness lapsed by degrees into a near-somnolence, and I lost track of time and direction, although I feel sure that the path we followed was by no means straight. The tunnel was broad, though, and I never had to stoop to save my head from being bumped or scraped. It was almost as if it had been deliberately hollowed out in order to accommodate the passage of human beings—or something of similar size. The air grew warmer, and sweeter still, until I had the feeling that I was no longer breathing air at all, or moorland mist, but something infinitely richer and more nourishing to body and soul alike.

We walked for a long time in total darkness, although I cannot estimate whether it was for tens of minutes or several whole hours. Eventually, though, we came into a part of the cave where the tunnel broadened much further, into a series of chambers, which were illuminated by a soft bioluminescence produced by some kind of fungus that grew thickly upon the walls and roofs. The light was faint, but perfectly white; once my eyes had adjusted to its magnitude, it was like seeing by starlight on a cloudless but moonless night. The return of visual sensation dispelled my somnolence, without threatening my tranquility in the least.

My guide was little more than a silhouette against the background radiance, and her pale face did not seem to reflect the light with any distinctness at all, being no more than a dull grey blur atop her thick-clad body. She was no longer alone, and I realized that we had probably had invisible company for some time. The further we progressed through the sequence of chambers, the more individuals of the same kind I saw, passing along the pathway we were following in the same or the opposite direction. I say "individuals of the same kind" rather than "people" because I could no longer think of her as entirely human. I had somehow taken the inference that when she had confessed to deceiving me, she had meant it in a very profound sense. Somehow, I divined—no matter how incredible the guess might seem—that I was in some kind of formicary, and that the creatures swarming around me were bipedal ants. My guide's choice of pseudonym now seemed like an oblique hint as to her true nature.

Eventually, the creature that called herself Mary McQueen invited me to rest, and showed me a covert in which I might sit down.

I was not afraid. I felt that I was no longer capable of fear—or grief either. It seemed to me that I had attained a state of Platonic *ataraxia*, in which the empire of my reason was fully secure for the first time in my existence, and my consciousness fully liberated from the animal instincts that we call emotions. I was, however, reasonable enough to remind myself that the impression might well be an illusion, and that I must be very careful not take everything that I saw or heard on trust.

"What am I to be?" I asked the trickster that had brought me here. "Will I serve as food for your young, or as a drone to the queen of your hive—or am I destined merely to be a slave, laboring alongside your workers?"

This time, she did not laugh. "I brought you here to offer you a choice, Edward Grayling," she said. "I brought you here to make you an offer, which you are free to refuse—but while you are here you will be able to exercise a purer kind of reason than the one to which human beings are normally heir, in order that you might be unswayed by instinctive animal revulsion."

"That's very kind of you, I'm sure," I said. "Am I right in assuming that your species is not part of the Earth's Divine Plan, and no evidence of any aspect of the mind of our Creator?"

"We are not native to this planet," the creature confirmed, "nor even this solar system—but if you believe in a Creator, you may take my word for the fact that we are far more representative of the common

state of his mind and the apparent ambition of his Divine Plan than your own species."

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard!" I murmured. "Consider her ways, and be wise."

"Precisely," my interlocutor agreed. "But you must not take that analogy too far. We are no mere social insects; our nature combines the best of the invertebrate and vertebrate realms."

"How may other men have been here before me?" I asked, curiously. "How many have accepted your offer, and how many have refused it?"

"Our form of governance is far from democracy," she retorted. "We are uninterested in matters of majority—but since you ask, you are the nineteenth person to be welcomed into this particular nest. If all our Earthly nests are taken into consideration, the number of our human recruits is something over a thousand. We have not been on your planet for very long—no more than seven centuries, in your reckoning. Of all the humans to whom we have made the offer of recruitment, not one has yet refused—but the selection of candidates is not random."

There seemed nothing startling in any of these figures, in my newly-remade estimation.

"Very well, then," I said, with perfect equanimity. "Make your offer."

My seducer explained, very patiently, that of the three guesses I had made as to the purpose I might have been brought into the alien nest to serve, the first was closest to the mark. I would, indeed, be asked to serve as a host to one of their larvae, and to nourish it—though not by being devoured in any simple sense. The larva would live within me—not merely within my gut like an ascarid worm or a tapeworm, but actually *within* my abdomen, sharing the circulation of my blood like any other organ and deriving its nutrition therefrom. While there it would grow slowly, undergoing the first phase of a long and complex process of maturation.

The larva would not merely integrate itself into my circulatory system, however; it would also integrate itself into my nervous system. It would gradually take on the form and functions of a massive ganglion: a second brain, equal in complexity and capability to my own, and capable of exchanging information with my own. I would, in some measure, become responsible for the elementary education of the nascent mind within that brain, assisting its gradual transformation from a creature of pure appetite to a creature of considerable intelligence.

In order that this metamorphosis might be achieved, Mary McQueen informed me, it would be necessary for the original larva to be gradually transformed, molecule by molecule and cell by cell, into a kind of flesh more closely akin to mine. By the same token, though, it would assist me—and, in particular, my brain—in a similar metamorphosis, so that my flesh would become more akin to that of the extraterrestrial visitors. Although the continuity of my consciousness would be perfectly preserved, allowing for the normal and inevitable lapses of sleep, its containing vessel would be strengthened in various ways.

The visitors could not offer me immortality, but they could offer me a much-ex-

tended lifespan, potentially measurable in tens of thousands of years. Although I would always remain vulnerable to the possibility of destruction by catastrophic injury, my body would acquire much greater powers of self-repair, and would become virtually invulnerable to the ravages of disease. In addition to these vulgar material benefits, the quality of my experience of the world would be altered in several ways.

In the first place, the ataraxia that I was now experiencing would become a perennially and voluntarily recoverable state of mind. I would remain able to savor the existential rewards of emotion, if and when I so wished, but I would also be able to rid myself of its more exacting claims. The empire of reason would be secured, not by the extermination of emotion but by its careful subjugation; emotions would become my loyal and contented servants, no longer bidding for mastery of my consciousness or posing any anarchic threat to my peace of mind.

In the second place, my mind would no longer be isolated, capable of making contact with other minds only through the media of sight and sound, by means of language and image-making. The intimate connection that I would gradually establish with the larva to whom I was playing host would eventually be severed when the time came for the larva to move on to the next phase in its development, but that link would be replaced, initially by another larva of the same sort, but eventually—as my own slow metamorphosis moved into other phases—by a series of larvae that were already more advanced in their development. I would never again be without companionship of the most intimate sort imaginable, nor would I be restricted to the company of new-borns.

When the time came for me to play foster-parent to larvae of a more advanced sort, I would be able to take the opportunity to leave my homeworld, because I would then be capable of the kind of dormancy required by long interstellar journeys. I would become a citizen of a vast interstellar culture, capable of the kinds of radical metamorphosis that were frequently necessary to facilitate life on other worlds. In time, perhaps, I might even be equipped for intergalactic travel.

My interlocutor also took the opportunity to explain the logic of this way of life, in evolutionary terms. Among the books in my father's library was the Chevalier de Lamarck's *Philosophie zoologique*, which my father had acquired from a French business acquaintance, who had received it from the author' own hand after attending one of his lectures in the Jardin des Plantes. I was, therefore, aware of the Chevalier's assertion that every living creature is possessed of an innate urge to improvement, whose cumulative effects, expressed across the generations, resulted in the gradual progressive evolution of new species. Mary McQueen told me that the sense in which this was true of Earthly species was more metaphorical than literal, but that there was indeed a universal process of natural selection that tended to favor the survival and reproduction of some individuals in every generation of every species, while others less fitted for survival and successful reproduction made proportionately less contribution to the following generation.

Although such vulgar modifications as fleshly resilience, the ability to avoid pred-

ators and efficiency in gathering food were all favored by natural selection, my informant told me, the most important factors thus favored—and hence the most progressive, in Lamarckian terms—were those promoting better parental care. Humans, she said, deserve to be reckoned the most advanced members of the native biosphere because their infants benefit from far better and more varied parental care, and are thus enabled to embrace much slower and far more intricate processes of maturation.

By comparison with the extraterrestrial visitors, of course, human maturation remains relatively rapid and primitive; the visitors had taken the process to a much more elaborate extreme. One of the gifts of the extra measure of progress they were thus permitted was, of course, to develop processes of personal and collective evolution that were authentically Lamarckian, allowing every individual of their species—including individuals of other kinds recruited into their species—to embark on a process of individual progressive evolution.

There were, of course, many matters of further detail that my scrupulous educator took it upon herself to enumerate and explain. I asked numerous questions, all of which were answered to my complete satisfaction. In the end, though, the force of the argument was simply and manifestly overwhelming. What I was being offered, with the utmost generosity, was a chance to transcend the vestigial primitive aspects of my own humanity: an opportunity to become, by slow degrees, a much higher kind of being, less closely akin to apes than my fellow men, more nearly reminiscent of angels.

I was not in the least surprised, when I understood my situation, that not one of the more than a thousand humans to whom this offer had formerly been made had turned it down. No creature in whom the empire of reason was secure could ever have done otherwise.

"Yes," I said, gladly, when the offer was confirmed. "I will certainly agree to join you in the capacity of foster-parent, with a view to becoming one of you, to the full extent of my eventual abilities."

"Thank you, Mr Grayling," the shadowy Mary McQueen replied. "I felt sure that you would."

In order to be invested with my larva I had, of course, to meet the extraterrestrial "queen" whose daughter Mary was. Because my preconceptions had been shaped by the initial analogy I had drawn between the world within the moor and an ant-hive, I was half-expecting an individual of gargantuan size lodged in some vast central chamber, perpetually attended by hordes of workers dutifully transporting her nourishment and incessantly bearing away the eggs that she laid. That aspect of the analogy was, however, misleading in the extreme.

In spite of their modest investment in the arts of parental care, the reproductive strategy of Earthly ants is essentially crude, involving the production of large numbers of offspring. The extraterrestrial visitors did indeed combine the best features of Earthly mammals with those of Earthly insects—indeed, as the description of their existential condition that I have just given will readily testify, they were no longer prisoners to any kind of taxonomic classification. At any rate, their rate of reproduction was

essentially sedate. They had, you will remember, been present on the Earth for seven centuries without having had the need to recruit many more than a thousand human beings to their cause.

The alien Mother's quarters were, in fact, relatively modest, as befitted her modest size. She was only a little larger than Mary McQueen, and although she was certainly plump, she was by no means obese. She was, however, intensely committed to her role as a specialist in reproduction, to the extent that she seemed almost to radiate maternal love.

Thus far in the course of my adventures in the underworld my emotions had been subject to a kindly but generalized suppression. When I was ushered into the queen's gloomy apartment, however, there was a noticeable change in the atmosphere. Its warm sickly sweetness was replaced by something more refreshing and bracing, which had the seemingly-paradoxical effect of reigniting at least some of my emotions and appetites. I did not feel that I was at all out of control, but when I came into the presence of the queen and felt the radiance of her love, I also felt free to return it.

Although I had never known my own mother, and my father had never made any effort to provide me with any kind of substitute, I had never felt unduly deprived in consequence, and I did not feel that the alien Mother's welcoming attitude was rushing to fill any kind of experiential void. I did, however, relish the opportunity to return her affection: to lavish upon her all the stored-up affection that I might, in happier circumstances, have been able to lavish upon my own mother for twenty-and-one years.

I could not tell, with any degree of certainty, what the extraterrestrial Mother looked like. Her chamber was not blessed with much illumination, and her face was as vague as my guide's had become, although she certainly had eyes with which to study me, and doubtless saw me far more clearly than I saw her. She was clad in black, like her sisters, and I do know that her coat—which was presumably some kind of tegument integral to her bodily structure—was soft and warm, with a texture not unlike that of wool. She was capable of standing erect and of sitting down, and she had five-fingered hands that were both expressive and tender, but I had the impression that her form was not such a close imitation of human physique as Mary's. Mary's form had, of course, to be a very close imitation, at least superficially, in order for her to pass for a cousin of the Raggandales.

The Mother's voice was very musical, but her command of English was somewhat limited; unlike Mary, she had never been up to the surface to insinuate herself, however briefly, into the human social world. Even so, we talked, not about biology and evolution but about more personal matters. In particular, we talked about Emily, and the tragedy of her death. While remaining intensely sympathetic, the Mother explained to me how futile it is to mourn the deaths of creatures which are by nature ephemeral, and why it is a perverted use of emotion to surrender oneself to grief so completely that one becomes impotent in the more elevated sphere of intellectual ability. She was right, of course, but that was not all that mattered to me: what mattered more was that she was *kind*, that she

was helping me to explore the perversities of my own sentiments in order that I might become calmer, happier and better equipped to deal with the vicissitudes of existence.

Longevity, she told me, is not necessarily a good thing. In order to reap the benefits of the condition, one must adapt one's frame of mind to its demands as well as its possibilities. I was grateful for her generosity in making time to give me that advice, and very grateful indeed for the tenderness of her explanations. When the time came for her to give me her larva, I was more than ready to receive it.

Unlike Earthly ant-queens, alien Mothers do not lay eggs; like humans, they nurture their young in embryo for some considerable time. They give birth by means of a special kind of kiss, which transfers the larva directly into the gut of a recipient host, from whose small intestine it makes its own patient way to the site of its temporary integration.

I had kissed Emily more than once, but I had never experienced anything remotely like the kiss of the alien Mother. Modesty forbids me to give a more detailed description, but it is only appropriate for me to report that the experience changed my life, and showed me what the true value of emotion is, to an intellect capable of its wise control.

I was taken away from the Mother's quarters by the same guide that had brought me. She led me up through the bowels of the hill, back to the surface of the Earth and the interior of the near-perpetual cloud that sat atop Arnlea Moor, which was now dark grey in the gathering twilight. Indeed, she led me further than that, taking me down the slope until we were completely clear of the mist, and accompanying me almost to the bounds of Haughtonlin.

"You had best make your own way from here," she said. "It will soon be dark, but I think you can find your way back to Stonecroft without difficulty. The moon is three-quarters full and untroubled by clouds at present."

"I can find my way, now that I've a path to guide me," I assured her. "Shall I see you again?"

"Of course you will," she said. "You must visit me at Raggandale very soon, so that we might become good friends."

I was greatly relieved, at the time, to hear that we were to become good friends, although I realized, on reflection, that it was a very necessary thing, to protect both of us from loneliness.

"In time," Mary continued, "we shall probably marry. I hope that we shall take the Grand Tour together. We might even range much further, in time, although it might be prudent to wait until more nests have been established in Africa and the Far East."

"I always yearned to be an explorer," I told her. "Now, it seems, I shall be able to take my explorations further than I ever dreamed." The use of that word must have stirred up some primitive fear, because I said: "I have already become an explorer in truth, have I not? What has happened to me is no mere dream, I hope?"

"It was no dream," she said. "There will be no more idle dreaming for you; from now on, your dreams will be ordered and constructive."

I wondered briefly whether I might miss idle dreaming, but decided that I would

not. "Shall we be able to play the role of seducer together in future?" I asked. "Will we be charged with the duty of bringing more recruits into nests, wherever the nests might be?"

"Perhaps, on occasion," she said. "But your first duty now is to your other self—the child whose primary education is your current mission in life. You will love and cherish your child, Edward, and you will teach him all that you can. Your second duty is to the ephemerae of your own kind, towards whose permanent liberation from the frailties of primitive flesh we shall both work tirelessly, through centuries to come. The work will be slow, and it will be painstaking, but in the end, it will all be worthwhile. In the fullness of time, the entire evolutionary legacy of Earth's biosphere will be incorporated into our flesh and spirit, ready for exportation to the worlds of other stars. Everyone, then, will have the best of both our worlds."

"It's a wonderful prospect," I agreed. "I'm not sure how I'll resist the temptation to share the good news with other human beings—not everyone, of course, but with those who are capable of understanding."

"They may be fewer in number than you can presently imagine," she told me, with a slight ironic laugh. "You might make a record of what has happened to you, though, so that the secret will have an objective existence of its own. In two or three hundred years time it might become possible to publish it, or at least to show it to our children."

"Do you mean *our* children," I asked, "or merely children that we are privileged to foster?"

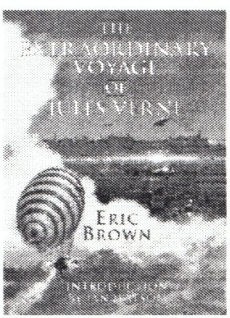
"Perhaps both," she said. "That depends on the magnitude of our achievements as ambassadors, and the success of our relationship."

I looked into her eyes, whose pupils seemed so utterly black as to be windows into the infinity of interstellar space.

"I'll call in at the graveyard on my way home," I told her, "to say goodbye to my past. Tomorrow, or the next day, I'll ride to Raggandale to say hello."

She smiled, and I felt the slightest tingle of emotion, which was followed by a faint echo in my other self, my other soul.

At last, I thought, I have begun to perceive the Divine Plan in all its richness and beauty. Father would be so proud of me, and Mother too. ⊠



Extraordinary Adventure!

Paris, 1855. Jules Verne, struggling playwright and frustrated dreamer, finds himself whisked through time, first into the Cretaceous Period, and then into the far future, on a perilous quest to save the world from the tyranny of Robur, the insane Master of the World.

Available in hardback and paperback, but hurry—only a few paperbacks are left!

"I never write stories about politicians," Eric informed us, "and especially never about the President of the US of A. I don't like conspiracy theories, and so have never written about them. And I don't write much about aliens coming to Earth . . . So I thought I'd put all those things together in one tale and see what happened."

Eric's latest novels are Kethani *and* Necropath, *the first part of the Bengal Station trilogy, both from Solaris. Forthcoming from PS Publishing is a novella about G.K. Chesterton and Edgar Rice Burroughs,* Gilbert and Edgar on Mars. *He lives near Cambridge with his wife and daughter, and his website can be found at: www.ericbrown.co.uk*

State Secret

Eric Brown

On his second day in the White House, the President of the United States of America finished meeting his advisors, discussed policy with a senator from Texas, then braced himself for the encounter with his Chief of Security.

There had been rumours. What he would find out, on ascending to the oval office, would make a fricassee of his grey matter. What had the outgoing President said at their last meeting? "Jeez, pal, are you in for an awakening!"

The man to do the awakening was striding through the double doors now, a chunky CIA clone in a black suit. His crew-cut looked as if it had been painted on the dome of his bullet head.

"Mr President, sir."

"Let's get this over with, hey, and then we can all get down to business."

"Fine by me. I'll get straight to the point. There are secrets, sir, and there are secrets. Some secrets are more secret than others."

The President tried not to smile. "Go on."

"Some secrets," said Security, "are for our ears, and eyes, only."

"By 'our', you mean . . . ?"

"I mean, sir, yourself and the usual suspects with security clearance. Plus the physician who made the discovery."

"The physician?" The President echoed. "Discovery . . . ?"

Security said, "We are not alone."

The President made a show of looking around the room. "We aren't?"

Not amused, Security lifted a finger and pointed heavenwards, looking almost angelic. "Extraterrestrials," he said.

The President's first reaction was to laugh. "Little green men?"

"You might say that, sir." Security smiled tightly. "Only they're not green."

We are not alone, the President thought. He'd heard mutterings from a senator out Oklahoma way who'd had it on good authority from high-ups in the Air Force . . .

He realised his heart was thudding.

"And we have proof?"

"Proof positive," said Security. "We have their ship."

"We have . . . ? Their ship? Roswell, right?"

Security shook his Head. "Their . . . arrival was more dramatic than any Roswell, sir."

"It was? Then why the hell didn't we know about it?"

Security remained unsmiling. "We did. Every man, woman and child on the planet."

The President said, "Tunguska, right? The Siberian explosion in—"

Security just smiled, shaking his head.

"Their ship wasn't destroyed, sir. Just badly damaged. In fact . . . " Security turned his finger hellwards. "We have it right here. In a secret vault under the White House."

The President blinked. "Isn't that a crazy place to keep an alien vessel?"

"It makes sense from a security point of view, sir."

The President nodded. "Yeah, I suppose it does."

"If you'd care to take a look?"

"Lead the way."

They left the Oval Office and paced down a red carpeted corridor, turned right and made for the rear of the building. They came to a steel elevator door. Security jabbed a code, the door sighed open, and they stepped inside.

The doors closed and they plummeted.

The President felt tense. He glanced at Security. "You realise what this means, of course? The advantages we could gain . . . "

Security faced forward, unsmiling.

Wouldn't life on Earth be irrevocably altered by this . . . this *proof* that sentient life existed out there? What benefits, scientific, technological, cultural, might accrue from being the first people to contact an alien race?

"We have communication with the extraterrestrials?"

Security cleared his throat, but remained otherwise silent.

Something occurred to the President. "Just when was the ship discovered?"

"Over forty years ago, sir."

Forty years? Then why, thought the President, had the country not benefited?

"And its crew?"

"They died on impact—all but one being. It managed to communicate before it too expired."

A minute later—longer than the President expected—the elevator bobbed to a halt. The doors eased open.

They were in another white-painted, red-carpeted corridor. They paced along the corridor and came to a door like that of a bank vault.

Security turned the swivel wheel and hauled open the door. It came slowly, revealing an aseptic chamber. Side by side they stepped though the door, and Security ushered the President across the ringing tiles to another vault-like door and swung it open.

The President entered, looking around for the alien ship. He saw nothing. The chamber was empty.

"This way, sir." Security led the President over to what looked like a viewscreen set into the wall.

The President stared through it, and saw, seemingly floating in the air, a torpedo-shaped vessel in three crumpled sections. It was hard to discern the craft's true size.

The President shook his head. "I take it we're in contact . . . ?"

He saw that Security was shaking his head, almost sadly. "That isn't possible, sir."

"It isn't? But—"

"The physician who discovered the ship, sir, spoke with the surviving alien. It apologised for what it had done, once the physician explained the situation."

"*Apologised?*"

"The being then contacted the orbiting mothership and suggested that no further contact between our species be attempted, for fear of human reprisal."

The President opened his mouth to speak, but Security went on, "The alien died soon after, before the physician could assure the alien there would be no reprisal, and that contact between the races would be welcomed." He shrugged. "We haven't heard from them since."

"But . . . " the President said. "What did the aliens do to fear our reprisal?"

Security held a hand up before the screen. "Take a closer look, sir."

The President peered, and it was as if an optical illusion had suddenly resolved itself. The screen was not a window into another room, but a container like an aquarium set into the wall.

And, within the container, the extraterrestrial ship was revealed to be the size of a cigar butt, perhaps an inch long.

"Apparently it went out of control when entering Earth orbit and broke up on impact. There was no way the crew could have avoided what happened. It was just . . . bad luck."

The President said, "Just where did it come down?"

Fearing the answer, he leaned against the wall to steady himself and stared at the alien vessel.

It looked for all the world, he realised now, like a bullet.

"Dallas," Security said, "on the 22nd November, 1963."

His head reeling, the President pushed himself from the wall and hurried from the chamber.

David Conway leaves Earth and settles on the backwater planet of Chalcedony, Delta Pavonis IV, in search of a quiet life away from the haunting reminders of his past.

Living aboard a derelict spaceship in the quiet coastal community of Magenta Bay, he meets artist Matt Sommers, beachcomber Maddie Chamberlain and ex-starship pilot Hawksworth, and things seem about as perfect as he could hope . . . until he discovers that his ship is haunted by an alien spectre.

What follows will change Conway and his friends—and the future of humankind's destiny in space—forever.

Slipcased Hardcover £50.00 [$100.00] • Jacketed Hardcover £25.00 [$50.00] • Hardcover £10.00 [$20.00]

'Test Subject' is the fourth of James Lovegrove's Chilton Mead tales, set in a (he hopes) fictitious government research facility somewhere in the Wiltshire countryside . . . "but nowhere near Porton Down, oh no," he's quick to point out. At Chilton Mead, language is being turned into a weapon every day, by scientists whose scruples come a poor second to love of country and an even poorer third to love of gainful employment.

"Over nearly two decades in the writing business I've published more than 20 books," James says, "and many of them chart my love affair with wordgames and the use of symbolic language, especially Days, Provender Gleed *and my dual novella* Gig. *The Chilton Mead stories continue the trend. 'Test Subject' is a dialogue, a verbal joust, a word duel if you like, between a morally compromised scientist and a serial killer with a persuasive tongue and a florid turn of phrase. It's about hubris as well, but then what good mad-scientist tale isn't?"*

Test Subject

James Lovegrove

> Mr Krzykwa, my name is Dr Anna Yao. You understand why I am communicating with you through a two-way closed-loop computer link and why this is the only way I shall communicate with you. You now reside in a cell 100 metres underground at the Chilton Mead military research facility in Wiltshire. The cell is perfectly soundproofed. You may scream at the top of your voice and no one will hear. This is your home for the foreseeable future. You cannot expect to be released in a long time, if ever. You will be fed and watered via that dumb waiter in the wall, and occasionally you will be removed from the cell, under anaesthetic, for examination. There can be no negotiation and no bartering when it comes to the conditions of your confinement. You waived your so-called human rights the moment you began your vicious murder spree. Please indicate that you have received my message.

> **Dear Dr Yao, message received and understood. You have me bang to rights. It's a fair cop, guv. I'll come quietly. Etc.**

> I'm delighted that you seem to be adapting to your circumstances so well. It will make things easier for everyone if you maintain a positive attitude towards your situation.

> **Easier for *you*, you mean, Dr Yao. So that you won't have to think about me languishing here in a white cube that's, what, eight feet per side? Eight and a half at best. You won't have to think about me sitting here on this steel cot with nothing to do but count the wall tiles and listen to the striplights buzz and the air vents hum. As long as you believe I'm buoyant, it won't prey on your conscience every waking minute of the day that you are holding a man captive in conditions that would shame a battery farm.**

> From what I know of your exploits, Mr

Krzykwa, it's no more than you deserve. And don't try any of your mindgames on me. They won't work.

> **Because you're mindless? Ha ha.**

> Ha ha. No, because the method by which we're communicating renders your (for want of a better word) powers useless.

> **My powers? And what would those be, pray?**

> That's why you're here, so that we can determine an answer to that question. My preliminary hypothesis is that you utilise some sort of advanced neurolinguistic programming, placing emphasis on certain key stress words in order to trigger deep-conscious responses in your subjects. Or should I say *victims*. Put simply, you talk them into committing atrocious, fatal acts of self-harm. Perhaps a form of low-level hypnotic suggestion comes into play, and perhaps there are certain pheromonal factors as well. I intend to pursue these and other avenues of investigation over the coming weeks until I have determined a solution.

> **And then?**

> Then I will attempt to devise a means of replicating your abilities in others.

> **You believe that these powers you ascribe to me have a military application?**

> My superiors do, and my job is to prove or disprove their belief.

> **Hmm. Interesting.**

> At any rate, I've informed you of the whys and wherefores of your incarceration. I have work to do now. I shall be in contact again soon. Goodbye.

> **Toodle-oo, Dr Yao.**

> Mr Krzykwa, Dr Yao here again.

> **Ah, Dr Yao. I hardly expected it to be anyone else, of course. May I congratulate you on the quality of the food here at Chilton Mead? It is quite the most repulsive swill I have ever had to force myself to eat. And that's saying something, given the ghastly repasts I've endured during certain difficult periods in my long, long life.**

> I'd hardly call 41 years of age a long, long life, Mr Krzykwa.

> **I suppose not. Perhaps it just seems long. Perhaps I've packed a great deal into that relatively brief span of time.**

> I'd hardly call 41 brief either. Anyway, we're straying off the point. The reason I'm "speaking" to you is to tell you that we will shortly be rendering you insensible by flooding your cell with halothane. I felt it only fair to warn you in advance. The gas will fill the cell entirely for ten minutes, so holding your breath is futile. You will be out for at least five hours, and when you wake up afterwards you can expect to feel groggy and nauseated for an hour or so. A receptacle will be provided should you be unable to hold down your stomach contents.

> **So that'll be why I haven't been given a meal in ages. I thought it was too good to be true. Never mind. May I say how courteous you're being, doctor. And how very clinical too. Politeness and professionalism are a useful means of maintaining an objective distance, aren't they? Talk down to me, and that way you can avoid seeing me as a fellow human being.**

> I don't see you as anything, Mr Krzykwa,

except an enigma to be unravelled, a problem to be solved.

> Hello again, Mr Krzykwa. How are you feeling?

> **Prtety awful. Dull headd. Stomache. Nott yping too well. Sorry.**

> Till later, then.

> **Toodle-ooo, Dr Yoa.**

> Mr Krzykwa?

> **Better now. Recovered. So tell me, how did it go? Did you find anything juicy?**

> Not as such. But it's early days yet. We ran several MRI scans and X-rayed you, EKGs, cardiac monitoring, ultrasound tomography . . .

> **The works. I'll glow in the dark for days to come.**

> Also we took some blood samples and a small piece of tissue for biopsy. Basically we're looking for physiological anomalies, anything that might explain how you do what you do.

> **You could always just ask me.**

> ?

> **Never thought of that, did you? Never occurred to you to ask the lab rat itself to give up what you want to know.**

> I assumed you'd be unwilling. After all, you didn't co-operate when our hunter-gatherer unit arrested you.

> **Arrest? Is that what you call being held at gunpoint by a group of black-clad men and given a 100,000-volt taser jolt? Of course I didn't co-operate with *them*. They had me surrounded and they'd taken the precaution of wearing ear-plugs. Of course I tried to fight my way out of their clutches. What else was I supposed to do? Surrender meekly? Not on your nelly. I'm many things but I'm not the type to give up my personal liberty without a struggle.**

> It was quite some struggle too, judging by the head-cam footage. You crippled one of the hunter-gatherers with a punch to the spine and broke another's nose and cheekbone through his helmet face-plate. It was touch and go whether they were going to be able to subdue you, and these are trained soldiers, most of them ex-special forces.

> **When it comes to unarmed combat I am, as the demotic has it, a little "tasty". Always have been.**

> No wonder they tasered the hell out of you. I'd have done the same. Frankly I'm surprised one of them didn't choose to take you down with a shot-to-wound.

> **But they had their orders, didn't they? Catch this unassuming-looking middle-aged man alive and unharmed. Which worked out well for you, Dr Yao. Had I had a bullet in me, you wouldn't have been able to get your hands on me quite so soon. I imagine it would have made you very impatient, having to wait while I inconveniently spent time recuperating from a bullet injury.**

> Are you going to tell me, then? What I need to know? You asked me to ask.

> **I did, and that would make things very straightforward for you, wouldn't it? To have your solution handed to you on a plate. Not quite as much fun, though. For either of us. Tell me, what do you know about me exactly? Why is it that I have come so flatteringly to the attention of the butchers and bomb-builders and bacillus-breeders of Chilton Mead?**

> You kill people. No, you make people kill themselves. You've left a swathe of corpses in your wake. We have you connected to at least seven deaths over the past nine years, maybe more. Four women, three men, distributed across the British Isles, from Liverpool to London. Each of your victims knew one of the others. It's like a chain of grotesque suicides stretching across the country, culminating in a final link, you.

> **I am the common factor in each case?**

> Yes. No. You're the one alive at the end of it. By a process of logic that means you're the one responsible.

> **Yes, I can see how that might be so. Logically speaking. I, after all, am a close friend of the last woman to be found dead, Mary Etchison, isn't that right? Mary, who eviscerated herself in her kitchen with a rather fine Sabatier paring knife. And she, in turn, was a work associate of Desmond Waller, who drove a Mont Blanc fountain pen through his left eye into his brain. They were both employees of Rushent and Hardman Solicitors of Chancery Lane, Mary a paralegal temp, Desmond a senior partner in the firm. I knew Mary therefore I knew Desmond. Makes sense. But not *complete* sense. It's a syllogistic fallacy.**

> A what?

> **Syllogistic fallacy. Oh, surely you know what that is, doctor. Look it up. Toodle-oo.**

> Syllogistic fallacy. A logical argument in three parts: two premises and a conclusion which follows wrongly from them.

> **Indeed. It's the presumption that if A equals B and B equals C then A must automatically equal C. You have me tied to Mary Etchison, and I am. I was her boyfriend, paramour, lover, inamorata, take your pick. She and I shared a passionately sexual if emotionally remote relationship. A prim lady on the outside but fiery within, believe you me. And it's likely that I would have met Desmond Waller, her boss. It doesn't stretch the bounds of credibility. But how likely is it that I would have met my previous so-called victim, who was, if memory serves, Desmond's regular squash partner at a rather exclusive Thames Ditton leisure club? That man who—what was his name? Tim Masters. Tim, who sat in his Jag one afternoon and slowly and methodically burned every inch of his body with the dashboard cigarette lighter until he died of shock. What are the chances that I knew him? Far slimmer than the chances of my knowing Desmond. And so on and so forth along this "chain of grotesque suicides" of yours, the connection between me and each person growing ever remoter, ever more implausible.**

> But you must have known them all. The police were working on that theory, anyway, and they felt they had enough prima facie evidence to move in on you, according to our mole at the Met. If we hadn't got you first, you'd be in the clutches of the boys in blue by now.

> **I should be thankful for small mercies.**

> But you're saying they had it wrong?

> **I'm a bit tired, Dr Yao. Still feeling the after-effects of the halothane. So nice chatting with you. Toodle-oo.**

> Mr Krzykwa? Mr Krzykwa? Mr Krzykwa?

> Hello, Mr Krzykwa.

> **That was a long sulk, Dr Yao. A week, I'd say, though it's hard to calculate time down here. I lose track. And I've been through another set of tests, I see. That's if this dressing on my head is anything to go by. Not that it'll gain me any sympathy from you but I am feeling rather sore.**

> We drilled a couple of small holes through your skull. We probed various parts of your brain with electrodes to ascertain which, if any, of the cerebral regions contained abnormalities. We also stimulated speech by the same method, putting tiny amounts of current through your frontal lobes, specifically the Broca's area.

> **Fascinating. And what did you get?**

> Nothing that made any sense. Gibberish mainly. Except—briefly you began talking in a foreign language. We thought it might be Hebrew but then we ran it past one of our linguistics experts and his opinion is that it's Aramaic. Nothing in your history and profile, Mr Krzykwa, suggests that you're familiar with Aramaic.

> **Speaking in tongues. The devil inside me. Lord, Lord, heal me! Cast out this unclean abomination!**

>I'm glad this amuses you, Mr Krzykwa.

> **So am I, Dr Yao. By the way, I've been studying your sentence construction and use of English, and from this I deduce that you're female, perhaps 32, 33, of Chinese ethnicity obviously, well educated, no doubt at a private school paid for by a father with a successful chain of businesses, retail or catering. You attended university, Oxbridge I'd say, earned a top-class degree, pursued a PhD in medicine and another in psychology, and no sooner did the military-industrial axis come a-calling, with an offer of unlimited research funding, than you leapt at the opportunity, grasped it with both hands, because security in life is what's most important to you. Security and the freedom to live intellectually, in the realm of experiment and science, in a world of abstractions. Because real life itself is too messy and complicated for you, too full of theories that don't stand up to testing and equations that don't balance. You aren't at all concerned that any breakthroughs and discoveries you make at Chilton Mead will be used for hostile ends. It doesn't trouble you that your brilliant mind is being plundered ruthlessly in order to create weapons and cause destruction. You don't need to compartmentalise that away because it just doesn't impinge on you. You have no heart. No conscience. You have no real interface with the outside world. And that's why you remain defiantly, frigidly single and why this method of talking with me, via computer, is perfect for you. Not only does it protect you from my alleged mind-controlling powers, it insulates you from the disagreeable business of actually having to look me in the eye and perceive me as a person. Apart from the times when you have my comatose body on an operating table and are sticking sharp implements into me, I'm not real to you; I may as well**

not exist. And that leads me to one conclusion, Dr Yao, and it's an ironic one. You're the person in the subterranean cell, doctor. Not me. You. A cell of your own devising.

> . . .

> **Dr Yao?**

> Fuck you, Krzykwa.

> **Oh doctor, don't be like that.**

> Krzykwa.

> ***More* tests. How long is it this time? How long have I been here? Night, day—my circadian rhythms are completely up the spout. Was that breakfast I just ate or supper? Hard to tell one meal from another. It's all slop. And these *apertures* you gouged in me. What are they all about? They're all over my abdomen. Was it really necessary to do so many?**

> We were looking at your glands with an endoscope.

> **"We"? Why don't you say "I", doctor? Why not be honest?**

> All right then, *I* was looking at your glands.

> **They were all present and correct, I take it.**

> Nothing unusual about any of them. The biochemistry of your secretions is totally normal.

> **I could have told you that. Really, Dr Yao, why don't you take my word for it? This is an absolutely ordinary human body belonging to an absolutely ordinary man named Jeremy Krzykwa. (A surname, incidentally, that would net a magnificent score in Scrabble were it a proper noun.) There's nothing strange or supernatural about it. You can carry out a hundred tests, a thousand if you like. You will not find anything that'll give you the satisfying, reproducible results you crave. It is just what it appears to be, an organic vehicle no different from any other. You'd do well to accept that.**

> Then *what*? What is your big secret, Krzykwa? I can't believe you simply persuaded all those people to kill themselves. I don't believe anybody has a tongue quite so silver as that. It's one of the cardinal rules of hypnotism: you can't make a hypnotised subject do anything that's against their nature or that will cause them harm. The subconscious rebels against obeying any command that is not in the person's basic self-interest. All that stuff in books and films about brainwashing and post-hypnotic suggestion—it's unproven, impossible. Pure fiction. You can't, say, turn a soldier from your own side into a sleeper agent or vice versa. It just doesn't happen.

> **But you'd like it to, doctor, or rather your bosses would, and that's where I come in. Only, I'm proving resistant to all your probing and surgical experimentation. You can't for the life of you figure out a scientific explanation for the wicked deeds I'm supposed to have committed, and that just eats you up inside, doesn't it? That throws your oh-so-orderly worldview into utter disarray, and you can't bear it.**

> Please. I'll beg if I have to. Tell me how you did it. I have to know. How did you get them to kill themselves?

> **Well now, there's a turn-up for the books. Let me think about it. Give**

me a while. When I'm feeling a bit better.

> Krzykwa?

> **Yes, Dr Yao. I'm here. I've not gone anywhere.**

> Are you ready to talk now?

> **If you're ready to listen.**

> You mean speak with you face to face? Not going to happen. I may not know how you do it but I know what you can do, and it's too much of a risk. I'm not going to let you convince me somehow to help you escape. That's what you want, isn't it?

> **What I want is for you to *listen*, as in hear me out with an open mind. That's all. Escape isn't at the forefront of my thoughts—although I'd be lying if I said it wasn't something I desired. I'm starting to get a little bored in here. But what I want, really want, is you to pay close attention to my words, doctor. Everything is there in my words, in these little black letters on your monitor. Words are power. Writers, legislators, dictators, press barons, admen, they've all understood this. Even God understood it: in the beginning was the Word. Words influence. Words sway. Words hold the key to reality. Without words we wouldn't be able to give shape and substance to the world. That which is not named does not exist. And yet...I am a thing without name.**

> Eh?

> **I didn't kill anyone, doctor. Neither did I convince anyone to kill themselves. Your chain of suicides doesn't end with me. I am merely the next link in it. The chain is ongoing. Eternal. And it is far longer than the nine people you know of. It reaches back through the ages, through millennia, eons even. It's a series of relationships, associations, acquaintances, and I move along it stealthily, anonymously, one to the next, and only occasionally does anybody perceive the pattern and join the dots and trap me. And then, when I'm trapped, I don't stay like that for long, because there's always a way out. There's always, even in the best constructed cell, a chink that I can sneak out through. Because I am formless. I am non-concrete. I am an idea which has existed through time since the Big Bang, and you cannot cage or contain an idea.**

> An idea.

> **A living concept. A sentient brainwave. An animate notion. That's me.**

> Delusion. Paranoid fantasy.

> **If you say so. You're the expert. But just think. If I am, as I claim, an idea, then it stands to reason that I can transfer myself from person to person, body to body, through verbal means. That's how an idea spreads and propagates, isn't it? Someone communicates it to someone else. Like a disease, in a way. Just by saying so, I can move myself through the ether, leaving one fleshly shell in order to inhabit another. That's why I'm not too bothered about all the surgical abuse you've heaped on poor old Jeremy Krzykwa. Pain doesn't trouble me overmuch. I'm used to it anyway. I was burned at the stake once, I'll have you know. And Krzykwa's insulted body is just one**

more waystation on my everlasting journey. I'll be departing from him soon. That's when he'll find some way to top himself. I've no idea how he'll do it—probably bash his head against the wall till his brains pour out. When I go, you see, I never leave a person the way I found them. While I'm inside, ruling them, they quietly go mad. They sink deep down into themselves, and there, at some lightless, limbic level, they dwell. They're well aware of me. They know I've taken them over and am in the driving seat. And it's torment for them, and so the moment they're rid of me, they resurface, insane, and take their own lives. Some ideas are just too huge to be borne and some inner depths are just too dark to survive in.

> I've had enough of this. This is bullshit, Krzykwa. Tell me the truth. The *real* truth.

> Fine. Be like that. But you know, in your heart of hearts, that what I'm telling you is gospel. "Word", as the rappers put it. You're not prepared to admit it, but you know. And doubtless you also know that you are my ticket out of Chilton Mead. You, the only person I have any contact with. You must understand that, since I have revealed myself to you, I am now planted in your head, and that when you walk out of the facility later today and travel home, I will be walking out with you. Krzykwa, meanwhile, will be lying on the floor of this cell in a puddle of blood and grey matter.

> No.

> Yes. I've enjoyed these chats of ours. It's been fun while it lasted. I was keen to learn a couple of things, and now I have. First and foremost, I was intrigued to see if I could get inside the mind of someone I haven't physically met. I now know that I can. Second, I wanted to experiment with transferring myself electronically rather than aurally. This is the Information Age, let's not forget, when people do much of their idea-sharing over the internet. I'm glad to be able to say I can bitstream myself, zip from place to place digitally as well as through old-fashioned analogue methods. How modern. How very cyber.

> Mr Krzzzyyzzkwwwa . . .

> Yes, Dr Yao, I'm here now. Nothing to worry about. I'm safely ensconced. It's nice to be in you at last. I feel very welcome. Quite at home. Snug as a bug in a rug. You can say goodbye to Krzykwa now. You won't be seeing him again. Go on, say goodbye, doctor, while there's still a shred of me in him.

> Goodbye.

> You can do better than that, Dr Yao. Or may I call you Anna? Come on, Anna. You know what I'm after.

> Yes. I do. I do. Toodle-oo, Mr Krzykwa.

> That's it, Dr Yao. That's it. Well done. And, for the last time, Kryzkwa says toodle-oo back.

The Left Behind *novels about the Rapture are right-wing Christian bestsellers in the USA. "Alarmed that they were being published in France," the author goes on to explain, "the late Patrice Duvic came up with the idea for a 'good riddance' satire and passed it on to me. We were to collaborate but he was already too ill. I hope his esprit in my words will please the many friends he left behind."*

Terry Bisson lives in California. His Planet of Mystery *and* Billy's Book *will soon be published by PS.*

Let Their People Go: The Left Left Behind

Terry Bisson

"The Holy Land," said Vince. "This is where it all began." He felt a thrill as he looked around at the arid rocky hills that had given birth to so many great religions. Although as a skeptical TV newsman he didn't believe in any of them, he respected them all.

"And where it's all still going on," said the Israeli general, Blitz Kreig, who was Vince's guide and host. "Don't forget we're in a security zone. This is not quite Israel—yet."

A stone bounced off his helmet.

"Understood," said Vince. While his worshipful (and cute) young camera-girl videotaped him, he began the broadcast he had come ten thousand miles to make.

"This is Vince Kirkorian," he said, "reporting for IHS News, and I'm here near the Israeli settlement of Itz-Al-Aurz to interview Dr Kramer Kramer, the Nobel Prize winning biologist who—"

RACKETY-RACKETY-RACK! Vince's intro was suddenly interrupted by a loud grinding noise, followed by high-pitched screams. AAAIYEEE!

Annoyed, Vince signaled *cut*. "What's all the racket?" he asked the general.

"Land reform," General Kreig said proudly, pointing behind him to an armored bulldozer, which was demolishing a two-story house while wailing women in Arab headdresses looked on. "We're making the desert bloom."

Another rock bounced off his helmet.

"By bulldozing houses?" Like most TV newsmen, Vince had a highly developed appreciation of property values. "Where will these people live?"

"They're Palestinians," explained General Kreig, firing a short burst from his Uzi into a crowd of unruly kids. "They can hop on their camels and find another place to pitch their tents. This is the land God promised us. It's in the Bible."

Another rock bounced off his helmet. It didn't seem to bother him.

"Oh, yes, the Promised Land," said Vince, remembering. It didn't seem quite fair, but he knew better than to question other people's sincerely-held religious beliefs. "Can you ask them to hold off on the

land reform till my interview with Dr. Kramer is over?"

"Done," said the general, signaling the dozer driver, who shut down the huge machine. "And here comes the good doctor now!"

Vince couldn't hide his smile as the old man approached, walking down the path from the attractive concrete battlements of the settlement perched on top of a nearby hill.

In his ragged cardigan and baggy pants, he looked exactly like Einstein, even to the kindly twinkle in his eye.

"I always watch your news show," Dr. Kramer said as he shook Vince's hand. "The world needs more honest, enterprising young journalists like yourself. And so cute!"

Vince all but blushed. "Thank you, Dr. Kramer. Now please, tell us about your new discovery."

"My new bio-gen seed grows fish from soil," said the aged humanitarian. A rock barely missed his head, and he ducked politely. "Gefilte fish, lox, whitefish, pickled herring. You name it. No one will ever go hungry again."

"No Jew, anyway," said the general, scattering a clump of children with a short burst of fire.

"That's wonderful news for a hungry world," said Vince. "And how do you intend to market this new discovery?"

"Market?" Dr. Kramer looked confused.

"Aren't you going to patent and license this revolutionary new bio-gen? It's worth millions."

"I am an old man," said Dr. Kramer, laughing. "What do I want with money? All I ask in return for my discovery is that the world allow Israel to live in peace."

Just then, as if in answer, there was a distant roar.

It grew louder and louder.

"Hit the dirt!" cried General Kreig, pulling Vince and Dr. Kramer to the ground with him. Vince looked up and saw swarms of funky-looking fighter-bombers streaking in low across the barren hills.

They were firing rockets and machine guns. Bombs were bursting all around.

"Arab jets!" cried the general as they all crouched behind the bulldozer, in the rubble of the wrecked Palestinian home. "Israel is doomed!"

"Maybe not," said Dr. Kramer. "Look!"

Anti-aircraft fire was blossoming around the planes, knocking them out of the air. They crashed into the hillsides, one after the other.

"Israeli missile defense!" said Vince. "Just in time!"

"I wish!" said General Kreig. "But our missiles are tied up in Gaza, taking out terrorists and bystanders. I don't know where these missiles are coming from."

"I do!" said Dr. Kramer. "Look. It's a miracle."

Vince stumbled to his feet, heedless of his own safety. He shaded his eyes from the sun and looked more closely at the shapes in the sky. He could hardly believe what he saw.

What he had thought were exploding missiles were actually Angels, armed with Uzis, riddling the shabby Arab jets with

holes and then batting them out of the sky with their snow-white wings.

"Get this on video!" he said to the camera-girl. *Angels?* he wondered. *Could this be happening?*

"They're all down!" said General Kreig. "Israel is saved!"

"For now, anyway," breathed the kindly old scientist.

"Did you get all that?" Vince asked the camera-girl. They were standing amid the rubble of smoking planes.

"I think so," she said, her eyes shining.

"Let's get out of here," said the general. "You can finish your interview back at the settlement!"

MOMENTS LATER

Firing a few short bursts to clear the way, the general ran toward his armored Humvee. Dr. Kramer and the camera-girl were right behind him.

Vince was about to follow when he heard a noise behind him. He turned and saw an old man in a dirty robe of goat's wool. He had a mad look in his eyes and carried an ancient Winchester 94 in one hand.

"Charlton Heston?" asked Vince, unbelievingly. He was pretty sure Heston had retired.

"Wrong prophet!" said the old man. His eyes were like two burning bushes. "Talk about tsuris! The Anti-Christ is coming, and a nice Jewish boy he is not!"

Then he fired the rifle into the air and disappeared.

An Old Testament prophet! thought Vince, as he ran toward the armored car. *Could this really be happening?*

"Did you get all that on video?" he asked the camera-girl, when he got to the Humvee.

"I think so," she said, her eyes shining.

"Come on, come on," said General Kreig. A rock bounced off the windshield of the Humvee as they sped toward the settlement. The general didn't seem to mind.

"I wonder why he has such a heavy Brooklyn accent?" Vince mused to himself. "There are mysteries everywhere I turn."

ELEVEN HOURS LATER

Except for take-offs and landings, which still require our hominid skills, modern airplanes fly themselves. Which is a good thing. The EconAir 777, high over the Atlantic, was on autopilot, and so was its pilot, Captain "Cap" Church. He wasn't thinking of the gigantic machine stuffed with dozing passengers that was in his command, or even of the faithful (if slightly dotty) wife, troublesome punked-out daughter and grubby son he had left behind in the USA.

He was thinking only of the lovely young stewardess, Amy, who was sitting on his lap, and of the hominid task at hand (literally): the unhooking of her brassiere.

Just as he managed to skillfully undo the clasp with two fingers, he heard a *ding*.

Amy stiffened. The Captain was already stiff. "That was a call button," she said.

"So what?" the Captain murmured, waiting for her ripe full breasts to fall into his eager hands, like oversized fruit from the Tree of Life. "Let 'em wait."

"First Class," said Amy, rehooking her bra. "It's a special ding."

"Then let 'em eat cake."

"We're out of cake," she said, hurriedly buttoning her blouse.

MOMENTS LATER

Amy softly shut, sealed, locked and secured the cockpit door behind her and tiptoed into the First Class cabin.

It was quiet and dark, just as it should be. She tiptoed toward the lit call light.

The white-haired old lady in seat 4E looked alarmed. "Where's my husband?" she asked. "He was sitting here, in 4F, reading the Bible, when I dozed off, and when I woke up, he was gone!"

"Are you sure?"

"OK, maybe it was *The Wall Street Journal*," the old lady sobbed.

"Perhaps he's in the bathroom," suggested Amy. Old men peed a lot, she knew, from personal experience.

"With all of them? Doing what?"

"All of who?"

"Them!" screeched the old lady, waving her hands in the air. "They're all gone!"

Amy turned and looked around. It was true! First Class was empty, except for the clothes that lay neatly folded on the seats. But how could that be? She had attended to them all, heard their complaints, served them their "champagne" (a fun California varietal) and fluffed their pillows herself.

"Calm down," she said. "Let me check."

Amy tiptoed up and down the aisle. All the seats, except for 4E, were empty. Each had only a little pile of clothing left behind. Even the socks were neatly folded in the shoes.

Strange.

There was no one in the bathroom. Then she heard a tapping noise from the back of First Class.

One man sat alone, in seat 12A by the window, working on a laptop computer. As she approached, Amy saw that it was Vince Kirkorian, the famous TV journalist. She had noticed him boarding. He was even cuter in real life than on his award-winning TV news show.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kirkorian," she said.

"Sorry but I can't give autographs while I'm working," he said politely, without looking up. "I'm in the middle of a big story. I'm on my way back from Israel, where—"

"Who was sitting next to you?" Amy asked. "Did you see what happened to them?"

"Some supermodel," he replied, tapping away furiously without looking up. "She was cute. I was telling her about how I saw, or thought I saw, actual Angels with Uzis knocking Arab jets out of the sky during an unprovoked sneak attack on Israeli settlements, and she dozed off. Is she not there? She must be in the bathroom."

Supermodels had to pee a lot, he knew, from personal experience.

"In the bathroom with 22 other people?" Amy asked. "All naked?"

That got Vince's attention. He looked up, then down at the almost-empty seat beside him.

"That's her underwear!"

"How do you know?" asked Amy.

"Just a guess," said Vince, eyeing the lace-trimmed Victoria's Secret bra and panty set, neatly folded on top of a Chanel gym suit. Like most TV celebrities he had a keen eye for nice things. "Those must be her shoes on the floor. Prada, and not a

knock-off either. Something very strange is going on here."

"You're telling me," said Amy. "I'm going to get the Captain."

"Isn't that him?" asked Vince.

It was. Captain Church was standing in the open cockpit doorway, struggling into his uniform jacket. It was a little tight across the belly.

"Zip up your pants, Cap," said Amy. "We have a crisis here."

SECONDS LATER

"Done," said Captain Church. "Now, what's the problem?"

Amy told him. "First Class is almost empty. All that is left behind, except for Vince here— do you mind if I call you Vince?"

"Not at all," said Vince. She was kind of cute.

"—and the old lady blubbering in 4E, is little piles of clothing, neatly folded, one on each seat."

"Perhaps they are in the bathroom," offered the Captain. "They have their own, you know."

"All of them at once?" said Amy. "I checked. It's empty, except for a neatly folded pile of clothing on the toilet seat." She shuddered, remembering the skid marks. "Somehow they all just suddenly disappeared."

Hmmmm thought Vince. He wondered if it had anything to do with the mysterious Angels he had seen downing Arab jets, or the crusty old Prophet who had sputtered some nonsense about the Anti-something or other.

"Jesus Christ!" said the captain. "Pardon my French but we're looking at a paperwork nightmare. I wonder if it could be the Rupture."

"The what?" asked Vince.

"The Rupture. It's some Bible thing my wife back home is always mumbling about. Everybody goes to Heaven all at once or something."

"First I've heard about a wife," muttered Amy.

"Rupture. That doesn't sound right to me," mused Vince. "There must be some logical explanation for all this."

SUDDENLY

Suddenly they heard shouts and cries from the back of the plane—the narrow, dimly-lighted tube where the Economy passengers sat squeezed together like pig parts in a long sausage.

Ayiesha Washington, the cute Economy attendant stuck her head through the curtain that separated the classes.

"I need help back here!" she said. "Hey, where did everybody go?"

Amy told her.

"That explains it," said Ayeesha (she spelled it differently every time herself). "Somebody must have peeked through the curtain and saw the empty seats in First. Now they're all demanding upgrades."

"Has anyone disappeared back there?" asked Amy.

"I wish!" said Ayessha. "Only the two Air Marshals. I went to wake them up, and their seats were empty. Nothing but two jump suits, neatly folded, and a couple of Glocks."

"Jump suits?" asked Vince.

"Orange," said Aiyesha. "They were

traveling disguised as convicts. They were handcuffed together."

They heard shouts from the back of the plane, then a deep, calm voice said, "Let's roll."

"Uh oh," said Amy.

"I'll handle this," said the Captain, grabbing an intercom from the bulkhead. "This is your Captain speaking!" he said. "Return to your seats immediately."

"No way!" came a shout. "We have miles. We have weapons. We want upgrades."

"I shoulda grabbed those Glocks," mused Iyesha.

"I can help."

"Who?" They all looked at Vince. "You?"

"I'm a TV newsman," he reminded them, straightening his tie. "I'm all about reassuring people."

SEVERAL HOURS LATER

"This is kind of fun," thought Captain Church as he brought the big 777 down for a landing. He usually let his co-pilot handle the landings, but it was good to get a little practice.

Besides, the co-pilot has disappeared with all the others, leaving only his neatly-folded uniform behind.

The disappointed Economy passengers filed off while Church filled out his log, dreading the paperwork ahead. Twenty four missing, all from First Class. Plus the co-pilot and the Air Marshalls.

Luckily, no one noticed. Church was relieved to find that the Flight Manager who checked off the passenger manifests was gone.

Vince followed him off the airplane, looking around in amazement. The Air Security ex-cons who poked through everyone's baggage were also gone. The long lines moved quickly.

The airport was strangely quiet. Peaceful.

"All the uniformed personnel have disappeared!" said Vince. He studied the Arrivals and Departures monitor:

DELAYED
CRASHED
DELAYED
SPUN OUT
DITCHED
DELAYED

Then he looked at Captain Church in his blue and white EconAir uniform, with the gold stripes on the sleeve. "Wonder why you were spared, Captain?"

"I was temporarily out of uniform. And you can call me Cap."

"Cool, Cap," said Vince, who was on a first-name basis with celebrities around the world. "Can I get a ride with you to my hotel? It looks like the shuttle buses are all missing their drivers."

"No problem," said the Captain, waving farewell to Amy and Ayiesha, who were meeting their dates in the gift shop. Amy didn't wave back. "I owe you one for cooling out all those Economy Class complainers."

MINUTES LATER

The airport exits were chaos, and the highway was worse—littered with burning and overturned cars, mostly caddies and

SUVs. Luckily Cap's Hummer H-1 was big enough to crunch through the debris.

"Some awesome tragedy has occurred," thought Vince, whose newsman "antennae" were on "full alert," taking in the scenes of destruction all around.

The hotel driveway was blocked by a burning bus, filled with screaming seniors, who were attempting to crawl out the narrow windows, without much success.

"No problem," said Cap, executing a U-turn. "You can stay at my house."

"Are you sure your wife won't mind?" asked Vince.

"Positive," said Cap. "She's a Born-Again. Do unto others and all that. My grubby son will hardly notice. And my daughter will be thrilled. You're a TV personality, and you're kind of cute."

"If you're sure it's no trouble," said Vince.

HOURS LATER

It was almost dark when they arrived at Cap's modest two-story colonial in a leafy, woody suburb.

They were met at the door by his punked-out daughter, Gotha.

"They're gone, Dad," she said.

"Who?"

"Mom and Billy."

Rushing into the house, Vince and Cap saw two neat piles of clothing on the sofa, one large and one very small.

"My wife was grossly overweight," said Cap. "And my son was small for eight. This is their stuff all right. And this is my daughter, Gotha, sixteen."

"Eighteen," said Gotha. She was covered with tattoos and piercings in odd places. She wore black lipstick, which looked funny with her rosy cheeks.

She's kinda cute, thought Vince.

"We were watching the Jerry Springer Show," said Gotha. "I was sitting on the couch between Mom and Billy when Jerry started to float upwards. I thought it was the horizontal hold, so I grabbed the remote from Billy, and I noticed that he was gone. Mom too."

"Hmmm," said Vince. "Your remote has a horizontal hold?"

"Turns out it doesn't," said Gotha. "Once Jerry was gone, all the guests stopped fighting. They didn't exactly make up, but they sat down and shut up. I had the feeling that even though the show was in trouble, the world was a better place, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do," said Vince. He liked this girl. She had a way of looking on the bright side.

"Did they like actually rise up through the ceiling?" Cap asked, looking up. "I'm asking because I don't see any damage."

"Didn't notice," said Gotha. "I checked Oprah. She was gone. So was Ellen."

"Hmmmm," said Vince. "First Class disappears. Then all the uniformed personnel. And then all the afternoon TV talk show hosts. There's some kind of pattern here."

"I'm telling you," said Cap, "it's the Rupture. My wife and her colored preacher boyfriend are always talking about it."

"It's Rapture, Dad," said Gotha. "And he's not her boyfriend, and he's not colored, he's African-American."

"Don't contradict your father," said Cap. He slapped her.

Hmmmm, thought Vince. *Maybe that's why her cheeks are so rosy.*

TEN HOURS LATER

"I like the black lipstick," said Vince. "And I like your rosy cheeks, too. But they don't exactly go together. They make you look like a clown. Not that there's anything wrong with that," he added.

"I know," sighed Gotha. "It's my dad. He's always slapping me. That's why I got all these tattoos."

"I like them too," said Vince. They were in interesting places. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Gotha was pulling on her panties. They had a skull and crossbones on the front panel, which was transparent otherwise.

"It's morning," she explained. "If Dad finds me in bed with you, he'll slap me."

"Maybe you should slug him," said Vince. Even though, or perhaps because, he had never been married, he was a believer in women's liberation.

"Hmmmmm," said Gotha.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

After waiting a decent interval, Vince went downstairs, where he found Gotha and her father in the kitchen, drinking coffee and listening to the radio.

"Imus is gone," said Cap, speaking though a paper towel. He had a bloody nose. "So is Rush. I'm beginning to worry about Dr. Laura."

"Good riddance to them all," said Gotha.

He slapped her. She slugged him.

"Is there any news on?" asked Vince. He was interested in the news, but also eager to change the subject.

Gotha spun the dial:

". . . the sudden disappearance of millions of world leaders last night and night before last as the world turned. The 24-hour event is expected to lead to crises and shortages as uniformed security personnel, corporate CEOs and many leading celebrities have also mysteriously . . .

"I'm telling you, it's the Rupture," said Cap.

"Rap-Sure!" said Gotha. "Jesus Christ!"

He slapped her. She slugged him.

"Can I use your phone?" asked Vince. "I should call the network and tell them I'm OK."

MINUTES LATER

"Find out anything?" asked Cap. He was sitting at the kitchen table nursing a black eye with a steak.

"No luck," said Vince. "The network has shut down. The suits are all gone."

"The suits?" asked Gotha. Her cheeks were a little less rosy than before.

"The execs," said Vince. "Actually, their suits are still there, but there's no one in them. Apparently I'm out of a job."

"Good for you," said Gotha. "You're way too cute to work for those corporate greedheads who control and distort the news in order to keep the people enslaved and fed on lies."

"I never thought of it like that before," said Vince.

"No TV news!" said Cap. "How are we going to figure out what is going on?"

"Alternative radio!" said Gotha. "Pacifica is still on!" She spun the dial again:

> . . . without the heads of state. The new Secretary General of the United Nations, Vlad, has declared a new World Government. And now for ten hours of uninterrupted harmonica music played by chimpanzees . . .

"World Government," said Gotha. "That's got to be a good thing!"

"Sounds commie to me," said Cap. "And what kind of name is Vlad?"

"I can find out," said Vince. "I have a secret contact in the UN. If somebody can give me a ride."

"My Hummer is on empty," said Cap, "and all the gas stations are closed. It was on the radio."

"I can help," said Gotha, putting on black goggles.

They looked cool.

ONE HOUR LATER

"This is the place," said Vince.

They were on Gotha's big black BMW boxer, pulling up to the UN parking garage.

"Wait here," Vince said. "I must do this alone."

Gotha nodded and shut off the motorcycle.

Notebook in hand, Vince made his way up to Level Four, Area B, where he had arranged to meet with Leak Throat, his secret UN informant.

He heard footsteps.

"New shoes?" he asked, without turning around. "Nikes."

"You're good," said Leak. "Perhaps too good for your own good."

"Never mind that," said Vince, cutting right to the chase. "What's the scoop on this new World Government? What kind of name is Vlad?"

"Rumanian," said Leak.

"Yikes."

"There's worse," said Leak, in a hoarse whisper. "It's all tied in with the attacks on Israel and the recent disappearance of millions. It's the End Times, the Last Days. This Vlad character is actually the Anti-"

Suddenly Leak's head exploded in a shower of blood, brain and bone. The sound of the shot came a split second later.

"Christ!" said Vince, as he made his way back down to the waiting motorcycle. "I wonder what he was trying to tell me."

ONE HOUR LATER

"There's definitely something strange going on," Vince said. He was back in the kitchen with Cap and Gotha. "I think it's tied in with the angels I saw defending the Israeli settlements. And the mysterious disappearances. And maybe even the Old Testament prophet who uttered stuff in the desert."

"This harmonica music is driving me nuts," said Cap. "Whoever told these chimps they could play?"

"I think it's time we talked with The Preacherman," said Gotha.

"The preacherman?"

"Mom's African-American minister," said Gotha.

"Colored boyfriend," said Cap.

She slugged him.

TWENTY-TWO MINUTES LATER

Three on a motorcycle? Don't ask. They managed.

"I think you should stop slugging your father," said Vince, as they pulled up in front of the Kristal Kathedral and jumped off, one by one.

"I think so too," said Cap.

"I'll think about it," said Gotha. "But understand, I'm still way behind."

The Kristal Kathedral was a huge megachurch, as big as the Superdome. The seats inside were empty. There was a pile of neatly folded clothing on each one.

At the altar, a handsome, vigorous middle-aged Black man was kneeling. Vince thought he was praying at first. But as they approached, they saw that he was weeping.

"I got left behind," he blubbered.

"No shit," said Gotha, looking around at all the empty seats. "And where's Mom?"

"Raptured," said The Preacherman. "Along with everybody else in my congregation but me."

He wiped his eyes and looked around. "What's your Dad doing?"

Cap was up in the seats, going through the pants pockets. "Just looking for change," he called down.

"You're wasting your time," said The Preacherman. "I already cleaned them out."

"Before or after?" asked Gotha.

"It's an ongoing process," said The Preacherman. "Let's go downstairs to my office, where we can talk."

SHORTLY THEREAFTER

"Maybe it was the bunker that saved you," suggested Gotha.

They were seated in The Preacherman's modest half-acre office, in a bunker under the stadium.

"Negative," he said. "The Vice-President was in his bunker, cleaning his bird gun, and he's gone. I read it on the blogs."

"What about the President?" asked Vince.

"Gone too," said The Preacherman. "He was out in the open, cutting brush. All they found was a chainsaw and jeans. And a nice leather jacket. A replica of a WWII A1 flight jacket."

"He was a flyer," said Cap.

"He's sure as Hell flying now," said The Preacherman. "Now, what can I do for you folks? Are you interested in joining my congregation? We have plenty of seats."

A tear appeared in his eye, but was quickly wiped away.

"Negative," said Gotha. "This is Vince Kirkorian, the TV newsman. He wants to know what's going on."

"Former TV Newsman," Vince corrected. "But I still have the newsman's hunger to get at the facts behind all these strange occurrences."

"Occurrence," said The Preacherman. "Singular. It's all one event."

"Which is?" Vince prodded.

"The Rapture," said The Preacherman. "We all knew it was coming. Jesus Himself grabbed all these folks by the scruffs of their necks, like kittens, and hoisted them straight up to Heaven. In spite of the fact that they were mostly overweight."

"But why?" Vince asked.

The Preacherman shrugged. "Cause He could? Beats me. He's supposed to be coming back for us all anyway, and soon. Why

those folks got to jump the line, I don't know."

"Could this have anything to do with the attacks on Israel and the new World Government?"

"Of course," said The Preacherman. "It's the End Times, the Last Days. That Rumanian dude running the UN is the Anti-Christ. World government. Israel attacked. Armageddon." He thumped the Bible on his desk. "It's all here in the Good Book."

"Told you!" said Cap.

"The clock is running," said The Preacherman. "Now there will be seven years of Tribulation, starting yesterday at two twenty Eastern Daylight Time."

"During Jerry Springer," said Gotha.

"The Tribulation's gonna make Jerry look like Oprah," said The Preacherman.

"What's Tribulation?" asked Cap.

"Trouble," said The Preacherman. "Hard times. Flood and famine, plague and panic, hurricanes, forest fires, wars and rumors of war."

"Yikes," said Cap. "What can we do?"

"Ride it out," said The Preacherman. "It's all good, actually. After seven years Jesus returns and it's hallelujah time. The Anti-Christ fouls out. Jesus hits all His free throws. All us foursquare born-agains get a championship ring."

"What about the rest of us?" Gotha asked.

The Preacherman rolled his eyes, turned up his palms and shrugged.

"I have to say, I find all this somewhat hard to swallow," said Vince. "I don't mean to question anybody's sincerely-held religious beliefs, but surely you don't actually believe all this crazy shit?"

"Here," said The Preacherman. He handed Vince the Bible. "Open it anywhere."

"And then what?"

"Just do it. Open it and read."

Vince opened it and read.

Bingo.

"Jesus Christ!" he said. "It's all true. I've been such a fool!"

"Told you!" said The Preacherman, taking his Bible back. "Anybody else want to check it out?"

"Not me," said Gotha.

"I'll take Vince's world for it," said Cap. "He's a TV newsman. Or was."

"Still am," said Vince, shaken. "Only now I know the Truth."

ONE WEEK LATER

"How come everybody calls you the preacherman?" asked Vince. "What's your real name?"

They were sitting around in the kitchen of Cap's colonial home. The empty Kristal Kathedral was lonely, so The Preacherman had joined them.

"That *is* my real name," he said.

"Huh?"

"You know how Black folks like funny names? My Mom was down with that. She wanted me to go into the ministry so she named me The Preacherman."

"Oh," said Vince. He had started out as a sports reporter and he remembered a basketball player named God Shamgodd.

"But you can just call me The."

"Cool, The," said Vince, who was on a first-name basis with celebrities around the world.

"I just checked all the blogs," said Gotha. She was sitting at the computer. "Looks like

this Rapture business is for real. The politicians, the corporate big-wigs, the greedheads—they're all gone for good."

"You mean for bad!" said Cap. "No big oil CEOs means no gasoline. My SUV is just a hunk of tin!"

"That means no more global warming," said Gotha. "Look on the bright side."

"No government means no more wars," said Vince, looking on the bright side. It was new to him but he was beginning to enjoy it.

"No more big wars, anyway," said The.

"Agribiz is shutting down," said Gotha, scrolling through another blog. "No more farm subsidies."

"That means no Fritos," said The.

"And what about money?" said Cap. "Once the ATMs are empty, we're out of luck with no bankers to refill them."

"Who needs money!" said Gotha.

"You always liked mine," said her father. "You spent it all on tattoos and black lipstick."

Gotha started to slug him but didn't. "I'm giving it up," she said, lowering her fist.

"Good. That's the Christian way," said The.

"The Christian Way was turning the other cheek," Vince pointed out. "That's why her cheeks were so rosy. She looked like a clown."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Cap.

"My knuckles are sore anyway," said Gotha.

"I kinda miss Fritos," said The.

ONE WEEK LATER

"I'm bored," said Cap. "The airlines are all shut down. I'm a pilot without a plane."

"What about me?" said Vince. "I'm a TV newsman without a network."

"I'm a preacher, but I have no congregation," said The.

"Quit your whining," said Gotha. "It's only for seven years. Then the world comes to an end."

"She's right!" said The, thumping his Bible. "When Jesus comes back, He'll take us all to Heaven. Some of us anyway."

"Don't pack your best suit," Cap said. "You're going to Hell for fooling with my wife."

"That's a lie," said The. "We never went below the waist, on her, anyway."

"Seven years is a long time," Vince said, eager to change the subject. "What do we do in the meantime?"

"Let's start a rock band!" said Gotha.

"A rock band has to have a cool name," Vince pointed out.

ONE WEEK LATER

"I've got it!" said Gotha. "We can call ourselves the Tribs."

"Good idea," said Cap. "If I can learn to unhook a bra with two fingers, I can learn to play a strat."

"I was a news anchor," said Vince. "I can play bass."

"I'll be the drummer," said The. "There's a drum machine in the back of Snoop Dogg's overturned Escalade out on the freeway."

"If we have a drum machine we won't need a drummer," Vince pointed out.

"Somebody has to turn it on and off,"

said The. "And every rock band needs a niggah."

"African-American," said Gotha.

"Whatever," said The.

6.9 YEARS LATER

"Another Grammy!" said Cap. "My fingertips are sore."

"I'm getting sick of these lame award ceremonies," said The. "No red carpet, no parties . . . "

"No record company suits," Vince pointed out. "And no TV. No Joan Rivers."

They were in Hollywood, lounging around an empty pool filled with trash.

"Quit your whining," said Gotha. She was not only the lead vocalist of the Tribs, she was also the manager. "We needed that award. I'm going after the biggest gig of the year."

"Opening for the Stones?" asked Cap. "I hear they're doing another Farewell Tour."

"Bigger than that," said Gotha, firing up the band's big black BMW boxer. "Get on, or in. Let's go!"

DOWN THE ROAD

"I don't see why we have to drive all the way across the country," said Cap. "Can't we just book the gig by phone?"

"There are no phones," Gotha reminded him. "And we need to meet personally with the World Leader. He's planning a big to-do at Burning Man. With any luck, the Tribs will be the opening band for his first Personal Appearance."

"First and last," said The. "He's the Anti-Christ! His time is almost over. Plus he's evil."

"Look on the bright side," said Gotha. "He's made the world a better place, what with World Citizenship and all. He can't be all bad."

"I'm inclined to agree," said Vince. He often found himself agreeing with Gotha. They were an item. He rode on the back of the BMW, behind her. Her father and The Preacherman were stuffed into the sidecar, taking turns sitting on each other's lap.

"What about all this trash?" asked Cap.

"And all these buffalo?" asked The.

The road was cluttered with debris, and the traffic was often blocked by herds of buffalo. But there wasn't all that much traffic anyway.

"Buffalo are cool," said Gotha, swerving to avoid a herd which was fleeing Indians on horseback, who were intent on eating their livers since the casinos all were closed.

"She has a point," said Vince. "Even with the Tribulation, life is better for the buffalo, and for the Indians as well."

"I have to admit," said Cap, who was raised on a farm, "that the countryside is prettier without all that agribiz."

"I miss Fritos," said The. "But it is true that things are better for Black folks, since the prisons have all shut down. No cops, no guards, no War on Drugs."

"And all the thug rappers Raptured," added Gotha, lighting a joint without slowing down and passing it to Vince.

FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD

"Ow!" said Cap.

He had just been beaned by a hailstone. They were as big as baseballs.

"I told you to wear a helmet," said Gotha. They were speeding across Indiana. It looked exactly the same as before the Rapture, except for the size of the hailstones.

"The Tribulation means terrible weather," said The, covering his head with his Bible. "Storms and floods and plagues and fires. You can't say we weren't warned."

"You mean WE can't say YOU weren't warned," Vince pointed out. "We never believed in any of it, remember?"

"Look on the bright side," said Gotha. "What about those tornados that took out all the Wal-Marts? That was cool!"

"I could have done without the locust plague that ate up Las Vegas," said Cap. "I had two unused buffet comps for the Flamingo."

"I could have done without the tsunami that washed across Florida," said The. "They had a discount for clergy at the Magic Kingdom."

"And we both have to pee," said Cap.

"Quit complaining and cross your legs," said Gotha. "We'll be in New York in sixteen hours."

SIXTEEN HOURS LATER

The UN building was surrounded by barbed wire and security guards with AK-47s. They all had the same badge number: 666.

"No pasaran," they said when the Tribs approached the main gate.

"That's Spanish," said The. "It means 'Forget it. Turn around and go home. Beware the Anti-Christ!'"

"Are you sure?" asked Gotha. "We've come all this way."

"Positive," said The. "I had a multi-cultural congregation in the Kristal Kathedral days. I speak three languages."

"I'm impressed," said Vince. "English, Spanish and what?"

"Ebonics. Not much call for it these days, with all the thug rappers gone. Sorta like Yiddish."

"No pasaran!" repeated the security guards.

"We've come all this way," said Gotha, gritting her teeth. "I say we bum-rush the joint."

SUDDENLY

"Let them through," said a sweet voice.

Cap was amazed. It was Amy, his former First Class Flight Attendant.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, as she ushered them inside the UN, to the World Leader's Private Chambers.

"I'm his girl friend," said Amy.

Cap felt a stab of jealousy. "You let him unhook your bra?" he whispered, hoping his daughter couldn't hear.

"I heard that," said Gotha.

"He doesn't have to," said Amy. "I don't have to wear one anymore."

MOMENTS LATER

They entered a huge room decorated all in black and red. There was no furniture, just a TV and a Mr. Coffee. And a big cardboard box with 666 on it.

"Bow to the box," said Amy.

They all bowed to the box: even The (who kept his fingers crossed); even Vince,

who believed in equality as a principle. "But when in Rome—" he muttered, as he bent a knee.

"Forget Rome," said a Voice from inside the box. "Those dolled-up dudes are all dearly departed."

"Good riddance," said Gotha. "It's a better world now, even though it's not perfect."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," said The Voice from inside the box. "Come closer."

They all inched closer. There were two little holes in one of the 6s, and Vince could see eyes inside. "This is like the Wizard of Oz," he said.

"The Wizard of Oz was a phony," said the Voice from Inside the Box. "I am the Real Thing. The Anti-Christ, the World Ruler, the Dark One, the Prince of Lies."

"We know who you are, Vlad!" said The. He held his Bible in front of him, like a shield. "Show your face!" he said. "We fear you not."

"Speak for yourself," said Cap.

"He doesn't like to show his face," Amy said. "That's why no one but me has ever seen him in person."

"Ah, but we know his evil deeds!" said The. "His One-World government has destroyed Israel, the Promised Land. Oh, woe."

"Oh, woe yourself," said the Voice from the Box. "I didn't destroy Israel, I just moved it to Europe, where it belongs."

"It's true," said Vince. "I got an email from Dr. Kramer, who says his bio-gen fish are doing much better in the rich Polish soil. He's cool with it. He was never comfortable with the idea of stealing Palestinian land."

"So it's OK to steal Polish land?" demanded The.

"The Poles owe us—I mean, them," said the Voice. "So do the Ukrainians, not to mention the Germans. Besides, you can't make an omelet without breaking legs."

"Eggs," said Vince.

"Whatever," said the Voice in the Box. "Let's don't argue. What can I do for you?"

"He doesn't like to argue," said Amy.

"It's what *we* can do for *you*," said Gotha. "We have a proposal."

"I don't know proposal," said the Voice. "You seek a boon?"

"A gig," said Gotha. "You'll need a band for the big to-do at Black Rock City. Your first personal appearance."

"And last," said The, from behind his Bible.

"Shut up, The!" hissed Gotha. "You're in luck, Mr. Anti-Christ. The Tribs are free."

"I'll think about it," said the Voice. "Show me your titties."

"You'd better not," said Amy.

But Gotha did. She lifted her tee shirt.

"Cute," said the Voice. "You've got the job. Scale. Now get out of here. It's hot in this box."

MINUTES LATER

"Sorry about that," Gotha said, pulling down her tee shirt as Amy escorted them out to the street. "Showbiz, y'know."

"It's OK," said Amy. "Just makes me look better."

"It's true," said Gotha's dad. "Hers are like ripe fruit hanging from the Tree of Life."

Gotha felt like slugging him but didn't.

WEEKS LATER

Gotha's big black BMW boxer sped through the garbage and debris that littered northern Nevada. They were on their way to Black Rock City, where the Anti-Christ was scheduled to make his first public appearance.

"We'll finally get to see his face," said Gotha. "Close up, too, since we'll be on stage with him. Wonder if he's cute?"

"The Prince of Lies?" scoffed The. "The Dark One? The Anti-Christ? Cute?"

"You are always so negative," Cap pointed out.

The ignored him. "At least we'll only have to see his ugly mug for an instant or so. The Seven Years of Tribulation will be over tonight. If the Good Book is right, and so far it has been, Jesus will return at exactly midnight and send the Anti-Christ and all his followers straight to Hell."

"What happens to us?" asked Vince.

"I go to Heaven for sure," said The. "I'm a sinner, but Jesus has forgiven me. He may forgive you guys too, and take you with him, or He could pitch you right on down to Hell with the Anti-Christ. He can be pretty strict."

"Can't you put in a word?" asked Cap. "I forgave you for fooling around with my wife."

"We never went below the waist," The reminded him, "on her, anyway, and He's not going to listen to me or anybody else. He may have already made up his mind, or He may decide on the spot. For all I know, you may get points for playing in a rock band."

"Can't we just stay here?" asked Gotha. "We have another gig next week, in Petaluma."

"That's just a street fair," said The. "And besides, the world will come to an end when Jesus returns. There won't be any Petaluma."

"I won't miss Petaluma," said Vince thoughtfully. "Though I will miss the world."

HOURS LATER

Black Rock City was a huge traffic jam of weird bicycles ridden by nudes, wobbling between cars covered with kewpie dolls, plastic ponies, beads and rhinestones.

"Art cars," said Vince.

"Ugh," said Gotha.

In the center of it all was a huge wicker statue that looked vaguely (that is, exactly) like Timothy Leary. Some drunks were trying to set it on fire.

"Got a light?" they asked.

The Tribs ignored them and set up on stage between two speakers shaped like gigantic skulls.

"This makes Woodstock look like a hootenanny!" said Gotha. She put her black lips up to the mike and ran a sound check: "Check 3-2-1!"

"Six six six," boomed the echo in return.

"What's a wood stock?" asked Cap, tuning his strat.

"What time is it?" asked Vince. It was dark. A cold wind was rising. His watch had stopped.

He shivered.

'ROUND MIDNIGHT

A half a million people, most of them stoned, many of them nude, and all of them covered with bodypaint and dust, gathered around the stage.

The Tribs were surprised to find that they were the only act. They were even more surprised when Amy appeared and handed them a playlist of only one song.

"There's no water and only two porta-johns," she said. "Better start playing now!"

Cap struck a funky chord. Gotha approached the mike and wailed, "Please allow me to introduce myself . . . "

The crowd went wild as The punched PLAY on his drum machine.

Vince picked up his bass. Behind him he saw a huge cardboard box being lowered onto the stage by a crane.

It had 666 on it.

"I am a man of wealth and taste . . . "

AT MIDNIGHT

"What the . . . ?"

The Tribs were rocking the "house" when Cap's strat went suddenly silent; so did The's drum machine, Vince's bass and Gotha's mike.

Amy had unplugged them.

It was 12:00.

The applause was deafening.

The silence that followed was even more so.

The box in the center of the stage was slowly lifting, as if by magic. The crowd gasped as they saw the slim figure sitting in a lotus position underneath it.

He stood, and the crowd gasped again.

There was no mistaking that gentle, wise face, those scratchy robes, that crown of thorns.

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Cap.

"Bingo," said Jesus, with a smile.

"It was you all along!" said The, falling to his knees.

"Rise up, faithful dude," said Jesus, helping him to his feet. "It was and it wasn't me. Think of it as a yin-yang thing. I'll explain later. But first, I've got one last job to do."

He grabbed the dead mike stand and, swinging it like a club, ran through the parked cars that surrounded the stage, sending kewpie dolls and plastic ponies, beads and rhinestones flying.

Then he climbed back onto the stage and cast the mike stand aside.

"A little action is good for the soul," He said. "I haven't had so much fun since I trashed the temple. Imagine gluing all that shit on a car!"

"He likes cars," said Amy.

"Whatever," said Gotha. "But what now? Is it Heaven or Hell for us?"

"Neither," said Jesus, spreading His arms wide and addressing the crowd. He didn't need a mike; everyone could hear Him just fine.

"Listen up, humankind," He said. "Here's the deal. The Earth is yours, but you have to pick up all this garbage and quit trashing it. Share everything equally. No more rich and poor."

"That's communism!" shouted someone from the crowd.

"Bingo," said Jesus. "It's never been properly tried, and now it's up to you all to make it happen. Just follow these simple rules."

"Rules?" said Gotha. She didn't like rules.

"The Ten Commandments," said The. "I told you He was strict!"

"Pay attention," said Amy.

"I've trimmed the list," said Jesus. "It's the Three Commandments now. Listen up:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

No more art cars.

"What about Heaven?" asked The, clearly disappointed. "What about Eternal Life and the forgiveness of sins?"

Jesus hugged him. "I forgave you all long ago, dude. Especially you! And you wouldn't like Heaven, not after playing in a rock band. It's a white bread scene. I have to go there and hang out, since my Old Man's expecting me, but you'll have a better time here. Promise."

"What happened to all those who were Raptured," asked Vince. He was starting to feel like a newsman again, looking for answers.

"Let's just say that they were recycled," said Jesus. He pulled a bag from under his scratchy robes and handed it to Amy. "Pass these wafers around."

They were like animal crackers with human faces.

"They taste like Fritos!" said The.

"They taste funny to me," said Cap.

"They're not so bad," said Amy, tossing handfuls to the crowd. "Once you get started you can't stop eating them."

"So the Rapture was just a way to get all the bad elements out of the way so we could begin to make the world better?" said Vince, munching on a Murdoch.

"Bingo," said Jesus. "And this Rapture wasn't the first Rapture. What do you think happened to all those dinosaurs?"

"Those *other* dinosaurs, you mean," said Gotha. "But I have one more question. Who folded all those clothes?"

"Mary Magdalene," said Jesus. "She takes care of the domestic stuff."

"First I've heard about a Mary," muttered Amy. "I'm outa here."

And she was.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER

The sun was rising. It looked new every day, but it looked especially new today, Vince thought.

After a long round of hugs, handshakes and autographs in Aramaic, the immense crowd had followed Jesus to the center of Black Rock City. There they watched in solemn silence as He climbed to the top of the Leary-looking wicker man.

"He's not wearing anything under that scratchy robe," said Gotha, admiringly.

"So?" asked Vince, resentfully.

"So, he's kinda cute."

"Don't leave us!" the crowd shouted. They were waving little lighted crosses.

"Please!" said Jesus, looking pained, "put those things away!" He spread His arms and balanced on the head of the wicker man. "It's time for me to say so long. I love you all to death, but I've got to split and I won't be back. I've got other worlds to attend to."

The crowd moaned. He stopped them with one raised hand.

"It's up to you now. Don't blow it. Love one another. Get to work building a decent world and make me proud." He looked

around. "You can begin by picking up all this trash."

"But who will rule us!?" the crowd shouted.

"You'll have to rule yourselves," said Jesus. "You've already started. Keep it up. The Three Commandments are right there in the Good Book."

He pointed down at The, who was holding up his Bible.

"Two of them, anyway. And for the day-to-day practical stuff—"

He reached into His robe and pulled out a cell phone, a nifty little Nokia, and tossed it down toward Gotha.

"If you get confused or need advice, call her."

"Me?" said Gotha, catching the phone. "Why me?"

"Why not?" said Jesus. "You're cute, you're smart, and you have a program."

"I do?"

"Sure. 'From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.' You studied Marxism in college, didn't you?"

"You did?" asked Vince, impressed.

"I went to Berkeley," said Gotha. "I told Dad it was a music school."

"I just thought you misspelled it," said Cap.

"There He goes!" said The, blinking back a happy tear.

And indeed, there He went—straight up into the stars.

SIXTY-SIX YEARS LATER

"Enough with the autographs," said Gotha. "Get on the train."

"The fans expect it," said The. "And this damned ball point keeps skipping."

"Nobody said it would be a perfect world," Vince pointed out. "Just a better one."

Even in their old age, the Tribs were still packing them in, thanks to Cap's cascading guitar solos, The's afro-beat drum machine, and Vince's rock-solid bass anchor.

Not to mention Gotha's wild vocals.

"Sometimes I'm afraid we're going to live forever after all," she groaned, settling into her seat as the train got underway. She was almost eighty (she had quit lying about her age) and her tattoos were so wavy with wrinkles that a skull might look like a heart. They were still in interesting places, though.

She and Vince were still an item. They often brought their grandchildren along when they played gigs in two-bit burgs like Denver and Des Moines. It made life on the road more fun.

"Eternal Life would suit me," said Cap. He was almost a hundred. "Maybe I could finally get those Hendrix licks down."

"Eternal Life is a metaphor," said The, thumping his worn Bible. "Jesus was speaking in parables. Don't ask me why."

"Cause He could?" suggested Gotha.

"We have our season, like all creatures on this planet," said Vince, who was realistic as always but no longer cynical. "And then it's done. I wouldn't want it any other way. If our biggest ambition was to hang around some Heaven forever, we wouldn't have taken care of this planet for our children. And grandchildren."

"And great-grandchildren," said Cap, who was tenderly watching one smear snot on his strat.

"Enough!" said Gotha, shooing three kids off her old, bony, but still cute lap. "I need a nap. You kids go look out the window at the scenery—or something."

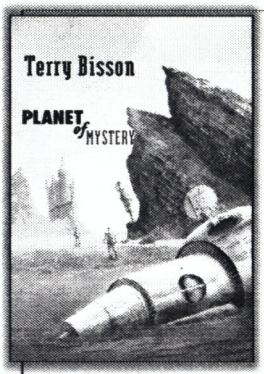
The engineer blew the whistle just for fun. The kids ran to the window to watch for buffalo.

Vince held Gotha's hand while she slept. He looked over the children, out the window, at the passing scenery.

Or something, indeed, he thought:

Fish in the ponds, corn in the fields, cattle on the hillsides, and the whole sweet world gliding by, slowly, out of sight.

pace



Two New Books from PS and Terry Bisson
Planet of Mystery *and* Billy's Book

Marooned on Venus, Hall and Chang of the first Chinese-American expedition are surprised to find themselves breathing Earth-normal air; and alarmed to find themselves captured by beautiful amazons mounted on foul-smelling centaurs.

"None of this can be real!" Hall protests, as he is dragged off to meet the Amazon Queen. Chang is inclined to agree (even though the arrow in his shoulder feels genuine).

Then the robot rolls in . . .

Planet of Mystery is more than just an interrogation of the enigmatic interface between appearance and reality. Like *Pride and Prejudice*, it's an adventure. Like *Don Quixote*, it's a love story; and like *Lolita*, it has a happy ending.

Like all boys, Billy is all boy.

Filled with mischief and meaning, his antic adventures educate as well as entertain. Wait till you see what happens when he leaves his toy bulldozer out in the rain!

Boys (and girls!) who practice their reading skills on Billy's Book will not only learn life lessons about friendship, honesty, responsibility and make-believe. They will be painlessly introduced to the mature concepts that are essential for social success, like corrosion, extinction, jewelry, and the FBI.

Billy's Book is not just for children. It's for old people of all ages.

Planet of Mystery will be available in jacketed and trade hardcovers; *Billy's Book* will come in a slipcased hardcover and a trade hardcover. Meanwhile, a few copies remain for Dear Abbey, Terry's novella from 2003. Please see the PS website for details: www.pspublishing.co.uk

Ms. Barnhill tells us she wrote this piece while driving. "Not all of it, of course," she adds, "and only in fits and starts (between, for example, changing lanes, and swerving around charging deer, and drastically reducing my speed when in the vicinity of state troopers). Still, the story began on a legal pad balanced on my knees as I drove from Madison, Wisconsin to my home in Minnesota. I had only meant to write a sentence—perhaps two—as I had an image of an auntie mercilessly preening her niece in anticipation of an engagement. The punitive nature of beautifying has always been particularly fascinating to me, having endured and, continuing to endure, the practice of plucking, shellacking, hoisting, squeezing, waxing and so forth. Once the sentence was written, however, it quickly became two, then twenty, then two hundred, then page upon page scribbled furiously in red pen for five hundred miles. While I'm happy with the story, I should also mention that I had to talk my way out of a ticket and was nearly crushed by a semi carrying fertilizer, so I can't say I recommend the process." Important note from the editors: don't try this at home, kids!

The author's work has appeared in journals such as The Sun, Fantasy, Common Ties, *and* The Rake. *Additionally, she has work forthcoming from* Weird Tales, Fast Ships, Black Sails, Hard-boiled Horror *and others. Primarily, she spends her days running after her three small children, and doing research for the juvenile nonfiction books that she writes for Capstone Press.*

The Men Who Live In Trees

Kelly Barnhill

Of all the cultures, subcultures, clans, gangs and sects that are bounded and protected by our Glorious Empire, none is more puzzling than the Molaru, known to the residents of Acanthacae as the men who live in trees. They have no recognized language, save for a complicated pageant of gestures and movements, accompanied by a codified set of facial expressions. Similarly, they have no recognizable tradition of the arts or music. That which, I suppose, is to pass as music is played on instruments not tuned to create melodies, but created instead for the express purpose of making a sound nearly identical to that of the wind pushing ceaselessly through the heavily canopied trees. Sometimes, one can even hear the rain dripping from the jungle's broad leaves, stretching darkly into the world, into the end of the world.

—From the Notes and Journals of Tamino Ailare

When Carmina Ailare was born, her father laid her in a green cradle. Patterns of vine, leaf, and heavy blossom twined along the curved edge, and twisted their runners into the cavity where the babe slept. When the cradle rocked, the leaves seemed to blow in an effortless wind. And when one looked closely, it sometimes appeared as though a pair of green eyes gazed back—unblinking, flickering, and gone.

The cradle had been fashioned from a thousand interlocking pieces of wood, cut from a single tree, which had crashed into

the south side of the house when everyone was asleep, injuring two servants, though only slightly. Her father, in his typical fashion, said that he never liked the south side of the house anyway, and that the servants in question were in need of a much deserved day off, and since recuperation is as good an excuse as any, they were ordered to recuperate. In truth, he cared only for the tree, and believed that its arrival into the servants' quarters was a sign.

"What sort of sign," his wife asked as she leaned into the overstuffed chair, her tawny eyes bloodshot with heat and hope and something else that she could not name.

Tamino shrugged vaguely and stared out into the misty green just past the garden wall.

"What sort of sign," she asked again, but he said nothing and she gave up.

During the length of his wife's pregnancy, as she sweated and moaned for her home and family in the familiar and licentious chaos of the Emperor's City, Tamino Ailare cut wood. He sawed and split and sanded and planed. He baked each piece, allowing the sap to pool out of its veins, sink deep into the wood's firm flesh, giving it a peculiar sheen. Indeed, the wood from the trees of the Oponax river was unlike any that Tamino Ailare had ever seen. Once cured, it was fragrant, luminous and dark. In a quiet room, Tamino swore that one could hear it breathing.

The day the cradle was finished, Carmina was born. Shaking with excitement, he extracted the bound babe from the protesting arms of her mother and laid her in the cradle. Immediately, a breeze blew up from trees just over the garden wall. The babe in the cradle made a sound—a sound like the wind in the overburdened branches. A sound like the creaking of wood.

Carmina's father had been a professor of The Discrete Mathematics and Applied Philosophy of Language. He had served at most of the major universities that spanned the boundless Empire, which is to say, he taught at every University that mattered. Which means, as well, that he was subsequently fired from every University that mattered.

With nowhere else to send him, the sages of the Empire sent him to the farthest corner possible, where he would no longer be a nuisance, and his tendency towards heresy and sedition could be chalked up to jungle fever, and therefore ignored. Acanthacae. Guardian of the penal colony. Gatherer of rubies. Overseer of the wide and fragrant Oponax River. He was sent to study the men who live in trees. He was sent to discover their secrets. He was to report regularly to the Emperor by way of His governors, ministers and mages as to why the Molaru had not been, nor, it would seem, could not be, subdued. He had not been instructed to love them, and yet he did. And then he died. Carmina supposed that she could take a lesson in that, but what that lesson was, and how it applied, well, this was mystery.

> The men who live in trees have no women. Ask anyone. The Governor, the Warden, the Bishop, the Provost of the University, even the proprietress of the estimable House of Ladies: They agree, and have agreed, on nothing, of course, save this. That a tribe or a nation

or even a supper club could be comprised only of men, is clearly a mad belief, and yet all assert the same. The men who live in trees are men. No women or children have ever been sighted, mentioned, let alone examined for study and publication.

—From the Notes and Journals of Tamino Ailare

On the day of her betrothal, Carmina went to the window to look for the men who live in trees. She would see nothing, of course, which is to say that she would see the slicked leaves of the jungle pressing up and over her garden wall, its great green and blossomed bulk sighing, panting, sweating. She shuddered.

Somewhere, beyond—no, *inside*, the skin of the jungle lived the men who live in trees. In her sixteen years she had only seen them four times: Twice for the protocol and pomp that surrounds the signing of a treaty, once for the show of friendship with the slaughter and roast of a wild pig—or perhaps it was a bear—and a demonstration of song and dance, met with much wincing and gritting of teeth for most everyone involved. Most everyone but Carmina, who loved the stylized bow and sashay, the overly gestured hunt and evasion, slicked as always with sheen upon sheen of sweet sweat.

The last time that she saw the men who live in trees was two years ago, when they climbed the walls of the city, sliced the bellies of the guards and laid the grin of their blades against her father's throat. She stood in the doorway, her white nightdress fluttering about her body like translucent wings. She opened her mouth, felt her lips stretch against her teeth, but no sound came. The men who live in trees clustered around her kneeling father. One held his sparse hair, one his shoulders, and one the blade. Her father choked, then gasped, then grunted something that sounded like, *forgive me, please, forgive me.* The men who live in trees had faces that did not move. Their mouths were stone, their faces, sky. With a quick flick of the wrist, the blade slid neatly into her father's neck, and sliced a clean arc from one side to the other.

Her father did not weep, nor did he scream. Instead he spread his fingers, curved the pinkie and ring finger inward with a fluttering motion, and brought both hands to his chest. Carmina knew the sign. Her father had taught it to her. The men who lived in trees knew it too. They spoke not in words. They spoke with their hands. Carmina's father, in their language, told them one thing. *Thank you.*

It is said that each man lives for three hundred years. That they emerge, fully formed and rational, from a slit in the side of the tree. That they do not die as we do, but rot from the center outwards as they inch towards death, dropping limbs as they do so. This, of course, is ludicrous, and yet. And yet. Once I saw a man while I traveled deep into the jungle's green heart. He had no left arm and no nose. He inched down the overgrown path. He creaked in the wind.

—From the journals of Tamino Ailare

Given that this was the day that she would be presented to her future husband and her future husband's family (which is to say, this was the day that she was to be presented to her future mother-in-law, who would, in a series of codified gestures, display her approval, indifference, grudging acceptance, open disdain, downright hostility, or abject refusal), Carmina was particularly alone. Normally, she would be escorted from the garden doors of the compound with her mother at her left hand and her father at her right. She would have a cacophony of relatives giggling behind her, covering their white teeth and spreading lips with the backs of their salty hands. Behind that would be the household servants, leading the household animals, and likely, after that would be a musician and singer, or even a choir, hired specially for the occasion.

Instead, it would only be Carmina and her aunt, which meant that Carmina would be completely alone.

Deborah, the servant waited quietly at the dressing table. This was not surprising. Deborah never spoke. None of the servants did. She simply waited for Carmina, arranging and rearranging the various tools for the intricate performance that was Carmina's toilette: A boar's bristle brush, a jar of grease made from the fat of a lamb, scented with bergamot, jasmine and lime. She had fourteen silver combs and ten ropes of tiny pearls that would shortly twine through her black hair, binding it fast. There were eight jars of fine powder in varying degrees of pallor. With each successive application, Carmina would become paler and paler until she was the color of stone. There were also jars holding an assortment of fine, smooth pastes, as silky as custard with a pleasing grit. There was a berry colored paste that would be applied to her lips (on her wedding night, this would be applied to her nipples as well), a seashell pink paste for her high cheekbones, and a sunset of blues and purples and iridescent greens for around her eyes.

There was, of course, much to do, but she stood at the window instead, watching the mounded green exhale in clouds of heat and mist towards the high, white sky.

It was in this moment that the door to the room opened as though by a force of nature and hit the opposite wall so hard that it cracked the plaster in a dusty puff.

"Clean that up," Carmina's aunt said to the silent servant without glancing over. Deborah stood, bowed and went for a broom. "This," her aunt said, hooking her head downwards like a vulture, "is what I am to present to your future mother-in-law? I came here looking for a bride-to-be. If it weren't for that ill-behaved tongue in your wretched mouth, I might have mistaken you for one of the servants."

Carmina leaned against the window sill, tilted her head and smiled mildly at her aunt.

"It shouldn't matter either way," she said. "I could meet his family wearing nothing but fig leaves and they'll still pant for the match." Her aunt snorted and reached for the powder, but Carmina continued, emboldened mostly because she knew she was right.

"I think I'll do just that," she said as sweat pooled and dripped between her bound breasts and down the fine ribs of

sliced whale bones that caged her middle. "I'll make a dress of leaves and burlap. And I'll anoint my hair with last year's tallow. Oh and *ashes* too." Her aunt laid a long-nailed hand at the small of Carmina's back and led her—with more than a bit of firm insistence at the tips—to the chair. "Behold the bride," Carmina said bitterly as her aunt began with the first jar of powder.

"Selfish," her aunt said with a hiss at her teeth. "Selfish and stupid. Just like your father. Think of your mother, for a change. Think of your mother, and do your duty."

Carmina's mother lay in bed, weak with fever. She had suffered from fevers for the last two years. When she saw her husband lying on the ground, his blood pooling on the cool flagstones, she fell into a swoon. Her body fell hard upon the stones, her father's blood flowing towards and around her head like a halo. Later, when the doctors and apothecaries, and even twelve women from the penal colony who were jailed as witches, examined the barely conscious woman, the diagnosis was unanimous, which is to say that each had his or her own particular theory, and they agreed in their utter lack of agreement. The doctors blamed a parasitic infection, and prescribed a draft of quinine, drunk morning, noon and night, followed by a second draft of strong spirits, and followed again by a tincture of morphine. The apothecaries blamed an over abundance of humor, and insisted that she be bled for fifteen minutes every day until her condition improved. At half past two every afternoon, she was to have a draft made from the petals of lilies, hibiscus and bitterroot, combined, of course, with the dried petals of roses imported from the beating heart of the Empire, to feed the poor woman's dying heart. The witches declared that it was from the shock of heartbreak and the unintentional ingestion of blood. They required a measure of seawater to be flushed to the eyes every day to wash away sorrow, the oil of poppy to be placed under the tongue to replace joy, and the presence of a singer in her bedchamber every day for at least two hours, to clear the head and soothe the heart.

As a result, Carmina's mother went blind, her skin ghosted and faded until she was nearly transparent, and she was rarely conscious. Her aunt, to her credit, followed the instructions to the letter. All, except for the singer, which she felt was an ostentatious addition to a household populated by women.

As it happens, the singing was the one thing that could have saved her, if brought in immediately. Without song, Carmina's mother, though she breathed, was already dead.

Death does not exist in the minds of the men who live in trees. Nor birth. There is no sign for either. In my first dealings with the Molaru, after my initial tours of the penal colony, as well as our small, but growing, University of the Upper Opponax, I was introduced to a man who was a healer of the Molaru. He had been called to the Central Mansion to see to the child of the Governor's most beloved and most beautiful mistress. The child had suffered from fevers, which had grown progressively worse, until he lay, white faced, on the crisp, linen sheet, as near to death as one could be without actually being dead. The

healer entered the inner room where the child lay. My lady commanded that I ask if the child would die. My knowledge of their hand speech was far from adept, but I did my best regardless. "End. This. Small Man." I asked with my hands. The old healer stared at me. He brought his middle finger of his right hand to his mouth and let it fly gently away, like a butterfly. He looked at me meaningfully. I said to my lady, "It appears that he is saying, 'the small man is free', though I cannot possibly know what that means." That night, the child died. That night, a Molaru prisoner at the penal colony escaped—the first person to do so. He was a very small man.

—*From the journals of Tamino Ailare*

Carmina ground her teeth as her aunt lashed on the heavy red dress. She imagined that in the Northern and only slightly barbaric cities of the Empire, such a dress would make sense. Or, at least it would make sense in winter. Carmina's mother, originally from the cities in the North, was the original owner of the dress, and doubtless looked beautiful in it. Carmina held her breath as her aunt stretched the thick, luminous velvet around her merciless corset. The fabric cut cruelly into the tender flesh of her breasts, and the flounce of velvet, as heavy as church drapes, from her hips to the floor made it difficult to walk. Her aunt attached the stiff collar with pins that bit at Carmina's shoulders and upper back. She winced and said nothing, though she knew she bled. Her feet were strapped into tiny, beaded shoes that whispered against the stone floors as she walked.

Her aunt eyed her critically. "Not fit for a bride of God, but you'll do for a man," she said. "Especially that man," she added with a half smile and glittering eyes. Carmina decided to ignore this, and went to see her mother instead.

Carmina's aunt did not marry, but made vows to the Sisters of the Western Sky and came to live in the province at the mouth of the Opponax river, separated from the world by Abbey walls, four feet thick and twenty feet high. In spite of the wall, the Abbey was destroyed only two years later during the unpleasantness between Empire forces and the rag-tag armies of anarchists, expelled students, displaced aboriginals, and defrocked clergy. The Empire forces, led to believe that the Abbess was harboring terrorists within its sacred walls, blasted a hole in the western edge and poured inside. All its residents were slaughtered, save one—Carmina's aunt. No one knew who told the general that dissidents hid in the Abbey. In truth, no dissidents were found. As a result, the Church released Carmina's aunt from her vows. *For your grief,* they said.

The men who live in trees do not grieve as we do. Since death does not exist, grief is altered as well. Recently, the Molaru sanctioned me to live with one of their own for a period of three weeks. I was not allowed to visit the communal dwelling of their people—even if there is such a thing. Some say that the men who live in trees build nests like birds and

sing out their territory. I don't believe this to be true, but since I've never seen their homeplace, I suppose that anything is possible. Instead, we slept on the ground each night, facing the sky. The man taught me the intricacies of Molaru storytelling, and how to draw their handpictures on the ground. On the eleventh day, he brought me to the walls of the penal colony. The soldiers walking the wall did not observe us, though we stood in the open. He instructed me to lay one hand upon the wall and another hand on his palm. I did, and instantly felt a stab of grief that pierced my poor heart. Through my one hand I felt the groans of the prisoners, their dry mouths and empty bellies, their rotting limbs and broken backs, and their crushing despair. Through the other hand, I felt my new friend's shocked horror, numb acceptance and breaking heart. We left without a sound. We were not seen.

—From the journals of Tamino Ailare

After kissing her mother on her shrunken, shriveled lips, and arranging the bedclothes around her tiny body, Carmina went to the front door, placed her hand in the hand of her grim lipped aunt and walked out into the thick sunshine, Deborah the servant trailing behind, holding up a very small parasol, which did little to block the crushing heat.

Although she was not accompanied, people on the busy street knew from the red velvet gripping her damp body, they knew from the beaded swirl of her heavy hair and the layer upon layer of powder on her face, neck and bosom that she was a bride-to-be. And, in truth, many had begun to wonder when a suitable match would be found—one that would satisfy the girl's aunt, and would satisfy the future mother-in-law. Since, as relatives of a Banished Individual, that being Carmina's beloved father, by law they were not permitted to access the vast resources of his family's coffers. Ever since Tamino Ailare was sent to the upper Opponax, he and his dependants were allowed a monthly stipend, which saw to their general well-being and provided the necessary luxury for maintaining a certain level in the larger society, but it was not enough for a dowry. However, anyone who married Carmina, would have access, as a relative once removed, to the largely untouched fortune, and would thus be very rich.

The man standing on the opposite end of the square wanted to be very rich, which is to say that his mother wanted him to be very rich.

The extra weight braided into her hair pulled on Carmina's scalp, giving her a headache. She looked the young man up and down as she approached. She had seen him before, of course, but it had been a while, as his mother sent him to the University in the Emperor's City, though how she afforded it, no one really knew. The young man came from a family nearly, though not quite, as old and glorious as the Beloved Emperor himself. But his grandfather, one of the progenitors of the concept of the penal colony and its lucrative business pulling rubies from the ground, had sold all of his family's lands and sunk the proceeds into two ruby mines that produced for five years and fifteen years, re-

spectively. Now there were no more rubies, and the family's fortunes dwindled.

He wore a silk shirt that was bound with lace at the throat and riding pants made from the skin of something soft and young. A rabbit, perhaps. Or a young doe. His high boots wore thick layers of polish and gleamed impressively in the noonday sun. But this, Carmina could see, was only for show. The boots, though polished, were old, perhaps his father's, and they buckled deeply at the toes as though walked too long with feet that never grew to their limit. The doeskin, freshly dyed cornflower blue (hope's color), was creased and cracked, its seams pockmarked from excessive mending. And the dye bled upon the rim of the shirt, a blue that would never wash away. He didn't look at Carmina. Not at all. He looked instead at his overlarge boots and sighed deeply, moping his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief.

Carmina looked into the face of the woman on his left. Despite the heat, she looked dry, bloodless as dusty bones. Her thin lips cracked into a frown.

"Your dress is creased," she said in a dry voice.

Carmina's aunt nodded ruefully. "Indeed it is," she said. "She dressed in haste. She is an anxious thing."

The mother's eyes wrinkled to slits. "And she sweats like a servant. Didn't she know to bathe before an occasion such as this?" Carmina flushed, caught her anger in her teeth and bit down hard. It was true, she sweated openly. It gathered at her hairline, ringed her neck, flowed downward past her breasts and navel. What was worse, she knew by the ache, heat and flow at her thighs that she bled as well.

"Then send me away in shame," Carmina said in a low voice, "or bind our hands and be done with it."

Both mother and aunt gasped, but Carmina sighed in relief.

"She is young," her aunt gasped. "Young enough to be molded. Bound."

> It is the tradition when the Molaru make the transformation from men of power to men of age, to bind their hands and feet as they pray to the river. If the river floods, he is taken away, and they say that his voice can be heard in the first gurgles of spring. If it does not, he is unbound after three days. His hair is white where it once was not and his face is lined where it once was smooth. He is no longer a sapling, but bears a strange resemblance to the twisted grooves in the oldest trees—that which only the strongest wind can ever master.
>
> —*From the Journals of Tamino Ailare*

Upstairs, Carmina's aunt recounted to her unconscious mother the sins committed that day. Her aunt did this every day, of course, but given the magnitude of today's sins, Carmina knew she would remain in the sick room until late afternoon.

Not that her sins had made any difference, either way. She was summarily betrothed. Bound. Her well being, and that of her mother and aunt were now in the hands of the man she would marry, which is to say, they were now at the mercy of her mother-in-law. Carmina slipped out the back door and followed the path

that snaked past the apothecary's tent, past the House of Eight Scribes, past the house of ladies, and past the sad hut of the Governor's first rejected mistress and her many children, until she reached the banks of the Opponax. She followed the thin trail that led upstream until she reached the mouth of a narrow, though deep, tributary, nearly hidden in a canopy of heavy leaved branches. The red velvet and the beads were already gone—the first hung to air in the courtyard, the second counted wrapped and locked in her aunt's bedroom. She removed her white muslin, her corset, her many layered undergarments. She removed each stocking, each shoe. She removed the ring that was her father's, the bracelet that was her mother's. She stood, mother naked by the water, her thighs glistening with sweat and bright blood, and slowly lowered herself into the water, hanging onto a large root to keep from floating away.

As she watched the tender curve of the trees' limbs swaying gently overhead, she heard the sharp groan of bending wood and a blinding crack. Above the water's skin, she smelled the sharp tang of flowing sap—a smell that instantly made her think of green eyes peering through a green wood, though she did not know why. She held more tightly to the submerged root and pulled close to the overgrown bank, her legs still floating freely in the swift water.

On the other bank, next to a large tree, was a man. A Molaru man who turned to the tree, and patted it gently. He was tall, taller than Carmina, though by how much she could not say. Like the rest she had seen, he wore a head-dress made from the oiled inner skin of the Looma tree, its seams bound up with the gut of a panther. From the forehead, fresh leaves wove with the hair of the dead—both human and animal, creating something of a crown. The breastplate was made of wood, dark, with a strange sheen, carved throughout in patterns of blossom and branch and leaf, and the boots were made of rushes.

Carmina, naked in the water, watched him as he touched the tree. His hands were small, smaller than her father's, with narrow fingers and soft, brown palms. He moved as a tree moves, gently, irrevocably, whispering to the wind. He removed his headdress, and the stretched dome of his scalp gleamed in the dappled light. He slipped each leg from the boots of rushes, and Carmina marveled at the delicate arch of the feet, the neatly cinched heels. After untying the eight straps that held it in place, he pulled the breastplate over his head and leaned it against the tree, draping the leafy cloth from around his waist over the top. Carmina's mouth opened, then closed. His nipples, dark as dates, hovered above the swell of two breasts. His thighs, like hers, were damp with sweat and the flow of blood from the dark scoop between.

Carmina let out a cry, scrambled to the bank and stood opposite from the Molaru man who was not a man at all. The man who was not simply gazed back at Carmina, unblinking and unsurprised.

"You," Carmina said, but the man who was not simply raised her eyebrows. "Oh," she said. "Of course." She thought a minute, and tried the signs she knew. "You," she signed. "Man. Not a man." Carmina pressed her lips together. Surely she could do better than this. Had not her

father taught her the poetry of handsigning? Had she learned nothing?

"I am a man," the naked girl across the water signed back. "We are all men."

Carmina thought for a moment. Then she signed, "Then what am I?"

"You?" The girl who was a man shrugged her shoulders. "A child. Son of a wise child."

"My father, you mean."

"Both of your fathers were wise children. Your father whose blood lives in the stones. And your father who is living and dead at once. Wise children."

"Who is your father," Carmina signed.

"The trees," the girl replied.

The men who live in trees have many stories. Some I remember. Others washed away like water. One story is claimed to be their oldest, though who can tell? As a member of the empire and a distant relative to the Emperor himself, I am afraid they may be more guarded with me than with another. And thus, this, my last great research, may also fail. Regardless, here is the tale they told me: Once there was a man with fourteen fathers. Like all other men, this man was noble and honest and fair. He was a skilled hunter, a moral and merciless judge, a terrible warrior. He was so great that the rest of the people were awed in their respect for him. They backed away when he came, shielded their eyes from his gaze, and would not communicate with him without invitation. As a result, the man was friendless, peerless and utterly lonely. He went to the oldest man and knelt before him. "My spear is unsurpassed in all this endless wood," he said. "My judgment is sound and unyielding, and I have kept my people fed and safe since I first became a man, which is to say, always. But I am alone, and therefore I have failed. I ask your permission to yield my life to the river, that my spirit may join in the lifeblood of the world and I may protect my people forever." The oldest man thought on this, and as he thought, drew a circle on the ground. Within that circle, he wove another circle. And within that another. He continued until fourteen circles entwined in a tight knot. The man did not notice. Finally, the oldest man spoke. "Any permission would not be mine to give. Such a decision lies in the hands of your fourteen fathers. Ask them." But the man did not know where his fathers could be found, so he prepared himself to journey into the heart of the wood. He took a single spear, which he strapped to his back. He brought no food, nor clothing, nor water skins. "I shall go forth into the world as I first entered—naked, hungry, but powerful." The people listened and lowered their heads. They feared his gaze.

The man traveled upstream towards the river's beating heart—the beating heart of the known world. He traveled for fourteen days and fourteen nights. He neither slept nor ate. When he was hungry, he bent his knees to the ground and opened his mouth to the sky, biting down a small piece to chew. Back home, his people noticed bite marks in the high, white sky. Small ones at first, but as the days wore on, they were larger and full of teeth. By the fourteenth day, the

rains came, and water poured in heavy gushes from the holes bitten in the sky.

—From the journals of Tamino Ailare

"Come across," the man who was a girl who apparently lived in the trees or under the trees, or perhaps was actually a tree, had said with a gentle movement of her right hand, her left arm outstretched over the water.

"I can't," Carmina said with her palms facing her chest, and flicking plaintively to the ground. This was one of the first signs she ever learned. She sat down on a rock and attempted to shove her feet into her wet undergarments, now washed nearly clean.

"Come across," the girl said again, using both hands for emphasis.

"I can not," Carmina signed back. "My father." There was no sign for mother.

"His blood is in the stones. Ask the stones."

"No," Carmina said out loud. She buttoned her white shift over her damp breasts. The girl across the water remained as she was—damp with sweat and blood and muck. From where she fussed with sashes and laces, Carmina could smell her—a lush, woody, damp earth smell. Carmina shivered. "His blood is in his body. He breathes."

"One breathes, though dead. The other calls to you every time you walk by. The trees hear it. We hear it. You do not."

Carmina nodded. "Did my father know that some of you are men and some are not?" She did not like the girl who pretended to be a man, she decided. But, then, she didn't like a lot of people.

"Your father knew that we all were men. He knew it with his last breath." Carmina picked up a stone the size of a mango and threw it into the water. It dropped with a satisfying splash and disappeared. She wasn't aiming at anyone, of course, nor did she intend to hurt the girl—or the man—or what ever it was. She simply wanted to throw something. The girl who called herself a man raised one eyebrow but remained silent. Carmina turned and hurried back down the path, rubbing her palm against her hip as though it burned. When she leaned down she heard a whisper—so faint, she wondered if she had heard it before without noticing. *Listen,* it said as she leaned. *In the stones,* it said as she reared back. And it arced upwards, its pale heft curving through the damp and dappled light of the afternoon, it said, *The one true stone,* before disappearing with a plop.

On his tenth day on the river, the man began to talk to the water. On the fourteenth day, the river answered back.

"I was hungry, so I ate a portion of the sky," he said.

"And when you did so, the land wept."

The man pushed against his pole, and the hollowed out boat—the one he had scraped himself—drifted to the shore. He stepped into the muck and waded into the flowering weeds along the river's edge. He released the boat into the river and watched the river take it away.

"A wicked man," he said, "knelt before me. He begged for mercy. He

begged for justice. I told him he could not have both. He asked me to choose. So I laid my blade upon the stretch of his neck and sliced it neatly away."

The river said nothing.

"His body was laid among the trees. By morning it was gone."

"And the sky wept," the river said.

"Yes. Yes, it did. Why did it weep?"

"It wept because it weeps. Why did the wicked man do wicked? Why did the merciless man lack mercy? Every true thing acts according to its nature."

"Then," said the man, "why, today, does the river speak, when such an action defies its nature?"

"Every true thing acts according to its nature," repeated the river. "Except when it does not. Then, it does not." And with that, the river fell silent.

The man tried again to speak to the river, but it communicated only in whorls and ripples and the occasional gurgle. A language he did not know. Weak with hunger, he ate another piece of the sky. He waited for the land to weep. It never did.

—From the journals of Tamino Ailare

When Carmina returned home, she found four surveyors, six carpenters, two architects, nine apprentices and sixteen servants crawling around the house and garden and walls like ants. The woman who was to be her mother-in-law leaned over the desk in the arched alcove that once served as her father's study and now was a dusty reminder of a dead man's quiet learning. Carmina stopped, her white shift fluttering around her now-sweating legs in a faint breeze. The woman who would be her mother-in-law leaned shoulder to shoulder with Carmia's aunt. On the other side of the desk stood a very small, very nervous architect, hands and face smudged with graphite and ink. He bobbed his head and curled his shoulders as he unfurled page after page of plans and drawings. He simpered; he whined; he showed his teeth. The two women clicked their heels against the broad stone floor impatiently, pointing *here,* and *here*, and *here.* Carmina cleared her throat.

Both women stood with a hiss. They regarded Carmina while simultaneously raising their chins and arching their brows. They brought their hands together in front of their chests and stroked their fingers gently, like insects preparing for a meal. "You," her future mother-in-law said. "You're here."

"Of course I am," Carmina said. "I live here."

The older women gave one another a knowing glance. The architect stared at the ground apparently looking for something to squish.

"For now," the aunt said. The future mother-in-law smiled.

"Please explain," Carmina said sweetly as she ground her teeth.

"Well, can't expect to stay here once you are married. This house was bestowed upon your wretched father as part of his banishment. The law prohibits you to profit from its sale, but your husband–"

"Future husband," Carmina corrected.

"*So rude,*" the aunt hissed.

Her future mother-in-law thinned her lips into a brittle smile. "Your *husband* will

be permitted to sell the house, the grounds, and all its possessions as he sees fit."

"As *you* see fit."

"Same thing."

Carmina placed her fists at the small of her back and dug in hard. Her hips hurt, her womb hurt, her breasts hurt. She wanted to lie down.

"But not the books. And my father's papers. They will stay with me."

"The books will be appraised by the bookseller next week. Anything of value will be sold. The rest you may keep."

Carmina spoke quietly, and closed her eyes to keep from shouting. "The books belong to my mother, who still lives. The books will not be appraised without her permission."

"Nonsense! How can an unconscious woman give permission," her aunt exclaimed, raising her hands heavenward.

"Indeed," said Carmina.

"In any case, they can't all belong to your mother. Unless they are marked, ownership is assumed by the male and passed to his heir which in this case–"

"They are marked. Each one. My father did so himself."

Carmina had watched him do it. Eighteen pots of sticky glue, nine brushes, and over a thousand identical, hand pressed plates, embossed with gold, declaring, "*From the library of Petra Ailare,*" all lovingly affixed inside the front covers. This he had done in the week before his death. As though he knew something was coming.

"I was never told of this," the future mother-in-law hissed to the aunt.

The aunt stammered and whined. "I—I'm certainly—Well, I never—Honestly they couldn't all—" Quickly she began removing books from the shelves and checking inside the covers. They were all marked with Petra's name. Every single one.

After twenty-eight days of journey, the man fell to his knees at the center of the world. He raised his hands to the broken sky. "I cannot travel any further," he cried. "My feet are torn, my hands are torn, my heart is torn." He sunk his fingers into the mud and scooped it to his mouth. "If my fathers meant for my life to end, then I shall lie here, and here will be my grave, a shallow maw in the worthless muck at the center of the world!"

"A shallow grave for a shallow man," said a voice behind him.

"A merciless end to one who had no time for mercy. Is this our plan for our son, my brothers?"

"All true things act according to their natures."

"True, but only if the thing, itself, is true."

"Who are you," said the man, still cradling mud in his hands.

"Your father," said fourteen voices. The man stood in a circle of fourteen trees. Each tree had a gash at the base, two friendly knots on either side and two large, red stones set, peering out. The stones blinked.

"My fathers," the man said, straightening up. "My spear is unsurpassed in all this endless wood. My judgment is sound and unyielding, and I have kept my people fed and safe since I first became a man, which is to say, always."

Liz Clarke

"And what have you to show for this?"

"Nothing," the man said.

"Nothing," repeated the trees, and they blinked their glittering eyes.

—From the journals of Tamino Ailare

When Carmina Ailare was a little child, her father took her into the forest to gather rocks. It was a welcome change from the merciless glare of the constant sun in town. She could remember the long, sweaty walk from the front door, along the bleached glare of the cobblestone street to the high wall that circled the city. The nearest exit point from their house was the smallest of the four ports, and was set low like a pleading, open mouth. It only had one guard, who was often too drunk to bother arriving at his post, and the door would remain locked for days at a time. Carmina remembered holding her father's cool palm, and wondering at how dry it was while her own was hot and sticky with sweat and dust.

They ducked under the low stone arch, sidled past the guard who stank of vinegar and grime and old meat. The guard grunted what Carmina assumed must have been a hello. Her father responded with a sound like the creaking of wood. Between the forest and the wall was a thin circle of bare earth that the Governor, in his terror of the green world beyond, insisted on clearing to keep the trees at bay. Each day, laborers, conscripted from the Penal Colony, grunted and heaved with tillers, scythes and plows, under the watchful eyes of their guards. They cleared the green to the root, and yet it resprouted under their feet. By evening the trees unfurled thin leaves towards the darkening sky, and were knee high by morning when the next group of laborers arrived.

Carmina and her father tripped across the stubbled ground and slipped into the shadow of the wood. It was cool and damp and dark. Carmina let go of her father's cool palm and struggled over root and branch and fallen trunk. Her father seemed to sway with the ease of windy limbs. With each foot fall, he seemed to take a green hue, then brown, then green again. Finally, they reached a small, clear stream, one of the many arms that reach for the broad middle of the forest—the flowing Opponax River. The stream was swift and clear, though narrow. When she waded in, it only reached her waist, though she had to hold onto her father's hands to keep from slipping away. The stream's bottom was spangled entirely with small, oval stones—just large enough to fit inside of her small fists. She submerged herself again and again, filling her sodden skirts with as many stones as the fabric would bear.

Afterwards, she sat with her father on the stream's rocky edge, their feet still dangling in the water, as they examined the pile of stones between them. Checking each one for a purity of color, they made piles of blue stones, green stones and black stones. White stones and muddled stones were thrown back. As they did this, Tamino Ailare told his daughter a story:

"Once upon a time, my darling, there lived a man who fell in love with a tree."

"What sort of tree," Carmina asked.

"What sort of tree? Any sort! What does it matter what sort it was?"

Carmina thought on this. "Well, was it a good tree? A kind tree? Or was it a selfish and wicked tree?"

"A good tree," Carmina's father said quietly. "The very best of trees."

"Good," Carmina said. "Because I want to like this story."

"Anyway, a man loved a tree very much. The tree grew at the center of the forest at the center of the world. It was not easy for the man to see his love. He had obligations. He was an honored citizen with a wife and a child. He had duties that he must do."

"How could he love something that was not his wife and family."

"Because he did."

"So he was a wicked man."

"Yes. But also a good man. Sometimes, a man can be both. Sometimes, they are the same."

Carmina said nothing. She watched the way her father watched the wood. His hair shone black, then gold, then green in the dappled sun.

"One day, the man prepared himself to leave his beloved and found that he could not. He laid his hands in the tender groves along the bark, buried his face at the mossy roots. The tree quaked and sighed. It waved its limbs mournfully in the crushing wind, and as the man's heart broke within his breast, the tree shuddered and split down its very middle, crashing down on either side of the man. At the center of the trunk lay a stone, dark red and glittering—like this." He reached into the pile of stones and extracted one that was teardrop shaped—smooth and red and twice the size of Carmina's thumb. He deposited it into her hand. "The one true stone."

"Did he go home, then?" Carmina asked.

"I don't know," her father said.

"Did he die?"

"I don't know," he said again.

Carmina looked at the stone in her hand. It glittered. It blinked. "What should I do with this stone?"

"Keep it," her father said standing up and hunting for his boots. "Don't lose it."

But she did lose it. That very day. As they left the wood, the stone slid through a hole in her pocket and landed on the overgrown trail. She never told her father.

To Our Noble and Gracious Emperor, Beloved of Generations, Protector of the Faith, Healer of Nations, Headmaster of Errant Tribes and Bearer of Knowledge, Reason and Truth: Greetings, Cousin.

It has been fourteen years since last we met, and fourteen years since last I wounded your Honor and dared to impede on the Blessed Sanctity of your most Holy Office. It is only by your Grace and Blessings that I still live to pen this letter, and that my wife and child still remain as a delight and comfort for this, your most Humble Servant. You sent me to, with all Diligence and Purpose, endeavor to study and document the pernicious Molaru—known locally as the men who live in trees—and thus provide needed Insight for your Grace in your Considerations for the future of the Molaru, the colony, and the State of Trade along the glorious Opponax.

Because of the Love that once we shared, oh Cousin, oh Sovereign, oh Patron to us all; because it is with only the fondest memories do I recall our days as young lads together, suffering the same punishments

after the wrongs we did to that poor Governess—may she rest in peace—that I must confess my failures in this matter. The task you set, cousin, is impossible. The Molaru will not—nay, they cannot—be dominated. Strangely, they cannot be a threat to you either. For fourteen years, I have followed, transcribed, documented and interviewed. I have used every known method of espionage, coercion, argument and trickery. I believe I know more about the language, history, culture and movements of the Molaru than any other man in the Empire. And I know nothing. Nothing! For fifteen years I have labored as a lover labors, quivering over the arch of my Beloved's eyebrow, moaning for one backward glance. They have given me little. And I, now, am a weakened, broken, and broken-hearted man.

The reason for my poor epistle to you, Dear Cousin, is this: any information I have learned, any detail that may—though this is doubtful—assist you in your quest to crush the Molaru, I will not give. For fourteen years I have sweated in this swamp, suffered under the weight of dull minds in this empty hull that calls itself a University, and for fourteen years I have loved the Molaru. If they knew your full intention for sending me, they have never let on. They will now, for I shall tell them. Whether or not they will let me live is an open question. Regardless, I would rather offer my throat to the blades of friends than to the hooded minions of a tyrant. I loved you once, Cousin, but your wickedness has forced me to despise you. I love the Molaru, and my treachery will likely cause them to despise me. So it goes.

My notes have been burned, my journal hidden in the depths of the forest, and my books have been removed from every library in the Empire by the stealthy hands of my remaining allies. All is destroyed or lost or hidden. All I have left now to lay claim to, is my life. So it is for any man. Even you, dear Cousin.

With all due Courtesy, Honor and Respect, I remain,

Your loyal servant,
Tamino Ailare

Carmina went into the garden. Two servants stood under the orange trees, gathering fruit into four large baskets.

"These are not ready to be picked," Carmina scolded. "They aren't ripe. Did *she* tell you to do this?" The servants simply looked at the ground, their large, mournful eyes heavy-lidded and sullen. She looked to the edge of the garden. Her future husband stood facing the wall, throwing rocks over the top. Above the wall's rim the trees hovered and pressed, their leaves clouded with mist.

"You won't be allowed to speak to the servants once we are married," he said without looking at her. He reached down and picked up another stone, throwing it neatly over. The trees shuddered.

"Why not," Carmina asked.

"Mother says that as the daughter of a known heretic and fear-monger, you would likely upset the staff and spread your father's doctrine of laziness and crass immorality."

"She says that, does she?" She watched him reach down and pick up another stone, about the size and shape of a mango. He

hefted it once, then twice, and glanced sidelong in her direction before hurling it over the lip of the wall. He threw it with such force, such focused intention, that she assumed he must have been thinking of throwing the stone at her head. It was a sentiment she shared. His head was, after all, rather large, and would be easy to hit.

On the other side of the wall, the trees gathered into a mass of green. Mist hung from the skin of the leaves and tumbled like drapes to the ground. Carmina coughed. She watched his hunched shoulders, his slack middle, the pasty skin just barely clinging to his fleshy neck. He bit his lower lip—pink as raw meat—as he reached down and hefted two more stones. His front teeth sank deep into the lip, creasing it neatly at the top. Carmina wondered if he would draw blood. She looked back over the wall. The heavily greened branches seemed even closer now, as though they were creeping over. The limbs swayed insistently though no discernable wind blew. Her husband to be still didn't look at her, but stared over the wall, preparing to throw his stone.

"I shouldn't worry about it though. It's not like you won't be cared for. Mother's got it all planned. We'll sell this hovel—honestly, I don't know how you can live here."

"I like it here," Carmina said. He didn't notice.

"We will be able to purchase a sizable stake in the ruby mine, and will have funds left over to renovate my grandfather's estate—"

"Excuse me," Carmina interrupted. "That's my rock." In his left hand was a stone, teardrop shaped and red. It flickered in the light. "My father told me not to lose it."

"Your father is dead." Her husband to be examined the stone. "And anyway, anything that's yours is mine. That's how it works. Besides, there's nothing special about this. It's just a stupid rock." He threw it high into the air. Carmina watched it arc cleanly over the wall and disappear into the mass of leaves. The trees were over the wall now—leaves and sticks tumbled into the courtyard, piling along the edge. The green gathered and swelled like clouds—or a wave, and Carmina wondered briefly if they would be submerged.

"There," he said. "You see? Problem solved. There's nothing–" But he did not finish his sentence. There was a sound on the other side of the wall. A sound like the creaking of wood. A sound of wood bending, swelling, and snapping open, followed by the sharp note of sap in the air.

"The trees," her husband to be said, and though he pulled at her arm, his voice seemed to be coming from very far away. "The *trees,*" he said again. But she couldn't hear him. She was too busy listening to the music of limb and branch and wood.

Six trees crashed into the wall, crushing it to the ground. From a thousand places inside the breathing forest, trees sighed, cracked, and yawned open. Men wearing polished breastplates and leafy tunics crawled through the gaps, scurried over the sides and leapt from the leaning branches.

"Run," her husband to be yelled as he ran. He turned, his broad face slack and slick from fear before a blade sliced him first in the thigh, then at the chest, then at the neck. He crumpled in a dappling of red and green and red, red, red. Carmina knelt be-

side him. Men with knives and spears and clubs ran by. Somewhere, a bell rang. And another answered it. And a third. These bells only rang in case of catastrophe, and Carmina had only heard them twice in her life—once when a man escaped from the penal colony, and once when the men who live in trees swarmed into her house and killed her father.

The man who would be her husband lay, face up, on the ground. His mouth ran with blood, and his breath was harsh and shallow. Carmina took his hand. She picked up a leaf and laid it on his chest wound. She laid another on his thigh. She laid another at his throat. He blinked. His breathing slowed and became easy.

"Once," she said, "there was a man who journeyed to the center of the wide world to find his fourteen fathers."

He looked at her face. Slowly, he brought his other hand to hers and squeezed weakly.

"Once, there was a man who was good and wicked at the same time. He loved a tree. He loved her so much, he thought he'd die."

Eight more trees fell over the wall. Carmina looked around and instead of a courtyard, they sat in a forest. Nineteen trees grew up through the house, their canopies piercing and arching over the roof. One of the Molaru men went by wearing her aunt's boots and carrying her favorite fan. Carmina did not move.

"Once there was a man who was not a man. Once there was a man who was me." The man who would be her husband shuddered and sighed and his hands dropped away from hers and onto the ground. Carmina stood and walked to a gap in the wall and climbed through. Forty trees stood with their middles slit open. Carmina approached the nearest tree and laid her hands on the exposed wood. It was yellow, veined with green and brown and smelled sweet and sharp with sap and dust. She found two handholds and lifted herself up and inside, finding that she just fit. Finding that she was quite comfortable. And when the bark closed behind her, she did not cry out. She did not look back.

NOVELLAS FROM PS

The Mermaids—Robert Edric's tale of an isolated, struggling fishing village, and mermaids; and, *Hereafter and After* by Richard Parks, in which Jake Hallman dies and teams up with a disgruntled ex-Valkyrie named Freya on a quest to discover if there is any place in the cosmos where a spirit can be truly free.

'Eagle Song' was inspired by a new direction for Mr. Baxter. It came about following his participation in a workshop on SETI, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, in Arizona in February 2008. "In a way," he says, "this story is a remote sidebar to my Manifold *novels, on the Fermi Paradox: why aren't the aliens here already? I'm interested in what motivates the people I met in Arizona to devote their lives to the search, and how we would feel if they found us."*

Eagle Song

Stephen Baxter

7510 BC.

Wolf Cry led Spring Snow out of the camp and up the track to the ridge and the Giant's Stone. It was deep in the night, but this was midsummer, and the huge sky was a deep blue speckled with stars. The way was easy to find.

They were both breathing hard by the time they reached the Stone. But Wolf was just fifteen years old, Spring sixteen, both lean and fit, and they recovered quickly. 'There.' Wolf pointed high in the sky. 'See that? The new star.'

Spring looked up. Her eyes were wide, her small mouth open, and a pretty pin of carved antler held her skin cloak fixed at her throat. Wolf felt something churn deep inside him, churn with longing. She said, 'Well, I can hardly miss it.' She looked away uneasily, and glanced back the way they had come, to the camp by the lake.

From here they could see the sweep of the landscape, the lake flat and still, the huts hunched by the shore, cages of bent-over poles draped with skin and reed thatch. Thin threads of smoke rose up from the ruddy glow of the hearths. Wolf could hear a dog growl in its sleep, and somebody snoring—old Speaker, probably—small sounds that rose up into the still air. Around the camp the wildwood was black in this light and foreboding, but it was broken by the smouldering scars of fire. The people burnt the reeds; new growth attracted the deer towards the water.

Spring said, 'I could have seen your star from down there, from my mother's side. Why did you need to bring me up here?'

But there was something about this particular star that Wolf Cry longed to share with her. 'Spring—it changes.'

She frowned. 'What do you mean? Does it wander? Will it fall? Do you think it will sprout hair?'

'No. I never heard anybody talking about any other star like this. Sometimes it's there. And sometimes it's not.' He opened and closed his fist, trying to make her understand. 'I saw it. A few nights ago it was fast, like this,' and he flapped his fingers quickly. 'But it slowed down. I counted it with my breath. One breath. Another. Then two, then three, then five—' Fingers flapped, flapped.

'You're talking nonsense,' she said. She was shivering despite the warmth of the night. 'Stars don't blink like, like an *eye*. It's not blinking now, is it?'

'No,' he admitted. 'It kept getting longer between blinks. I tried to count it, five and five until there were four fives, and it blinked again, and then—'

She shook her head, denying this strangeness. The people knew the sky as intimately as they knew the land, for it informed them of the times when the deer and horses and aurochs ran, when the forest's fruit ripened, and when the snow would return. Any change was something to be wary of. 'I don't like this, Wolf.' She moved away from him into the shadow of the Stone, and stepped on something that crunched under her feet. 'Oh! What's *this*? Oh, it's Speaker's old mask . . . ' She reached down and picked up a skull adorned with antlers, one broken in two. She dropped it in disgust. 'I think I cut my foot. *And* I dropped my antler pin. What a mess this is.' She clutched her skin cloak, which had come loose. 'I'm going back to my mother. Wolf, you should come too. Stars that blink—'

'I saw it,' he insisted.

'Nobody has told of such things, so they can't be real, and that's that.' She stomped back down the track, her irritation and nervousness obvious in her stride.

Alone, Wolf sat miserably with his back to the Giant's Stone. If he'd hoped to impress Spring Snow by bringing her up here, he had done the opposite. He picked up the skull mask. Speaker had worn it during his dream dances, the times when he spoke to the animals and the birds and the fish. He had discarded it for a more handsome stag's skull. And Wolf saw something else that gleamed white. It was Spring's deer-antler needle. Idly he used the needle to scrape at the skull, scratching spirals and starburst patterns into the worn, much-handled surface.

He looked up at the new star. It was so bright it looked like a fleck of the sun, he thought, and the same sort of colour. If only it had blinked for Spring, even just once, she would have believed him and everything would have been different. But no star was going to perform for his benefit.

Or would it? Why would a star blink at all? What *was* a star? A stone, an animal, a bird, a person, a god? What could a star see of the tiny movements of the people, their little camp? But he glanced over at the smoke that rose from the reeds they had set burning, and further across the hillside at the great gash of the clearing they had burned two years ago and later abandoned, not yet healed. Could a star see such vast burnings, such changes in the land? If it was trying to speak to him, what was it saying? But even as he formulated the questions he knew he would never find an answer.

And just then the star blinked again, turning dark for a heartbeat, two, three, before shining down on him once more.

949 BC.

It was chance that revealed the strange star to Gouen, that cold summer night. Chance that her eyes were drawn up to its unnatural flickering, from the decomposing corpse of her child by the lake.

It was midsummer, but it was cold, cloudy, wet—a dismal season, nothing like the brilliant summers Gouen remembered from her own childhood. And it was lonely too. The family's great cone-shaped house was abandoned save for herself, and the

fields marked out across the hillside by reeves and low walls were populated only by weeds and young trees, come to take back their ancient domain.

Gouen's own husband was gone, dead of overwork.

Her sisters and their children had fled the hunger to throw themselves on the mercy of Podraig in his brooding fort further down the valley. Nobody could farm up here on the uplands any more, only in the valleys and the lowlands, all of which were owned by men like Podraig with his swords of iron. Gouen, twenty-five years old, knew she would have to follow her sisters. And she would have to trade the last pitiful remnants of her father's legacy, the pottery, the bits of fine fabrics, the bronze daggers nobody wanted any more, for a place in Podraig's petty domain.

But she would not leave, not yet. Not while her only daughter Magda, just eight years old when she died, still lay on the sky burial platform by the water; not until the birds and the worms and the flies had done their work, and Gouen could take her cleansed bones to inter them in the barrow of her grandmothers.

When the weather permitted she sat through the night on her blanket by the lake shore, by Magda's platform. Tonight was mild, relatively, and the stars shone through breaks in the cloud cover. The midsummer sky was pale, and she could easily see the ridge and the brooding mass of the Giant's Stone and its ring of pillars, on a spot where, it was said, the skull of the Giant who had carried the great Stone could be found, with horns sprouting out of his broken face, and the bone marked with spirals and stars. Gouen had been very small the last time anybody worshipped up there. When the weather failed them the farmers had abandoned the old stone gods and had taken to sacrificing and propitiating at the edge between land and water, the border between this world and the next.

And tonight, praying for repose for her daughter, Gouen would make another sacrifice to the water gods: one of her last daggers, a thin blade of bronze that had been handled by her grandfathers since time out of mind.

It was just as she was about to jam the dagger between two boulders, meaning to break the blade before casting it in the water, that she noticed the flickering in the sky.

Entranced, she watched the new star come and go, shining longer and more steadily with each return, as if it were trying to say something to her. She counted the shining by her breath: two breaths, three, five, eight, thirteen . . . The glow of the star was bright, surely brighter than any other star in the sky, and it had a yellowness to it that reminded her of the sun.

Magda's white face was turned up to the star: poor Magda who had never known a single summer of warmth and play.

Gouen lurched to her feet, stiff from sitting on the damp ground, pulled her woollen blanket around her shoulders, and stumbled over to the platform of the dead. Worms curled in Magda's vacant eye sockets, and flies rose up from her open mouth. It was unbearable to Gouen that Magda could not see the sunny star. How it would have delighted her!

Her father's dagger was in her hand.

She leaned over Magda and scraped hard at her forehead, her movements jerky and

anxious. She drew a star shape, there on the pale bone under the remnants of flesh. It would be a mother's last gift to a lost daughter, to show her this shining jewel of light that rode over the petty concerns of the human world, the rain and the mud, the grasping of men like Podraig. She scraped and scraped.

But the skull rolled loose on its neck. And before she was done the bronze tip blunted. She threw away the dagger and fell weeping on her daughter.

1238 AD.

At the close of the sixth day of the new star's apparition, Brother Wilfred summoned Ibn Mazur to his side. Wilfred had the Moor set out chairs and a table on the green beside the abbey's cloister, with parchment and quills and ink, and books and hourglasses.

From here Ibn Mazur had an uninterrupted view of the countryside, of the lake and the village on the upland beside it, and the crag with its brooding rock and silent attendant monoliths. It was midsummer. The sun had set but the sky was still a powder blue, and only a few stars yet shone—one of them the enigmatic newcomer. For just a moment this dismal corner of Wales evoked some of the beauty of far-off al-Andalus. Ibn Mazur could never return to the land of his birth. But he was alive, thanks to the charity of the brothers of this Christian house; and Ibn Mazur offered thanks to Allah for his life, and for this instant of remembrance, and he touched his fingers to his ruined lips.

Wilfred saw nothing of the evening. For days he had been staring at the sun through his bits of parchment with their pinprick holes, determined to discover if the star's light was indeed the same as sunlight. Now his eyes were tired, he said; as he waited impatiently for the day to fade he sat back in his chair with a damp towel over his eyes, white hair sticking up around his shaved scalp. Unseeing he might be, but his mind bubbled with speculation. 'You say you have the date I asked of you, Ibn Mazur?'

'I do.'

Wilfred breathed, a frail old man's excitement apparent in the way his bony fingers flexed. 'Then tell me—but not yet . . . '

When the winking star had first appeared in the sky, Wilfred had been excited to learn of local legends that seemed to be connected to it. Seven centuries after Augustine the people of this remote place still clung to remnants of pagan belief. And they said this had been a holy land long before the Norman abbey had been built here to replace a Saxon church, which in turn had been built over a sylvan temple of the pre-Roman British. All of this was a link to the deep past, Wilfred believed, to legends of a dead child with a third eye that had gazed up at the winking star, and to even older legends of the primordial giant who built the landscape and was now buried under the great Stone. Wilfred had seized on Ibn Mazur's scholarship, and had urged the Moor to check through the almagests he had carried since his enslavement in Granada to determine if the Moors had any record of those earlier apparitions. After all the winking star must have been visible all across the world.

Somewhat to his own surprise Ibn Mazur had been successful. More than two

thousand years before, long before the Prophet's revelation, such a sighting had been made by a Chinese court astronomer, written down in a book of astronomical oddities, and eventually brought to al-Andalus by traders along the Mongols' Silk Road.

It was this Chinese date that Wilfred now deferred hearing, like a child putting aside a strawberry the better to enjoy its flavour later. 'Let us review what we know. The star itself—'

'Is known to the Arabs as Altair.'

'And to Ptolemy as Alpha Aquilae, the first star of the constellation of the Eagle.'

Ibn Mazur bowed his head. 'But the light we see, so like sunlight as you have observed, is not that of the star itself. In the intervals when the new star is dark, we still see Altair shining as we remember it.'

'We know that it has shone in its intermittent way for six days now, in which time it has undergone two cycles of pulsing—starting with the rapid flickering, the shining intervals gradually lengthening.'

'So we believe. But we cannot see the star easily in the day, and our observations of the beginning of the first cycle are uncertain.' Based on the ramblings of a wide-eyed boy and old woman of the village.

Wilfred waved that away. 'Well, we have one more chance to observe a full cycle with scholarly precision.'

Ibn Mazur frowned. 'Why just one? Why not many?'

'The star is ruled by numbers—so I believe, Ibn Mazur. We have had two cycles of three days; a third cycle would round off the set neatly.' The talk of numbers made Wilfred agitated; despite his great age he had a boyish enthusiasm for his studies. 'I cannot wait any more. The date, Ibn Mazur! Tell me what the Chinese said!'

Ibn Mazur had managed to convert the date from an archaic Chinese form to the Arabs' elegant calendar and then to the Christians' own error-ridden calculations. 'The Chinese saw the star nine hundred and forty-nine years before Christ.'

Wilfred's mouth worked. 'Nine hundred and forty-nine! How long ago is that? Added to our date, which is one thousand, two hundred and thirty-eight years—oh! Numbers entrance but baffle me.'

Wilfred was a computistor; his primary job was to figure the movable date of Easter each year. But Ibn Mazur had never yet met a Christian who could do computations much beyond nine hundred, not even a computistor. 'I worked it out on my abacus,' he said dryly. 'The apparition was two thousand, one hundred and eighty-seven years ago.'

'Two thousand, one hundred . . . ' Wilfred muttered, adding up figures in his head. 'Why, I believe that number is divisible by three!'

Ibn Mazur took a bit of parchment and a pen, and wrote down the figure in his own Arabic numbers. Because of his affliction all but two of his fingers were bandaged stumps, and his writing was clumsy and slow. 'You are correct,' he said at length. 'The product of the division is also divisible by three . . . '

It took them a few minutes to establish that two thousand, one hundred and eighty-seven was in fact three multiplied by itself seven times.

Wilfred was so excited by this result that he sat upright and his towel fell from his face. Ibn Mazur was shocked at how red

and watery his eyes were. 'Numbers, Moor! I told you, New Altair is a star made up of numbers, woven by God and hurled into the sky!'

Ibn Mazur looked up with some unease. 'Perhaps you are right. But why should God speak to us in this way?'

'To reassure us, perhaps, that there is an order in all things. To remind us that He is *here*, in an age of chaos which crowds around us . . . '

Like all thoughtful Christians Ibn Mazur had met, Wilfred fretted over the trajectory of history. Across Europe, save only for Iberia, Islam was triumphant against the forces of Christianity. Further afield, the pagan Mongols were ripping in turn into the bellies of the great Islamic empires of the east. It was a world where Christ's triumph seemed very distant indeed.

And yet there were gentler consolations, Ibn Mazur thought. He looked down at the village. Tithed to the abbey, it was a rude collection of longhouses where, Ibn Mazur had been horrified to learn, the people lived *with* their animals. Tonight those few villagers not yet in their houses kept their eyes averted from the sky, for these Welsh were a superstitious lot who feared the new flickering star.

But Ibn Mazur had experienced great kindness here. There were no slaves in Wales or England, none that Ibn Mazur had encountered; he himself had been set free after his purchase in Bristol by a lord who valued his skills in arithmetic. There was law: the manorial courts ensured a rough balance was maintained between the interests of the peasants and the lords and bishops. And the Christian Church, for all its infantile theology, cared for its flock from cradle to grave in return for devotion and moral rectitude. Wilfred spoke earnestly of the Fourth Lateran Council when the Church had resolved that salvation was available to all, not just the most righteous. There were worse systems.

Ibn Mazur himself had cause to be grateful for Christian charity. He had caught his ailment when the Viking raiders who had captured him had traded him through African ports. When it became impossible to hide his condition his lord had not thrown him out or put him to death, but consigned him to the care of this remote abbey with its hospital of Saint Lazarus, patron saint of lepers.

Would a star, or a being riding on a star, be able to see such petty sufferings and kindnesses? Perhaps such a being would make out only the greater works of man: the walls of Hadrian and Offa, or the way humans had turned so much of their world into a patchwork of farms. Perhaps, then, the flickering star transcended human divisions among men. Perhaps the star presaged a better future in which Christian and Muslim would be able to put aside the centuries of warfare, and work together on loftier purposes.

Wilfred was agitated. 'Tell me, Moor, I cannot see well, my eyes are tired . . . Has the star gone dark? Has the new cycle of flickering begun?'

Ibn Mazur glanced up. The sunlight sliver had indeed gone out, and only the pale, familiar light of Altair shone. 'It has,' he said softly; and even as he said it the brighter light returned.

'Quickly, man,' Wilfred said. 'The hourglasses . . . '

As the star resumed its flashing, each glare longer than the one preceding, the two of them went into the routine they had rehearsed, of hourglasses and counting and scratched numbers on parchment. It soon became apparent to Ibn Mazur that each successive glow lasted a little more than half as long again as its predecessor.

But Wilfred was after more precision. 'Yes, yes—look at these numbers! It is as I suspected. If you take the first pair each as a unit of duration, then the next beaming was two units long, and then three, then five, then eight, then thirteen, then—'

'I see the sequence,' Ibn Mazur said. 'I do not understand it.'

'It is additive, man! Look—one plus one is two; I don't need your abacus for *that*. One plus two is three. Two plus three is five . . . '

'Ah.' Each number in the sequence was the sum of the two preceding. Something in Ibn Mazur warmed with satisfaction at the realisation, and yet another part of him cringed. Could Wilfred be right, that something divine really was at work above his head, in the midsummer sky of Wales?

The two of them continued to work long into the night, measuring the lengthening intervals until they could count no more.

Wilfred turned out to be right that the final sequence of flashes lasted three days, as had the first two, and then the star turned dark, leaving only patient Altair. Wilfred babbled speculation, wondering what strange eyes might see the star when it returned in another three-to-the-seventh years, or three to the sixth or three to the eight . . . But Wilfred was not able to see even the end of the new star's nine days, for his eyes were ruined from his staring into the midsummer sun.

After that Ibn Mazur stayed with him, a leprous Moor with a blind Christian. They let the days slide by, neither of them with anywhere else to go, and waited for more messages from a silent sky.

1967 AD.

'Neolithic SETI, man,' Neville had promised on the phone. 'That's what I'm talking about. That *and* the Beatles. You've got to be there . . . '

On that June Sunday, it was early evening by the time Barry Morgan drove up to the ruins of the abbey. The place hadn't changed in the eight or ten years since he and Neville used to come up here when they were both still geeky kids at school in Cardiff, fascinated by maths and scared of girls. The abbey still stood gaunt beside its lake, a shell since the dissolution of the monasteries four centuries ago. And, older yet, there was the Giant's Stone, a great glacial erratic with its ring of standing stones. But the pale light of the four-day-old new star—the sunlight beacon, as astronomers like Neville were calling it—was already visible in the evening sky. And Barry could see the TV aerial Neville had fixed to the stone wall of the abbey.

Barry took the box of bottled beer from the boot of his car and strolled up to the abbey. Neville Wilson was on his hands and knees tinkering with the TV's tuning. He had brought blankets, a hamper of sandwiches, flasks—a regular picnic. Barry dumped his beers on the floor. 'I can't believe you actually brought that bloody set up here, you mad bugger.'

Neville got to his feet, awkward and shy-looking as ever, and wiped his hands on his corduroy trousers. 'Wotcher, Barry. Or should I say—peace and love?'

'Shut up and have a beer.' Barry sat on a blanket, threw Neville a bottle, and used the flat of his hand and the edge of a tumbled stone to open a bottle for himself. He took a long pull; the beer was warm after the drive up from his mum's home in Cardiff.

The 'Our World' show had already started, Barry saw. This was, he had been surprised to learn, a broadcasting stunt dreamed up by the staid old BBC. For the first time twenty-four countries, something like two hundred million people, were to share a single live show with contributions from each of the individual countries. Right now, rather bafflingly, jolly Swedes were showing off their canoeing skills. 'Is that what they spent all those millions of quid on comsats for? Canoeing?'

Neville grinned. 'Wait until the Beatles come on. You're looking tanned, as far as I can tell under all that facial hair.'

'Ah, that Californian sun. You can't beat it . . . '

But while Barry dressed like a West Coast American, Neville wore pale brown cords and a crumpled white shirt, and his eyes were hidden behind big Roy Orbison glasses, as if he had been deep-frozen since the fifties. Barry was struck how much the two of them had grown apart. After their first degrees, while Barry had gone into the private sector, Neville had stayed on at Cambridge to do an astronomy Ph.D..

Barry felt like winding him up. 'What a season. The Summer of Star Love, they're calling it now. Those hippy chicks just fall over with a bit of banter about peace and love.'

'That's all it means to you, is it? Getting inside the knickers of some spaced-out teenage bird? I wonder what they'd think if they knew you work at a weapons lab like Livermore.'

'Make no difference probably. It's all bollocks, man, all of it. While one end of America is eating flowers, the other is using helicopter gunships to strafe straw huts in Vietnam. You just take what you can grab, just like always.'

'Well, not everybody thinks that way.' Neville pointed at the beacon. 'And besides, that's not bollocks, is it?'

'Ah.' Barry stood, beer in hand, and looked hard at the sunlight beacon. He felt a prickle of scientific curiosity, and envy, for Neville had managed to get involved with the global effort to study the new star. 'Repeating the flickering pattern, is it?'

'Yes. The beam lengths are running through the Fibonacci sequence, as far as we can tell. The SETI boys in America—the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, searching for radio signals from the stars—thought the aliens would send us a sequence of prime numbers. But if you're going to communicate in mathematics, the Fibonacci series is even more obvious. I mean, it's there in nature, embedded in the spiral shape of the galaxies for instance . . . '

'And it's definitely coming from Altair.'

'Oh, yes. Seventeen light years away. If we had more time we might be able to get a parallax and prove it for sure, but that depends on the signal lasting longer than nine days—time for the Earth to move significantly in its orbit.' Neville held to a controversial view that there had been previous

sightings of the beacon, perhaps in the thirteenth century—there was supposedly a note left by a monk of this very abbey to that effect. That sighting had lasted no longer than nine days; maybe this apparition would cut short too.

'But the light we see,' Barry said, ' has nothing to do with Altair.'

'No way. It's pretty much monochromatic.'

'A laser, then.'

'We think so. Very narrow beam. Pointed right at us. *And* tuned to the peak wavelength of our own sunlight. Not only that, it's got an almost identical apparent magnitude as Sirius, the brightest star in our sky.'

Barry thought that over. 'They intended it for us. The Altaireans. Jesus.'

Neville was grinning. 'It's scary, or thrilling, depending how you look at it. We've actually been able to dig out a lot more information. There are slight Doppler shifts on two periodic cycles, one of a few days, the other of years. We think their transmitting station is on a planet. We're seeing the station move towards and away from us, as the planet turns, and travels around its sun.'

'You've worked out their day and year.'

'Yeah. Altair is maybe eleven times as bright as the sun. We think their planet is a big one, turning slowly, about three times as far from Altair as Earth is from the sun.'

'Cool enough for liquid water.'

'We think so.'

'All that from Doppler shifts.' Barry sat again, finished his beer and cracked another bottle. 'I think I'm more interested in the reaction down here on Earth.'

He had seen some of it for himself. For the few days of its patient signalling the sunlight beacon had been a wonder in the press, even crowding Vietnam and the aftermath of Israel's Six Day War off the front pages. The scientists were crowing. The Pope had made an earnest statement about sending the Altaireans evidence of Christ's incarnation. Wernher von Braun had declared, 'With the right funding we'll be at Altair in fifty years.' The UFOlogists said it was a government hoax designed to distract attention from the truth about aliens.

And all over the western world a generation of young people, already blissed out on drugs and music and sunshine, had kicked off a kind of global party. Barry had bluffed his way into one of a 'star happening', just a couple of days ago, at the feet of the Golden Gate Bridge. The drugs and sex had been on tap.

'I suppose the hysteria will wear off,' he said. 'I mean, as far as alien life is concerned the beacon is only a proof of existence, as old Prof Morton would have said at Cambridge. I figure most people believed in aliens anyhow, and half of *them* think they've met them.'

'I don't know,' Neville said thoughtfully, pushing his heavy glasses up his thin nose. 'Yes, it will pass out of the headlines. But even a proof of existence represents a philosophical upheaval—like Copernicus, like Darwin. From now on, we can still theologise if we like, but we're going to have to separate religion from the knowledge that we really do share the universe with a higher power. They might even be here soon; seventeen light years isn't all that far.'

'Um.' Barry swigged his beer and watched the TV. 'Speaking of God . . . '

The screen had filled up with an image of John Lennon in a flowery shirt, strumming a guitar and chewing gum.

Neville turned the volume up. He had always been a Beatles fan.

The Beatles were singing in a flower-strewn studio with a string orchestra and acolytes sitting at their feet. Barry recognised Mick Jagger, Donovan, Keith Moon. The song was slow, dreamlike, littered with what sounded like sitars, and very beautiful.

Barry said, 'I see they've dressed up again. What are they singing?'

'A new song by George. "Eagle Song"—for Aquila, see. Evidently they were going to do something by Lennon, but scrapped it when the sunlight beacon lit up.'

'I hope the Altaireans enjoy this when they get to hear it in seventeen years.' He eyed Neville. 'And this is why they are speaking to us, right? They detected our radio broadcasts, and now they're flashing their beacon to show they know we're here.'

Neville shook his head. 'That's the consensus. You know I don't agree. I'm convinced they've been signalling since long before the radio age.' Hastily, he ran over the evidence for previous sightings of the beacon. 'Those Chinese were good astronomers; we *know* they made accurate sightings of novas whose relics we can see. And there's a pattern to the dates . . . ' He picked up a pad and scribbled: 1967 AD, 1238 AD, 949 BC. 'Look at the intervals. Going back in time, seven hundred and twenty-nine years, then two thousand, one hundred and eighty-seven years—which is precisely three times the previous interval. I'm willing to bet there was a previous event another threefold years before then.'

Barry could never resist a puzzle. 'Three times twenty-one eighty-seven is six thousand, five hundred and sixty-one. Add that to your oldest date . . . ' He wrote the result on Neville's list: 7510 BC. 'That's back in the Mesolithic.'

'They can see us. They know how long our year is, and used it as a unit of time.'

'Why all the threes?'

Neville waggled his hand. 'Maybe they have three fingers.'

'Or three cocks. How could they have known we were here in the Mesolithic? We weren't using radios then.'

'No, but we were changing the world. The big forest clearances came with the farming revolution in the Neolithic, but even in the Mesolithic we were slashing and burning, starting to domesticate plants and animals. You can imagine viewing the composition of a remote planet's atmosphere with some kind of spectroscope. Maybe you can see that kind of global change. It would be distinguishable from natural events like volcanoes or asteroid strikes, for instance by the characteristic timescale.'

'And when they saw us starting to farm–'

'They hit us with a beacon. They didn't expect we had radio telescopes, but it was a good guess we had eyes that could see our own sun. God knows what they intended our ancestors to make of the signal, mind. Could have kick-started a Neolithic astronomical revolution, I guess. Pity we weren't a bit smarter. I hope whoever saw it found some consolation. Which begs the question of what use we will make of this latest signal.'

'Time will tell,' Barry said.

'I guess so. Anyhow it's a falsifiable hypothesis. If the pattern persists we can predict the next sighting, after a third of seven hundred and twenty-nine years.' He added another date to the list: 2210 AD.

'Well, you and I won't be around to see it.' Barry had drained another beer, and cracked a third. The Beatles were finishing their song with a long, repetitive coda. Neville stared at them wistfully, a true fan. On impulse Barry dug into his pocket, and produced a couple of sugar lumps wrapped in tin foil. 'Here. You ever tried this?'

Neville took one dubiously. 'LSD, right?'

'Everybody's taking it, including the Beatles. Especially the Beatles. Try it. It makes the world sparkle.' He nibbled his own lump.

'I can't afford to pay you—'

'In Cardiff, it costs about a quid a tab. Forget about it. Listen, Neville. What you said about the Altaireans being a higher culture. How much power would you need to send a signal like the sunlight beacon?'

Neville put down the lump and rubbed his nose. 'Well, we're not sure. The laser will cast a spot of some size across the solar system, like a searchlight. We don't actually know how big the spot is, how far it extends beyond the Earth. NASA are trying to measure it using their Mariner deep space probes. It depends how good their aim is, and how tight the beam is. I mean, you'd have to fire the laser to where Earth was going to be in seventeen years' time . . . Across that spot you need to maintain a flux equivalent to the light reaching us from Sirius.'

'So how much power?'

'In the terawatts. That's surely beyond us for the near future, but a Kardashev Type II culture could manage it easily.'

'A what? . . . '

The Kardashev types were a theoretical grading of alien civilisations based on the power they could muster: Type II controlled the entire output of a star, and Type III a galaxy. Humanity was somewhat less than a Type I, controlling a planet's energy supply.

Barry nibbled his sugar. 'A terawatt laser would be a hell of a weapon.'

Neville frowned. 'Typical of you to think that way. Anything's a weapon, potentially. I could choke you with flowers.'

'I guess so.' But Barry thought of himself as a realist. Tanks burned in the desert around Israel: *that* was the truth of the world, and maybe the universe. His thinking loosened by the booze and the drugs, he let ideas run around in his head. The Altaireans had offered evidence of the possibility of a pretty powerful technology . . . He began to run over proposals he could make back at Livermore.

Neville handed back the sugar cube. 'Sorry, man. Not for me.'

'Forget it.'

The Beatles had gone now, to be replaced by a feature on trams in Australia. Neville turned the set off and they sat in the dark, gazing up at the beacon. Barry was content with the silence, as he waited for the drug to kick in.

2210 AD.

By the time he had finished his walk to the weapons installation in the shade of the

Giant's Stone crag, Owen Wilson was out of breath. At sixty-eight he was too old for this, too old to be sneaking around in the dark.

He knew he didn't have much time before he was detected. But he gave himself one minute to rest. Leaning against a bit of surviving wall of the old abbey he took a swig of his water, and a deep breath of the hot, smoky air. There actually wasn't much left of the ruined abbey, whose stones had been ground up to make the concrete base of the weapon.

He got on with it.

He stepped forward towards the installation, his way illuminated by a torch strapped to his forehead; the sky was a lid of smog. The Morgan laser was surrounded by a wired-up fence and monitored by a surveillance system, but Owen had used a microgrenade to knock out the fence's juice, and smart viruses were already at work in the Unitary Authority's data processing systems to make him invisible to these electronic eyes. He just snipped through the wire and walked in.

He soon reached the weapon. It looked like a cannon, its metres-wide snout poking stubbornly at the obscured sky. He had studied its design carefully, and knew just which maintenance hatch to open, just where to plug in the software patch he had prepared. In only minutes, with a grind of massive servomotors, the laser prepared to move, obeying his commands. Owen allowed himself to punch the air.

And yet his triumph was muted. He looked up into the air. It was midsummer day—not that you'd know it, every day was as murky and warm as the rest, right through the year. And today, somewhere above the obscured sky, he was sure, the sunlight beacon from Altair was once again pinging Earth with its hopeful Fibonacci sequence. The story of many-times-great-grandfather Neville, who had witnessed the last apparition back in the twentieth century, had been passed down as a family legend. As Owen had grown up, in between his work in the big offshore food factory in Cardiff Bay, he had been able to verify the old story with a bit of data mining. And he had been thrilled to discover that his long-dead ancestor had predicted that the next apparition from Altair would come in his own lifetime.

But he would see nothing of it. The sky was entirely shrouded, and deliberately so, to protect Britain, Russia, North America and the rest of the Unitary Authority commonwealth from the Chinese laser mounts on the Moon. Make the air opaque with aerosols and endless fires and you could scatter the light of the most intense laser weapon, even the big Chinese petawatt monsters; the laser war continued from space platforms, but at least the planet itself had some degree of protection.

And then there was political control. With the sky covered you could make the sunlight beacon invisible for the first time in its ten-thousand-year history of interaction with mankind. The citizens of the Authority need never be troubled by the existence of another world, another civilisation—or by the idea that others possibilities might exist, a destiny other than a war that had now ground on for a century.

But tonight, Owen believed, the air might clear enough, if not for him to see the sunlight beacon for himself, at least

enough to give this big old beast a shot at *replying*, on behalf of mankind. The Morgan was antiquated by comparison with the latest Chinese weapons, capable of no more than a few megawatts, and much of its brightness would be lost even before the signal got out of the murky atmosphere of Earth, let alone began its seventeen-year journey to Altair. But Owen was confident the Altaireans would be able to pick up the signal, and to read the message he intended to encode into it: 'SOS' in Morse code, easy to decipher for a culture that had surely been monitoring human radio broadcasts since Marconi. A weapon used to cry for aid.

Help us—that was all he wanted to say. Help us, for we have misused your gift and your example; we used the idea of your beacon and turned it into a weapon. Neville Wilson had long ago calculated that if the beacon continued to recur at intervals reducing by a factor of three every time—after another eighty-one years, twenty-seven, nine, three, one—the ten-thousand-year sequence would come to an end in 2331, not much more than a century from now. What would happen then? Would the Altaireans' mighty ships slide into the solar system?

But Owen was by no means sure mankind would still be around on that date. So he needed to send his reply today. Help us now—

The shot's noise was soft, from a silenced gun, but the round ricocheted noisily off the barrel of the repositioning laser.

Owen turned off his torch and stood stock still. In the murky light he couldn't even see who was shooting at him, or how many there were. There were no voices, no sounds of footsteps, only that single shot. With a grind of seized-up bearings the laser began to tilt up. He crept round towards its muzzle. His programme might yet be completed, his signal sent—

Another shot. This one slammed into the weapon's concrete base; he felt chips fly up and dig into his heel, through his sock. The petty pain seemed absurd. Surely they could see him, if he couldn't see them. It occurred to him that they were playing with him.

Another shot screamed past his head. He cried out, and found himself stumbling forward against the laser's open barrel. He held onto its rim, and as the cannon tilted back he was lifted up bodily. He heard a hum, felt in his gut the huge energies gathering. His fingers strained to hold his weight. Another shot cracked past his head. The laser grumbled, as if waking.

His eyes registered the light for the briefest of instants before his retinas were seared.

And he cast a shadow kilometres long as the beam punched through the air, seeking Altair.

Several years ago, Beth Bernobich wrote a mathematical murder mystery set in a world where Ireland became an empire. But she tells us the voice for that story eluded her until she came up with an image of a single red balloon, and the background story of Éireann's queen. "The queen herself never appeared in that story," Ms Bernobich points out, "so of course, I had to write another one from her point of view." Fortunate for us that she did.

Beth Bernobich's recent publications include short stories in Subterranean Online, Baen's Universe, *and* Apex Online. *She has a novella forthcoming early 2009 from PS Publishing:* Ars Memoriae, *the next story in her Éireann series. Her first novel is due out from Tor Books in Autumn 2009.*

The Golden Octopus

Beth Bernobich

I first met Breandan Reid ó Cuilinn in my father's Court, in Cill Cannig, on a bright cold November day. I was seventeen, a Princess Royal and heir to the throne of Éireann. He, I knew from reports assembled by the King's Constabulary, was the son of a country gentleman, thirty years old, with a doctorate from Awveline University in physics and philosophy.

He never even noticed me.

But then, he was there to impress my father, the king, and the many astrologers, scientists, and councilors who made up the King's Court in those days, not a young girl watching from the shadows. Ah, but I'm rambling on without purpose. Let me tell you what happened that day.

It was late November, as I said. We were all gathered in the smallest of my father's audience chambers, the one where he liked to hold such demonstrations. (*Miscellaneous Scientific Inquiries, Etc.* is how the steward labeled them.) Sunlight poured through the high square windows; an early morning rain shower had spattered droplets over the panes, which made a hundred tiny rainbows over the gray marble floor. A raised platform ran around three sides of the room, with a series of recessed alcoves. I sat in my usual place, the middle alcove, which gave me the best view of my father and ó Cuilinn both.

"Tell me," my father said, "what you hope to discover."

Breandan ó Cuilinn—excuse me, Doctor ó Cuilinn—said, "I cannot tell yet. I can only report on what I have achieved."

The old astrologers, those who had served my grandfather and great-grandfather since the middle of the century, nodded. They recognized temporizing, no matter what form it took. "True, true," one old man mumbled through his toothless gums. "We can chart the moon and all the stars of heaven, but there are subtleties beyond even the most learned of the cloud diviners."

The Court scientists and mage-mathematicians, whose philosophies belonged to both the old and the modern schools, merely shrugged and stared hard at the strange machine he had brought, and which now sat upon a large battered work-

table, evidently provided by the steward from the palace stores.

He was not a rich man, this Doctor ó Cuilinn. He had arrived in a hired van, with no servants, no assistants, and had transported the five large crates to the interview chamber himself using a freight trolley. He must have assembled the machine as well. That would account for the oil stain on the sleeve of his frock coat, and the dusty knees of his trousers.

The machine itself gleamed in brass and silver splendor upon the table. It was as large as a man's torso and shaped like an octopus, with shining glass tubes writhing about the massive central orb. Wires ran through the center of the tubes, like thin black veins; more wires snaked over the table and connected the device to a crate of batteries sitting on the floor. The metals themselves, however beautiful, were likely chosen for their properties, I thought, remembering the man's initial letter. And it required a great deal of electricity. But what were those strange knobs and dials for?

With a practiced gesture, ó Cuilinn drew a small metal bar from his pocket. It was just a few inches long, made of some dull silvery material. He pressed a spot on the side of the octopus's body. A section of the front slid open—as though the octopus had opened its mouth into a rectangular yawn. ó Cuilinn placed the metal bar inside. The mouth closed again; this time, I could see the thin lines marking its edges.

"What kind of metal is that?" my father asked.

"An iron-chromium alloy, your Majesty," ó Cuilinn replied. "It proves less reactive than pure iron."

If he doubted my father's ability to understand the answer, he made no sign of it. But one question led to a barrage of others from the Court scientists. Those batteries, what were they, and what charge did they produce? Was it purely electricity his device used? If so, what role did those glass tubes perform? A modified Leclanché cell, ó Cuilinn replied. Ammonium chloride mixed with Plaster of Paris, sealed in a zinc shell, each of which produced 1.5 volts. He was corresponding with a collective of scientists from Sweden and the Dietsch Empire, concerning a rechargeable battery with nickel and cadmium electrodes in a potassium hydroxide solution. Yes, the results would certainly prove more reliable. Also, more expensive. (Here the councilors muttered something about how these research men always demanded more money.) As for the role of the batteries, they were purely to start the necessary reactions. He would rather not discuss the further details until his Majesty and the gentlemen had observed the machine's performance.

Turning away from his audience, ó Cuilinn began to manipulate a series of switches and dials along the lower edge of the machine. The scientists and mathematicians fell silent, absorbed in watching his work. The astrologers were less entranced, and one old man continued to mutter about the stars and their effect upon the Earth's magnetic currents. ó Cuilinn ignored them all. His long slim fingers moved deftly over the octopus's face. Gradually I became aware of a soft buzzing between my ears. My skin along my arms itched. Just as I reached up to rub them, a loud crack echoed from the device.

The audience gasped. I started, then found myself unable to move.

Gas inside the tubes ignited into gaudy colors; the wires burned golden inside. Smoke roiled around the device, and there was a distinct burning odor, as though lightning had struck inside the palace. The astrologers and other philosophers were all whispering. The scientists frowned. My father too was frowning, but in concentration.

ó Cuilinn alone seemed unperturbed. He leaned down and touched the device. Again the octopus yawned. I stared, uncertain what I might see inside its mouth.

I saw nothing.

More muttering broke out, louder than before.

"Where has it gone?" my father asked.

"The future," Doctor ó Cuilinn replied.

An uncomfortable silence followed that pronouncement.

Less assured than before, ó Cuilinn said, "Please understand that I've not yet calibrated the timeframe. So I cannot predict when it will reappear."

"Meaning, it might be anywhere," one mathematician said.

"Or any *when*," another quipped.

A bark of laughter, just as quickly smothered. My father said, "Your application states you are on the point of proving that time travel is possible."

"I have proved it," ó Cuilinn said, a bit heatedly.

My father smiled. It was a kindly smile, but his obvious sympathy clearly irritated this young son of a country doctor just as much as the open disbelief from the scientists. Flushed, he jerked around to face my father. "I have proved it," he repeated. "Even if I cannot predict precisely when into the future my machine sends these objects. And, well, there are certain difficulties. But to overcome them, I need money. It is a crass plea, your Majesty. I know that. But I swear you shall not regret it."

My father gazed at him steadily, no trace of kindness on his face now. "What use do you see for such a machine, Doctor ó Cuilinn?"

"That is not for me to say, your Majesty. But if you were to ask—"

"I just did, young man."

Breandan ó Cuilinn grinned, then ducked his head. "So you did, your Majesty. Well, then. I would say the uses are infinite, just as time is. You could send artifacts forward, for future historians. And if once we make travel into the future, surely it follows that those in the future will have the means to communicate with us. Think of that, speaking with the future and hearing its answer. "

One of the astrologers objected. "Impossible. If the future is immutable, our descendents cannot interfere by offering us assistance, in any form."

"How, immutable?" said one of the philosophers. "If the future has not happened yet, we are free to change it."

"But change implies existence—"

"It implies nothing of the sort. You can change a man's potential without altering his situation—"

The argument broke out, louder and more strident than before. ó Cuilinn scowled. My father shook his head, but made no effort to quash the debate. He beckoned ó Cuilinn to one side. They stood within a half dozen steps from my alcove. One glance upward, and the man would

see me, or at least my dim outline, but his attention was wholly upon my father.

"Tell me truthfully," my father said, "how you believe to breach the walls of time." And as ó Cuilinn looked about to launch into a long speech, he held up a hand. "In simple terms, please. I have dabbled in science in my youth, but I am no scholar."

ó Cuilinn flushed and smiled. "You undervalue yourself, your Majesty. I know your reputation. Well, then, my research and my methods depend on time fractures. These are—"

"I know what time fractures are. Most scholars believe them to be myth."

"They are not. Or rather, I have uncovered certain historical documents that support their existence. My theory is that they cluster around specific events. If you provide me with funding, I can map the largest of these clusters and use them to send forward items. Of course I would also need to refine my calibrations for how far into the future . . . "

My father nodded, but said nothing. By now, the noisy debate had died off. Clearly the demonstration was over. My father spoke a few final words to ó Cuilinn, so softly I could not make out the words, then with a signal, he and his court departed.

From my alcove, I watched ó Cuilinn disassemble his machine into pieces and pack them into the same five crates. Though I knew he must be frustrated, or angry, he worked without hurry, carefully wrapping each item into paper sleeves, then packing them into straw and cotton. His were strong deft hands, pale and beautiful in the fading November sunlight. A faint flush lingered on his cheeks. Now that I had the leisure, I could examine him freely. He was long-limbed and graceful. His complexion fair, his hair the color of pale straw, and fine. Not precisely handsome, but pleasing to look upon. I wondered if he had had many lovers.

Doubtful, I thought. A man like that—a scientist—could have only one obsession in his life, and usually that was his craft, not a woman.

He had done with his packing. Still he had not detected my presence, but then I had placed myself outside of anyone's casual notice. It was a trick my mother had taught me, back when I was a young child. *Watch first,* she said, *and then you will know how to act.*

One by one, the crates vanished from the room—no doubt going back to the same hired van. ó Cuilinn returned a final time and scanned the empty room, as though checking for forgotten items. The sunlight fell across his face, but his expression was hard to read. Discouraged? Or merely preoccupied?

The door swung shut. I counted to ten before I left my alcove.

Only a half hour had passed since ó Cuilinn had begun his demonstration, and yet the sun already dipped below the windows. The fire burned low; the air felt chill. Soon servants would come to sweep the floor, rebuild the fire. Soon my father would send for me, to ask me my impressions. Still, I lingered. I made a slow circuit of the room, sniffing. The burning odor had faded, but traces of it remained. The closer I approached the table, the stronger the traces were. The prickling sensation returned, as though tiny pins ran over my arms and neck.

Intrigued, I held my hands a few inches over the table. Where the octopus had sat, it felt pleasantly warm.

His demonstration was exactly like that of an illusionist. One moment, you saw the apple on his palm, the next it had disappeared. Hardly proof of a scientific discovery.

But he was so certain. And I am certain he could not lie, even if it meant his death.

And then I saw it—a shadow on the table. A clear dark shadow, in spite of the fading afternoon light. I bent closer. Not a shadow, but a thin layer of ashes on the tabletop. Exactly where the bar had sat inside the machine.

My pulse beating faster, I touched a fingertip to the shadow. A film of dust clung to my skin. I tasted it. (A rash move, since several of my recent ancestors had been poisoned.)

Fine grit on my tongue. A sour metallic taste.

Rust?

No, not just rust—a metal bar, corroded.

Very quietly, I brushed the iron flakes into my palm and closed my fingers around them. I felt as though I held the future.

A year and a month passed before I saw Doctor ó Cuilinn's name again.

My father had approved a grant for his research, and from time to time, the King's Constabulary sent reports on his work, but these went directly to my father. My own time was consumed latterly with preparations for my formal presentation to the Congress of Éireann. I had appeared before them once, five years go, when my elder brother died, and my father named me the new heir, but that was a token affair. Now that I was eighteen, almost nineteen; this presentation signaled I would soon take my place at my father's side in ruling the kingdom.

This morning, however, one of those reports lay in the stack of documents handed to me by my father's secretary. Memory shivered through me as I read the name. Only after a moment did I take in the import of the report itself.

"He has given up his post," I said. "I wonder why?"

"Who has?" my father said.

We sat at the breakfast table, both of us reading feverishly in preparation for another long day. Lately, my father spent more time reading than consuming his breakfast, which worried me, and his face had taken on a gaunt and harried look. He looked older—much older—than his fifty-seven years. One could almost see the shadow of bones beneath the translucent veil of his fair skin.

He has outlived three children and his wife. He is older than his years.

Hurriedly, I put that thought aside. "Doctor ó Cuilinn," I said, in answer to his question. "The man who invented the time machine."

"Hardly invented," my father murmured. "There were and remain several significant obstacles to such a device."

"The corrosion of materials?" I guessed.

"Among others. According to the Constabulary, our doctor made slow but regular progress for the first six months. Lately, however, his laboratory assistants admit they do little more than sweep the floors while Doctor ó Cuilinn

scribbles notes and formulas into his journal."

"You set spies upon him."

My father set his papers aside and regarded me with mild eyes. "I set spies upon everyone, my love. It is necessary, and you know it."

I did. I remembered the assassination attempts from my childhood, and the investigations after my mother's and brother's deaths, when my father stalked the corridors of the palace, suspecting every councilor and courtier of plotting against the throne. That investigation had proved a simple accident of infection. But the assassination attempts—those were real.

"Back to Doctor ó Cuilinn," my father said. "He gave no concrete reason for quitting his post, but if I were to guess, I would say he believes himself close to discovery. He wants no distractions."

"But the reports—"

"—are accurate, but they can only record his outward activities. Not his secret thoughts."

Or his soul, I thought. I had only observed the man for a scant half hour. Still, he had impressed me as someone who did not give up very easily. The word *obsessed* came back to me, along with a tremor of premonition. "Will you extend his grant, then?"

"Possibly. Certain members of our Congress believe the device will have practical applications, and my scholars agree Doctor ó Cuilinn's theory about time fractures is . . . plausible."

His gaze turned inward a moment, as though he were gazing upon a scene far different from this bright breakfast room, the warm yellow gaslight glinting off the silver platters and coffee urns. Was he pondering the implications of time fractures? (The idea alone made me shiver.) Or was he perhaps remembering my mother?

Then he gave himself a shake. "Enough speculation. We both have a busy schedule this morning. Let us finish our breakfast and set to work."

It was Tuesday. A day set aside for meeting with delegations from other nations. Today, my father would meet with the Prussian ambassador, a stiff-necked, belligerent man, who matched his king's personality well. It would not be a pleasant hour. The Prussian States were seeking to expand their territory, and while their activities did not affect Éireann directly, they did affect our closest ally, Frankonia.

Mine was the easier morning. A brief meeting with the newly-appointed representative from the Papal States. Another with a group of Nubian scholars, who wished to organize an exchange between their universities and ours. A much longer session with an ambassador from the Turkish States, listening demurely as the ambassador droned on, and the interpreter murmured in my ear.

The hour bells chimed. The Turkish ambassador and I rose and went through all the formalities of leave-taking. It had been an especially tedious hour, and later events should have erased this insignificant moment from my memory, but a scattering of images and impressions remained. The man's pale blue eyes, almost ghostly in his pale brown face. The high soothing lilt of his voice. How faint lines and mottlings belied his otherwise youthful appearance. The scent of coriander and rose and patchouli that hung about his person.

One of the senior runners escorted the ambassador from the room. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. A few moments remained before the next interview. I needed them. My head ached. My muscles felt tense from too many hours of control.

And then, a door swung open.

I heard it first, a deep, grating noise that penetrated to my bones.

Even when I opened my eyes, I could not quite take in what I saw.

It was not the unobtrusive side door, used by servants and runners. Nor the ordinary-sized doors used by state visitors, such as the Turkish ambassador. No, these were the doors used only for affairs of state. Immense. Each panel carved from a single tree imported from the American Farther Coast, decorated with intricate patterns and overlaid in gold leaf.

An old man in dark livery marched into the room and stepped to one side.

Next came a silver-haired Lord with the ribbon and chain of office draped over his raven-black coat. It was Lord Melville, the oldest of my father's Councilors. He had served as an officer, then as my grandfather's personal advisor, when my father was but a young man. Old, so very old, his thin white hair like a veil over his skull. He walked with a stiff limp, but he held his chin high, and I saw there were tears in his pale blue ears.

He stopped six paces away. "Your Majesty."

"What are you saying?" I whispered.

Lord Melville knelt before me and bent his head. "My Queen. I have the great misfortune to report that your father . . . "

I heard nothing past that, only a roaring in my ears, but I knew what he was saying. My father was dead. *Impossible,* cried a voice within. *He was well not three hours ago. He—*

" . . . the first to pledge my honor, my loyalty, my blood, and my self to your throne . . . "

My pulse thundered; my body turned numb. As Lord Melville recited the vows of Lord to Queen, a part of me remembered that he had recited those same vows to my father, twenty years before, when he had lost *his* father to an attack from Anglian revolutionaries. It was important that I face the news with as much strength and composure as my father had. And so, when Lord Melville finished his speech, I held out my hands to receive his kiss upon my rings. With great difficulty (I knew better than to make any move to assist him), Lord Melville rose and gave way to the next Lord just entering the chamber . . .

Later, much later, I sat alone in my private chambers in the palace and laid my head upon my hands. Firelight jumped and flickered against the dark walls. No gas lamps burned. Only a single candle guttered on the table—an orange-scented perfume overlaying the wood smoke and pervasive sourness of my own fear.

I was Áine Lasairíona Devereaux, the seventeenth of my house to take the throne, the thirty-second ruler of Éireann.

I do not want this, I thought.

I did not want it, but I could not turn away from my duties.

And so I let tradition carry me through the next six weeks. When I look back upon

them, I remember nothing in particular, just a weight against my heart, a curious and lasting numbness. The funeral itself proceeded without any misstep. A hundred ambassadors passed before my father's coffin; thousands more—from Éireann, from the Anglian Dependencies and Albion—paused to bow and whisper a prayer, before making way to the press of mourners behind them.

And I, I stood dry-eyed upon the podium, flanked by guards.

I have no tears, I thought. *No grief.* Or had grief been burnt entirely away?

There was no one who could answer that question. Or at least, no one I trusted.

Afterward, I met with my father's Councilors and members of Éireann's Congress. I held innumerable interviews with representatives from the Continent and farther abroad, those who came to express their condolences, and to reassure themselves that an alliance with Éireann would continue to be to their advantage.

I also met with the royal physicians and ordered an autopsy on my father's body. They soon reported he had died of a simple heart attack. There were no signs of poisoning, nor that the heart attack had been induced by artificial means. I thanked them for their thoroughness, wondering all the while when my grief would break free.

Ten days later came the coronation—a hurried affair, but my Councilors agreed I should assume the throne as soon as possible. Once crowned, others would find it more difficult to dislodge me. And there those who would attempt it. I knew that from my own history.

The day began with a stuttering of snow—a typical late January morning. The skies were flecked with clouds, and the sun, when it finally consented to rise, cast an uncertain light over Cill Cannig and the nearby city of Osraighe. Cold nipped at my skin as I darted from the palace into the waiting carriage.

The kings of Éireann had lived in Cill Cannig and the Royal Enclosure for six centuries. Tradition, however, proclaimed they would receive their crowns in the ancient cathedral of Osraighe. And so I rode alone in the royal carriage, shivering in my finery, in a slow creeping procession from the palace, through the Royal Enclosure and intervening fields, and into the city of Osraighe. The clocks were just chiming ten as I arrived at the cathedral. There Lord Kiley took hold of the lead horse's reins, while Lord Melville flung open the carriage doors to greet me with a long ceremonious speech. A cold dank wind blew against my face. I paused upon the step to listen, as the ritual required.

It was there the assassin took his chance.

A shot rang out. Fire exploded inside my shoulder, as though a white-hot spear had pierced me. I gasped and fell backward, reaching for that spear and thinking confusedly that if I could pluck the damned thing out, the agony would stop.

After that, I had difficulty remembering. Pain and more pain. The strong stink of blood. Lord Melville's creaking shout, then Lord Kiley's stronger voice calling for the Queen's Guard. And me, retching all over my grand expensive gown, and weeping at last, weeping so hard that I retched more and finally collapsed onto the ground, knowing no more.

The wound proved painful, but not dangerous. Once the physicians removed the ball and bandaged my shoulder, they allowed themselves to be herded away by Lords Melville and Kiley.

"Your Majesty," said Lord Melville.

I turned my head away.

"Áine," said Lord Kiley.

That nearly caused me to look around. With a jerk of my chin, I stopped myself, but not before I glimpsed a smile on Lord Kiley's grim face.

"You are not dead," he said quietly. "Nor so badly wounded we can put off this interview."

He was right, of course. I sighed and waved a hand to show my assent.

That, apparently, was not good enough.

"Stop grieving for yourself," Lord Kiley said crisply. "You have lost your father. Well, and so have I. Lord Melville here lost a brother and two sons in the last Anglian Uprising. I understand. But you must postpone your mourning for a more propitious time."

"When I am nearly dead myself," I muttered.

"That would be more convenient."

His words brought a puff of laughter to my lips. "Speak," I told him. "You will anyway."

"So I will," Kiley said. "First, you must have a more competent bodyguard. Lord Vincent and his staff have vetted all the members of the Queen's Constabulary deemed fit to protect the Queen. And they are fit. But they are not quite so . . . thorough as the man I would propose."

"A bodyguard," I repeated. "Who . . . "

"Commander Adrian O'Connell Dee," Kiley said. "He served in Eastern and Southern Europe as a covert agent for eight years. More recently, at my recommendation, he enlisted in your father's Constabulary to acquire experience at home. I have always found him reliable."

"You mean he is one of yours."

He nodded. "One of mine."

Someone outside Court, but inside our circle of trust.

Though I disliked the necessity, I understood Lord Kiley's reasoning.

"Very well," I said. "Have him come tomorrow for an interview. Surely the Constabulary can protect me until then?"

Lord Kiley and Lord Melville left me with a thick packet of reports. I set them aside for later. My shoulder ached, and I had little appetite for reports or food. It was easier to lie motionless, hoping that the drugs the physicians gave me would obviate the need to even pretend an interest.

An hour of restless sleep. Another hour lying on my back, staring at the patterned ceiling.

He knew it, I thought, as I maneuvered myself painfully onto my good shoulder. *He knew I would get bored.*

Whatever their faults in predicting the assassination attempt, my Constabulary had worked hard and well to discover those at fault. The attempt had been led by members of several disaffected political groups with ties to certain Congress members of influence. With a sense of nausea, I read the name of a cousin who had allowed himself to become the nominal leader of this movement.

You, I thought, *have made a grave mistake.*

More reports, concerning the investigation, the names of lesser conspirators, the

possible extent of the disaffection. My difficulties would not end with one assassination attempt. There were others who believed me too young to rule. Some wanted a Regency. Some worked to shift power from the Queen to Congress.

And there were the Anglians. Always the Anglians.

We shall never rid ourselves of the danger, my father once said, *until we cut their chains and help them build a new nation of their own.* He had meant to accomplish that in his own reign . . .

The tears burned in my eyes. I swiped them away and read past the further details of plots and political maneuvers, to the details about this man Dee.

Commander Adrian O'Connell Dee. He had taken an undergraduate degree in mathematics from Awveline University, then started graduate work in Austria. Studies broken off for reasons unknown. Fluent in German and French. Recruited by Lord Kiley's people for his ability with languages and disguises. Later he showed a fine understanding of political concerns. I saw nothing to suggest he would make a good bodyguard, but I knew Lord Kiley. My father had trusted him. I began to think I might as well.

"Commander Dee."

"Your Majesty."

It was three days after my near assassination. Lord Kiley had arranged everything, even to choosing this room, which was smaller than most of the other interview rooms, and more intimate with its plush carpet, the cloth chairs gathered around the brightly burning fireplace.

Commander Dee, however, remained as formal as if we were met in Cill Cannig's grandest audience chamber. He stood at attention, his hands clasped behind his back: a tall man, as lean as a shadow and nearly as dark. Dark-complexioned or tanned, I could not tell which. Warm brown eyes. Dark hair cut short and swept back in the newest fashion. His hands, like the rest of him, were slender, but I could imagine the muscles sliding beneath his skin. The reports said he was thirty-five. He appeared younger, except for the faint lines around his eyes.

"Why did you quit your studies?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Let us call it the distraction of youth."

"Is that the truth?"

His eyes narrowed with humor. "Truth is such a transient thing, your Majesty. I find in certain cases it depends entirely upon perspective."

Before I could stop myself, I laughed.

Adrian Dee's mouth quirked into a smile—a brief flicker of shared amusement. It changed his expression entirely. That intrigued me.

"So tell me," I went on, "how you would protect me better than my own guards."

At my insistence, he took the chair opposite me. We leaned toward the fire, heads close together, as he described his own impressions of the political situation facing me. A part of me absorbed everything he said, to be reviewed later when I was alone. Another part took in details of the man himself. How his mouth was fuller than I would have expected for someone with

such a lean angular face. How his voice had started off so cool and official, only to drop to a warmer lilting tone. He wore a pleasing scent, too—another surprise. From Lord Kiley's initial description, I had expected Dee to be more the automaton. Instead I found myself intently aware of him as a handsome man, clever and brave and strong. And so very competent.

"So you believe the conspiracy to be widespread."

He paused. "I believe the number of opportunists is greater than expected."

"There is a difference?"

He spread his hands, palms outward. "If these were usual times, I would say yes, there is difference. Now, with your father's sudden death, the uneasiness upon the Continent, and, pardon me, your youth, not really. However, I believe we should deal with the situation as though there were a difference. Call it a message to those who watch your reign."

I nodded. Felt a tremor of hope in my chest. "Do you want the position?"

He tilted his head, observed me for a moment—a long assessing look, as though he were measuring me, not as his Queen, but as another human being. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes, your Majesty, I do."

And so we talked and planned and argued about the coronation and how to keep me safe while giving the people a spectacle they could remember all their lives. For, as Lords Kiley and Melville and others in the Queen's Council reminded me, this ceremony was meant to imbue me with the authority of history and tradition. Adrian Dee himself simply shook his head, and took their recommendations into account. He had neatly insinuated himself into the ongoing investigation into the conspiracy. When he found the time, I had no idea. His absences from my side were few.

As for myself, I kept to my private chambers, visited only by my closest advisors and my physicians. The official reports said I needed time to recuperate. I suppose I did. I hated it, nevertheless. *Kings and Queens do not hide,* I thought. *They act. Just like my father did. And our ancestors before him.*

The physician's last visit had left me aching and breathless. In between, there were other indignities. Nurses to wash the wounds and apply fresh ointment. Formal inquiries after my recovery from the Congress. Uncharacteristically, Adrian Dee had vanished a few hours before. He returned just as the court astrologers departed.

"Where have you been?" I muttered.

He smiled, as though to a fractious child. That only worsened my temper. The astrologers had made long and noisy protests over the new date for my coronation. They had calculated to a fine degree the position and phase of the moon—never mind those of the stars—and wanted another month to assure me of a propitious day. Now I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

"You are tired, you Majesty."

"I know that," I snapped.

Dee shifted his glance toward the fire. I saw his fleeting grimace.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I . . . I am impatient. I dislike being caged." And before he could reply, I hastened to add, "That is hardly an excuse, I know. Merely an explanation."

He acknowledged the apology and the

explanation with a wordless gesture. There were bruises underneath those brown eyes, and a web of faint lines radiating outward. He must have spent half his nights in ceaseless work on my behalf. I felt a stab of shame.

"I'm sorry, Adrian."

A flinch, nothing more, at his given name.

I had forgotten—just for the moment—that we were Queen and servant, not two friends. There was no possibility of apologizing. That would only exacerbate my offense.

But truly, I did not mean to offend. I meant only . . .

Better not to think what I meant.

"Can we manage it?" I asked hurriedly. "The coronation, I mean. Next week."

He nodded. "Most of the guests have remained in the city. The others could arrive by airship. What about the astrologers?"

"Let them determine the hour. Within reason," I added.

His smile, edged by firelight, caused the last of my bad temper to leach away. "It shall be exactly as you wish, your Majesty."

It was.

Telegrams and letters went out the next morning. Flocks of balloons began to arrive within the next few hours—scarlet, silver, the royal blue and purple of the Turkish States, the fantastical constructions of Japan and the Hindu Archipelago—all the heads of state were represented, as though my guests had anticipated my plans and only awaited a word to set off for Éireann.

My coronation was set for the first Monday in February—a cold bleak day, the skies mottled with cinder-black clouds that spat snow and frozen rain over the bare fields. Once more I rose at dawn and gave myself over to the maids and ladies of the Court. Once more I donned the layers of silk and cloth-of-gold—all new-stitched because the old gown was burnt and stained. My shoulder ached in memory of that other day, but then Adrian Dee appeared at my side to escort me to the waiting carriage.

Out the gates. Through the streets. The same and yet so different. My nerves felt raw and exposed, buzzing as though charged with electricity. The ticking of sleet against the cobblestones sounded loud. My heartbeat thrummed in my ears. I thought I could feel an answering pulse from Adrian Dee's hand as he handed me down from the carriage, even through all the layers of cloth. I paused, just as before, and listened to Lord Melville's studied speech. I gazed over the crowds of onlookers. I felt so removed from my surroundings, from the event itself, that it was not until I stepped into the cathedral's shadowed entryway it struck me fully I was to be queen.

I paused a moment to recover myself. Felt my heartbeat dancing fast and light. Then, with a signal to my guards, I continued forward into the pale yellow light of the cathedral's vast body. Step, step, step, my guards keeping time with me. Then they too fell away and I walked alone the last distance, there to kneel before the archbishop.

She stood upon the steps leading up to the nave of the church. Her silver crown flared like a circle of flames around her seamed face, reminding me of ancient portraits of the saints.

"May the blood of our mothers and fathers bless you," she said.

"May the flesh of our Lord and our ancestors guard us," I replied.

So we continued, giving challenge and response. Behind me, I heard the low chant of the priests, smelt the rich rank scent of blood in the air. When an acolyte approached the archbishop, she dipped her fingers into the bowl and smeared the lamb's blood over my brow.

"Let this symbolize our dedication to the mother and the father, to oak and stream and the Lamb of God."

The archbishop offered me the silver flagon filled with blood; I drank it all.

Thereafter, memories scattered into fragments. I remembered the heavy scent of incense. The archbishop's warm fingers brushing my temples as she set the crown upon my head. The warmth and weight of gold pressing against my forehead, like the weight of centuries. The ritual words intoned in Latin and old Gaelic and the chants rising upward like smoke. Then a bell rang out, and I felt a pang within my heart.

I was Queen of Éireann.

The archbishop then offered me a flagon of cold water to wash the taste of blood from my mouth. More rituals and rites followed, first in the cathedral and then upon my return to Cill Cannig. A stream of festivities crowded every moment through the rest of the morning and evening. My maids kept busy, helping me from one formal gown to the next. That night I dined with visiting kings and queens and ambassadors.

On and on and on. Until at last I sat in my rooms, swathed in a warm robe and drinking a soothing infusion of tea. It was past midnight. Outside, I heard the crackle and boom of fireworks. The skies were clear and dark and spangled with stars. Adrian Dee lingered by the windows, though both of us knew he had no official reason to be there.

"Did you know my father?" I asked him.

He paused. Considered the question. "Only from afar." Then he answered the question I had not dared to asked. "I thought him a good king. I believe you will make a good queen."

"Ah." I smiled, but my lips were trembling. I had not realized how much I wanted this man's good opinion.

A log broke. Adrian turned toward the fire, alert. The shower of sparks sent up a spray of golden light that limned his profile. I don't know how long we stayed thus—just a heartbeat—but it seemed I had all the time to study his face. The lines running in angles, the shadow-black of his hair edging his dark face, the curve of his lips. His expression was pensive, as though he were searching the fire's red-gold heart for answers.

Then he chanced to look around. My glance caught his. There, no mistake, a flash of attraction in those warm brown eyes.

My cheeks burned. I turned away.

Adrian—Commander Dee—did nothing. How could he? He was my servant. I was his Queen. It was all fraught with impossibility.

Later, much later, I lay in bed, sifting through my emotions. Oh, and sure, I was the Queen. Oh, and sure, many of my predecessors had taken favorites—my father among them. But I was a young queen, my authority not yet proved. I could not follow my desires as I wished.

With a sigh, I closed my eyes and felt the beat of my pulse against my eyelids.

Surely, if I reached out now, my hands would meet the bars around me.

He effaced himself after that.

Of course. He thinks you wanted a dalliance.

I paused in reading correspondence and pressed my hands against my eyes. Luckily, I was alone. My secretary was occupied in the outer offices, sorting through invitations and handling the many impromptu visitors from Court. Adrian—*You must not think of him that way, I told myself*—Commander Dee spent less time in the Royal Enclosure than before. These days, he oversaw the entire branch of the Queen's Constabulary assigned to Cill Cannig. We met each morning, but these consisted of mostly perfunctory exchanges. Commander Dee handed me a detailed written report, including his current assessment of security, as well as summaries of the most important reports from the Queen's Constabulary. If I had questions, I might ask, but he had made them so thorough and complete, I never needed to.

And so I sat alone, weeping like a girl.

Furious, I thumped a fist against my desk. *I am not a girl. I am the Queen.*

So be one.

The words came to me in my father's voice.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and pulled the closest stack of papers toward me. These were applications and petitions my secretary had reviewed already and forwarded to me according to our own obscure set of criteria. The first few I scanned automatically: a petition from a district in the north, asking for temporary reduction in their taxes, a long rambling paper setting forth grievances between two major guilds, yet another polemic concerning Anglian liberty, request upon request for monies to support this or that worthy cause, ...

. . . a request from Doctor Breandan Reid ó Cuilinn, asking for an extension to his grant.

I stopped. Flicked away the other papers and concentrated on his alone.

He was no politician, I thought, reading closely. He stated without apology or preamble that he had quit his position at Awveline University, though they had offered him more money and a higher position.

. . . I have discovered, through painful experience, that I cannot do proper research when I am distracted by other obligations. My blessed father died the year before and left me a small inheritance—enough to live off, but not enough to afford a laboratory and materials for any substantial endeavor. Your father's generosity enabled me to accomplish a great deal, but—and here I apologize to you, just as I did to your father, for such blatant beggary—I must have another year's funding if I am to transform my theories into reality . . . .

He believes in his cause, I thought. *So do they all.*

And yet, I remembered that handful of iron dust, the shiver in the air when ó Cuilinn's golden octopus worked its magic.

It was not golden, but brass, I reminded myself. And he used science, not magic.

Nevertheless, I found myself transported back to that cold sunlit room, watching a shabbily-dressed scientist perform a miracle before my father and his Court.

At least I can do some good here, I thought as I called for my secretary.

"Doctor ó Cuilinn."

"Your Majesty. Thank you for inviting me to Cill Cannig."

He had changed little in the past two years, but the differences intrigued me—his fine golden hair lay thin over his skull, a tracery of lines marked his pale complexion. And though his eyes were just as dark and brilliant, the gaze as direct, I thought I detected a new uncertainty in his manner. Not a good sign, for my purposes.

I gestured toward the waiting chairs. "Please. Let us be comfortable. I invited you because I wanted to discuss your research."

There was the briefest hesitation, an even briefer glint of wariness, before he smiled and bowed and followed me to the comfortable grouping of stuffed chairs set round a low table. Beside us, tall windows overlooked one of the palace courtyards, now rife with lilies and roses and the last sweet-smelling blossoms now dripping from the apple trees. Spring rains had given way to the brief summer sun, which poured through the windows.

Servants silently poured tea into porcelain cups etched with falling leaves. At my glance, they withdrew. ó Cuilinn watched them throughout their work. Only when we were alone did he glance back in my direction. Expectant.

"I was not entirely truthful," I told him. "I want you to move your laboratory here, into the palace, and—"

"You cannot purchase me," he said abruptly. Then added, "Your Majesty."

Ah, so he had not entirely lost his arrogance. Good.

I nodded. "I do not intend to. But you see, I believe in your work. I have ever since I observed your demonstration to my father two years ago."

His dark blue eyes widened as I opened a drawer in the table and withdrew a handkerchief wrapped many times around. I set the handkerchief on the table. Its contents shifted slightly. Was it only in my imagination, or could one hear the hiss of its contents? Smell the faint metallic scent, old and stale?

Breandan ó Cuilinn stared at the handkerchief. "What is that?"

"Your metal bar," I told him. "The one you sent forward in time, when you last were here."

"How did you—"

"I waited." Never mind that I had not known what to expect, or when. The essence was true. "A few moments after you left, the bar reappeared. Or rather, part of it did."

I undid the handkerchief carefully, layer by layer, until the cloth lay flat upon the table. There in the center lay the handful of dust, somewhat diminished. ó Cuilinn stretched out a hand, plucked it back. He glanced up at me. "What do you want?"

No honorifics. I hardly cared.

"I want you to continue your research," I said. "I am willing to allot you substantial funds. However, I would find it simpler if we could eliminate the layers of letter writers and secretaries and other middlemen."

His mouth relaxed and the tension eased

from his jaw. "I believe I understand. But your Majesty, if you truly want me to continue my work—and dedicate myself to it entirely, not in piecemeal fashion as I have over the years—then I will require a great deal of equipment. And money."

A faint flush edged his cheeks. He had freckles, I noticed.

"I understand," I said. "Please, tell me what you've discovered so far. And what you hope to accomplish in the future."

He told me far more than I could understand. In between careless sips of tea, he spoke about using carbon-free chromium objects for his experiments, which resulted in less corrosion. His most recent experiments with the material had yielded larger flakes of dust, along with fragments of the bar itself. But that alone, he told me, was useless—merely a device for proving the concept. What he needed to do was reduce the effect of time travel itself. In fact—and here his gaze went diffuse, obviously following this thought along all its permutations—he ought to search for ways to shield objects inside the chamber. A combination of the two branches of research . . .

"What about the past?" I asked.

"What about the past?" he said.

A moment of uncomfortable silence followed.

"You want to change the past?" he said. "Why? Or is this a scheme you have for some political end?"

"I do not mean that. I only mean—"

"—what everyone else means," he said bitterly.

"If you think I will make any preconditions on you, you are mistaken," I said crisply.

For the first time, he seemed to notice me. "No. I did not think that—"

"You did," I said. "But never mind. I am sure we can come to some agreement. You want money. I want to continue my father's legacy with scientific progress."

A smile twitched at his mouth. "I see. Yes. Yes, your Majesty, I believe we can meet both our goals."

Orders, however easily spoken, are not so lightly carried out. Doctor ó Cuilinn had no outstanding obligations to any landlord or university, but he did have an enormous quantity of records and equipment to transfer from Awveline City to Cill Cannig. A month went simply to negotiate what quarters he required for his work. Two more passed in transferring his belongings to the palace, and arranging them to his satisfaction. An arrogant man. I had thought that a good quality, but I found myself hissing whenever my steward or secretary mentioned ó Cuilinn's name.

That, unfortunately, was not the end of my worries.

"You say this fellow—"

"—scientist," I murmured.

"—this scientist holds the keys to time?"

Seven months had passed since Doctor ó Cuilinn took up residence in Cill Cannig. I was breakfasting with Lord Tallon, a senior member of Eíreann's Congress and an elderly man, used to the perquisites of age and rank. Others were present, but they all deferred to him.

"He investigates them," I said patiently.

Apparently my patience was too transparent.

"He walks the time roads," Tallon said.

A shiver went through me, in spite of knowing he used only the terms from legends past.

"He is a scientist," I said. "He researches possibilities."

"At a considerable cost," another said. I recognized him—Lord Begley, newly arrived in Congress after his father's death. An ambitious man, with a reputation for cleverness. He had attached himself to the Council for Economic and Monetary Affairs.

"Explain yourself," I said.

The other members of Congress flinched at my tone, but Begley himself was oblivious. "The monies spent on Doctor ó Cuilinn's research is a matter of public record, your Majesty. And as part of their duties, the Committee has studied those records. We wish merely to express our concern about spending so freely—"

"We are hardly in danger of ruin." It took a great effort to keep my voice calm.

"No, but as you know, your Majesty, there are troubling rumors from the Continent, echoed by troubling rumors within our own borders. We need an advantage, be it economic or political or . . . " Here he offered me an oily smile. " . . . or an advantage both scientific and concrete."

"You mean a weapon," I said.

He dipped his head. "Whatever you wish to call it, your Majesty."

I studied the man before me with growing anger. Subtlety played no part in his speech. If I did not give him the assurances he wanted, he and the Committee would work to undermine ó Cuilinn's project. Though I had established a measure of authority over the past year, I could not afford to insult or ignore these men, however badly I wished to.

You must make concessions, my father's voice added. *He holds a portion of influence, and has the means and determination to increase it.*

That night, in a rare private conference with Adrian Dee, I reopened the matter. Though he knew all about the invitation, and ó Cuilinn himself, I recounted everything, from ó Cuilinn's first visit, three years before, to Begley's speech.

"They want reassurance," Dee said.

"I know that," I said. "I only wished to know your opinion about the matter. As a friend," I added in an undertone.

His expression remained immobile, but I thought I glimpsed a quickening of his pulse, the clues so faint despite the ubiquitous gaslight.

"If you wish my opinion," he said, "then I will give it. Spend the money for his research, if you believe it necessary and right for Éireann. For you. But do not promise anything to your Congress. Otherwise you break the promise you made to him."

No need to ask how he knew. He knew everything.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"No need to thank me, your Majesty."

The odd inflection caught my attention. I jerked my head up.

But Adrian Dee was already rising and bowing—a deep graceful bow expressing loyalty and obedience and all the qualities I loved in him.

And damned him for.

Alone, I considered the problem. The difficulty was that Begley did have a point. Our alliance with Frankonia, sealed with treaties and blood ties, had assured us secu-

rity for decades. But now Frankonia's king was failing, and the electors were voicing disagreement about his successor. The Turkish States were embroiled in another succession battle. The American experiment had crumbled into warfare. The Prussian States and Dietsch Empire pressed upon our colonial borders in Africa and the Hindu Peninsula. The Austrian Empire, failing for decades now, proved no less dangerous in its dying throes.

We needed a means to keep ourselves predominant.

"I will not renege on my promises," I told Doctor ó Cuilinn.

He seemed unsurprised by the rumors I told him.

"It has always been the case," he said. "Mention science, and someone mentions war."

And, as if I had not mentioned any difficulties at all, he went on to talk about his latest discoveries. He had made great progress in mapping out the time fractures. Indeed, they seemed to be multiplying, though he could not yet determine why. The largest cluster centered over Awveline City; others had appeared in the neighborhood of Osraighe and the northern provinces, and he was corresponding with scientists on the Continent to determine if they had discovered any. Whatever their origin, he said, they represented a weakness in the fabric of time. If his theories were correct, he could use them as avenues between the years.

"A road between times?" I said.

"Possibly. I need more time before I can guarantee anything."

"Of course," I murmured.

There were no guarantees in science, I knew. None at all in politics. Nevertheless, I found myself reviewing Doctor ó Cuilinn's reports with greater eagerness than I knew was wholesome. And though I hated the necessity, I played the conciliator to Lord Begley and his faction. But to what end?

Uncertainty nibbled at me. In turn, I asked each of my advisors their opinion.

"Remember your father," Lord Melville said.

"Remember the longest road," Lord Kiley told me.

And from my closest friend, "Remember what you wish others to remember of you."

"Is that how you make decisions?" I asked Adrian Dee.

He never answered me; I never pressed him.

By autumn of the following year, I had several answers, none of which satisfied me.

"Tell me again," I said, "what you have accomplished."

We stared at one another a few moments. He disliked being questioned—I could see that at once—but then, I disliked excuses and obfuscations.

At last he bowed his head.

"We have made progress, your Majesty."

"How much?"

"A great deal."

"Show me."

Now his anger was unmistakable. "Why? Because you want a good return on your investment?"

I met his glare with one of my own. "Why not? Or are you so gifted by God and Gaia that I dare not question you?"

At that he gave a snorting, breathless laugh. "Ah, I should have known . . ." Then, before my anger could flare hotter,

he added, "Your Majesty, I have been a thankless, arrogant creature. My apologies. Here, let me show you what you have bought with your generosity."

He led me from the interview chamber through a series of ever-narrower corridors into an unused wing of the palace. Nearly unused, I thought, taking in the many recent renovations. Surely my secretary had cleared all these beforehand. Or no. I remembered saying once, *Do whatever it takes.*

We came into a vast, brightly-lit laboratory, lined with shelves and cabinets. Several assistants sat at workbenches. At our entrance, they glanced up and made as if to stand, but I signaled them to remain seated. ó Cuilinn trailed me as I advanced into the room. Bins of supplies, all of them neatly labeled, took up most of the shelves, but others held books and folders, half-finished replicas of that original machine, and several strange devices I could not identify. More shelves and more cabinets crowded the far end; in front of them stood a huge worktable, with neatly arranged stacks of record books and tools set out in ordered rows.

All of these paled before the machine that ó Cuilinn wheeled out before me.

The octopus, I thought.

But this octopus overshadowed everything else.

It was three times the size of a man, golden and polished and wrapped all around with gleaming glass tubes. More wires than before filled the tubes. A vast cube of batteries, or who knew what, crouched under the workbench, and there were other, larger cubes sheathed in lead off to one side, connected with an umbilical cord of wires. The air in the room felt close and stale and charged with electricity.

ó Cuilinn crouched down, tugged open a drawer.

"I meant to show you this earlier, but . . . "

Without finishing his explanation, Breandan ó Cuilinn extracted a small object from the drawer. It was a balloon and its basket, I saw, worked in the finest gold and silver. An artist's rendering, a craftsman's masterpiece. Then, as if inspired, he picked up one of the books from his worktable. He pressed a button, and the octopus's mouth stretched wide. He placed both objects inside, pressed the same button again, and took a hasty step backward.

The octopus closed its mouth.

"Wait," he said, before I could speak.

One moment, two. Just like before, my skin prickled, and the air went taut.

"What is it?" I asked.

A note rang through the laboratory, as though someone had plucked a gigantic string. As I waited, I felt my pulse thrum inside me, and an answering vibration from Breandan's hand pressed against mine. He had dismissed his assistants, I realized belatedly, and my pulse beat faster.

"I sent them forward in time," he whispered.

I had no answer for that, only a stupid, "How long?"

"A year."

"Why so long?"

"To prove myself. To everyone else. To you."

We were both breathing fast in excitement. Afterwards, I could not tell who turned first toward the other. All I remem-

ber is that our lips met and pressed together briefly. Pressed again and did not part for an impossibly long interval. Only when we paused to breathe, I realized I did not wish to stop. My hand snaked around his neck. Both of his grasped my waist. Time and time uninterrupted, and none of it satisfied me.

At last, he pulled back. His face was flushed, his eyes so dark, they appeared black.

"I have taken too many liberties."

His voice was husking and low.

"Not nearly enough," I said.

Even in my bed, in the midst of kissing me, he could not refrain from speaking about his research. "There must be a way," he murmured, as he ran his fingertips along my hip. His hands were cool and raised a trail of goose bumps; the rest of him was like a winter's fire.

"A way for what?" I asked when he did not continue.

"To send a person ahead in time, like a courier to the future."

I noticed that he was tracing a pattern on my skin. A mathematical formula, a schematic for a new octopus, a pathway through time for his imaginary courier. Laughter fluttered in my belly. When he kissed me again, I had no doubt his attention was focused entirely upon me, and the laughter changed to a new and sharper sensation. Almost painful.

"What is wrong?" he whispered.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Tell me about these couriers."

His breath tickled my cheek. "They would be like runners in the old empire. But traveling through time instead of plain dirt roads."

"The time fractures? But what if they close?"

He paused. I could sense his attention withdraw to some secret citadel within. I waited.

"It depends on the nature of the fracture," he said at last. "If my theories are correct, they might be stranded in the future, or past, in the wherever and whenever of their destination. But others suggest that time fractures indicate parallel histories. It's possible my couriers would be stranded in a different *now*."

As he spoke, he rose and absentmindedly pulled on his clothing. He paused only to kiss me, then he was gliding through the doors. I sighed. Obsession. And yet, we were much alike. Already it occurred to me that I should discuss these possibilities with my Councilors. Not as a weapon, but surely a way to maintain our predominance, as Lord Begley so delicately phrased it.

As I exited my private chambers, I stopped.

Adrian Dee stood in the parlor outside. The hour was late, and the room lay in shadows. But I hardly needed sunlight or lamplight to read his expression, which was cold and remote, like the bare trees of winter.

In my memories of those days—memories blurred and splintered by later events—it seemed I did nothing but lie in bed with Breandan ó Cuilinn, the two of us absorbed in carnal pleasure as we talked about mathematics and the properties of time. In truth, I spent the chief of my hours as I always

had, doing the work of a queen, while Breandan pored over countless treatises and monographs ordered from universities throughout the civilized world, from Sweden to Iran to the Mayan empire of the Americas. When he came to me, saying that certain theories pointed toward signs of time fractures at high altitudes, I hired engineers to construct special balloons with heavy-weight baskets for Breandan's equipment. As the months passed, Breandan studied balloons as he studied everything else. Soon others began to call him the expert.

They said he was my favorite, which was true.

I told myself he was a friend.

"Your Majesty."

Adrian Dee had arrived for our daily conference. Since the day I encountered him outside my private chambers, we had confined ourselves purely to the business of Court and Éireann. There were no more private conference, no sudden access of intimacy, on either part. We were as two strangers.

Adrian Dee silently handed over his neatly typed report. Just as silently, I accepted it.

On every other day, he would repeat the same formula—that he hoped the report was complete, but if I had any questions, he would make himself available.

Today, however, he paused. "Your Majesty . . . ."

I waited. "Yes, Commander?"

Whatever I expected, it was not these next words.

"There has been a murder. At Awveline University."

"A murder?" My skin went cold.

"Several," he answered, then added quickly, "No one connected with Court."

Only then did I remember that several Councilors and members of Congress had children studying at the University. "Who then?"

"Students—many of them well-connected, and from influential families. But that is not the difficulty. The local police have found the case difficult to solve. The city is panicking, and I fear this panic will spread into the surrounding countryside." He paused and glanced to once side. His expression was pale and drawn. He added, "The murders were bloody and . . . peculiar."

Whatever his own response, Adrian Dee managed to collect himself to deliver a crisp verbal report. Four graduate students hacked into bloody pieces, the bodies left exposed. Rumors were already spreading. Some claimed it was the work of a gang. Some whispered about a larger conspiracy. There was talk about Anglian dissidents, or even spies from the Prussian States. All of it nonsense, of course, but panic and rumors did not always listen to reason.

"I want you to monitor the investigation," I said, interrupting him. "Assign an officer from the Queen's Constabulary to work with the police—someone you trust. Have him send regular reports on their progress. Let the newspapers know as well."

Adrian Dee's glance met mine. For just that moment, the remoteness vanished from his expression. We were friends and allies once more. Strange how my heart lifted at the sight.

But my reprieve was a short one. Within a heartbeat, his face turned blank. He nodded stiffly and turned away, saying, "Very

well, your Majesty. I will carry out your orders at once."

Even before he finished speaking, he was gone, leaving me startled and not a little irritated. Then I heard a rustling behind me and a hand descended on my shoulder.

"Áine."

It was Breandan, clad in rumpled clothes from the day before, his mouth tilted in a warm smile. Ah, so. Yes. I turned into his embrace, grateful for the warmth of this man.

"There's been murders at Awveline University," I said. "Several graduate students."

"And so you sent your Commander to solve the problem."

"Not exactly. He . . . "

But when I glanced up, I could see that Breandan's gaze had already turned diffuse. He was staring past me, out the window. Most likely a sudden insight into his machine had distracted him. I wanted to shake him, yank his attention back from that inward world to the present. But I did not. My first impression, from all those years ago, was the true one. A man like Breandan Reid ó Cuilinn could have only one obsession in his life. Everything else was a temporary diversion.

And you are much the same way. He is your favorite, not a true partner.

No, I insisted. *A friend.*

You cannot afford to have friends.

Words recalled from a long-ago lecture from my father, the king. I had confronted him about his new favorite, an acclaimed poetess invited to Cill Cannig because of her work, and who had stayed because my father desired her company. I had been angry with him for months.

I miss him.

With a twitch, I shrugged away from Breandan's arms. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't sleep well. And I have a great deal of work. Commander Dee's report awaits me."

"Yes," Breandan said softly. "I believe I understand."

Our love changed after that. Or perhaps, I saw things more clearly. Oh and sure, he kissed me just as tenderly. And sure, I invited him to my bed as often as before. But our first heedless passion had ebbed. Breandan spent longer hours in his laboratory; I buried myself in my work.

My Councilors approved of the change. None of them had openly objected—the tradition of kings and queens taking lovers was older than Éireann itself—but now, I caught Lord Kiley nodding with approval during our Council sessions, and Lord Bierne no longer had the air of someone barely tolerating my opinion. Lord Vincent, it was true, had a perpetually dreamy manner. He took opium, and the habit had grown worse since my father's death. Soon I would have to replace him.

As for Commander Dee . . . He remained the proper officer of the Queen's Constabulary, but his manner eased enough that our interviews were no longer so painfully stiff.

So the summer passed. Reports from the Queen's Constabulary about the murders in Awveline City were neither good nor bad: the murders had ceased, but the police in Awveline City suspended their inquiries for lack of evidence. Frankonia's King died, and now the electors were locked in a room in the palace dungeons until they voted in his successor. Another heir in the Turkish States had been assassinated. But negotia-

tions with the Dietsch Empire were proving worthwhile, and it was possible we could create a new alliance to balance against the Prussian menace.

Meanwhile Breandan barely mentioned his research. It was from the official reports, and not himself, that I knew he was writing a treatise about time fractures in the upper atmosphere. He had commissioned a new balloon using the latest technology for his experiments—a navigable balloon with an enclosed carriage and compressed oxygen contained in iron storage flasks.

"If I could fly to the stars, I would," he told me, in one of our rare moments of intimacy.

"But would you fly back?" I murmured.

He shifted around and grasped my face with both hands. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes, I would."

To my shame and regret, I could not find the words to reply.

He must have read my thoughts from my face, because he smiled unhappily, gave me a brief kiss, and rose to begin his day. By the time I had bathed and dressed, he had eaten his breakfast and disappeared into his laboratory. The servants cleared away his dishes and brought me fresh coffee and warm bread, while I reviewed my schedule. But my thoughts were scattered between my obligations as Queen and those last moments with Breandan ó Cuilinn.

(He loves me. I had not expected that.)

(And you do not love him in return.)

A loud rapping at the door broke into my thoughts. Before I could speak, Adrian Dee burst into the room. He closed and locked the door. His face was so pale, so drawn, I stood and hurried toward him, thinking he needed to be helped to a chair, but he waved me away. "Your Majesty. There's been another murder. In Awveline City. Lord Kiley's daughter."

I dropped into the nearest chair. "Lord Kiley's daughter. When? How?"

"Word came just half an hour ago," Dee went on. "By telegraph from the police. They believe it is the same murderer as before." In a softer voice, he added, "A groundskeeper found her body at dawn, near the commons. The report is . . . ugly."

My stomach gave a sickening lurch. I had read the detailed reports of those earlier murders. "Where is Lord Kiley?"

"In his rooms."

With Adrian following close behind me, I ran to Lord Kiley's rooms. Though it was a warm September day, servants had lit a fire and drawn the curtains. Only a single gaslight burned here, its pale yellow light hardly penetrating the gloom. Lord Kiley sat limply in one chair, his chin against his chest, his arms flung to either side.

Like a dead man, I thought. I knelt at Lord Kiley's feet. A pang of relief shot through me when I saw the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

And yet, there was death in the room.

"Lord Kiley," I said.

No response.

"Lord Kiley," I said again. "Whatever it takes to find that murderer, I swear I shall order it done. By Christ's mercy, by the blood I drank upon my coronation. Do you hear me? I am sending Commander Dee to lead the investigation."

Lord Kiley raised his head slowly with an audible click. "Your Majesty," he whispered. "Commander Dee has told me." With an obvious effort, he lifted his gaze to Adrian Dee. "They tell me a lunatic mur-

dered my daughter, Commander Dee," he said in a soft eerie voice. "A madman." Then he gave himself a shake, and I saw a shadow of his old self. His dark eyes narrowed. "Find him, Commander. Find him and bring him to justice."

"I promise, my lord."

Adrian Dee left at once. I canceled all my other appointments that I might stay with Lord Kiley until his wife and other children arrived from their estates. Later, my secretary and I wrote carefully worded announcements about the tragedy, making certain to emphasize that a senior officer of the Queen's Constabulary would oversee the case until it was finished. Thereafter followed what felt like a dozen or more meetings with my other Councilors—with Lord Bierne to discuss who would handle Lord Kiley's responsibilities in the interim, with Lord Vincent's assistant, Lord Paor, to discuss the possibility of a terrorist connection.

Hours later, exhausted, I returned to my chambers and sank into the nearest chair. Servants had left a tray of covered dishes on the table. Bread and soup. Chilled water flavored with crushed mint. I poured a glass of water and drank it off. Though I had no appetite, I forced myself to eat. The day was not even close to ending.

More water. Then cup after cup of hot tea, until my head cleared. Only then did I notice the bells ringing noon. Odd, surely it had to be almost sunset by now. But no, the brilliant light of mid-day poured through the windows. Nothing had changed in this room—the same elegant furnishings, the same bright peaceful space I so loved—and yet, the taint of death had invaded here, as well.

I wish Adrian were here.

But he was not. He was already in Awveline City, by my command, searching for Maeve Kiley's murderer.

My hand fumbled for the bell—I thought Breandan might spare an hour from his work, and I badly wanted his company. For once, his inattention to state matters would prove a relief. The movement dislodged an envelope left upon the table. I saw Breandan's handwriting, my name. I snatched it up.

Áine, my love. Do not be surprised by my seeming disappearance today. If all goes well with my experiment, you will see the firmest, finest proof of my long research within the week . . .

I hardly comprehended the rest of his letter. Something about the roads of time, of braving the perils before all the other scientists. Of gratitude. Of love. I know not what else, because I dropped the letter onto the floor and raced toward the windows. Only now did I remember his talking about the appearance of new time fractures between Awveline City and Osraighe, and the last fine day of the year.

His balloon, I thought. It was large enough to carry his machine.

"Breandan!"

I flung open the windows. The golden towers and spires of Cill Cannig spread out before me, below a green garden rife with summer roses. My gaze took that all in, then snapped upward to the skies. Yes, there, between the tallest towers was an expanse of blue. And against that expanse, a bright red sphere, glorious and huge.

Already the sphere was shrinking as the balloon climbed higher into the skies. I could not move, could hardly breathe.

Higher. Higher. Now the sphere was little more than a black dot. The sun was blinding me, and yet I could not look away.

Breandan, I hope—

The dot vanished. A bright flare of fire burst out, smearing my vision. I blinked.

And saw nothing more.

There is little to tell about the next few weeks—or rather, very little of those weeks remains true.

That sounds mad, I know. Let me attempt to explain.

It took several days to recover all the wreckage from Breandan's balloon. The fall had shattered the carriage into pieces, which were scattered over the countryside. From what the Queen's Constabulary could determine, the fire came first, then the explosion of the oxygen tanks, which caused the fire to burn even hotter. Nothing remained of Breandan's golden octopus but a charred ruin. And of Breandan himself, nothing at all.

The Constabulary and police searched for ten days; they found no sign of body or bones.

That night I called for two bottles of wine and dismissed all my servants early. And I drank, I drank until the fire burned low and cold nipped at my skin through the layers of my woolen robes. Once, around midnight, I nearly summoned my secretary, so that he might send a telegraph to Adrian Dee. But that, I knew, would have been a terrible mistake. Adrian would refuse to abandon his murder investigation simply to comfort me. He had his pride, and his sense of duty.

As had I.

And so I left off drinking and retreated to bed, where I fell into a restless slumber. My dreams consisted of scattered images of the past five years—of my first interview with Adrian Dee, of the golden octopus and its leavings of iron dust, of Breandan's face, illuminated with joy as he placed the miniature balloon into his new gigantic machine. Of Lord Kiley, as limp as a puppet, after hearing of his daughter's brutal murder.

I woke just before dawn to the creaking of branches outside my window. It was a cold gray October morning. The skies wept with rain. One of the maids had left it partially open, and a dank wind blew through the room, carrying with it the scent of moldering leaves. My head aching from the wine, I stumbled toward the window to shut it. Paused and blinked to clear my vision. Below me, Cill Cannig looked as it always did in autumn. Copper-brown leaves whirled about. The trees, stark and black against the dull gray skies. The sense of a world dying.

(Though Gaia and God both taught us that resurrection was our right.)

Now. I have attempted to describe in writing the next moments several times over. None of them fit what I remember. Though "remember" itself is a tenuous concept.

So. Let me just tell the story.

It was a cold wet October dawn. I was standing by the window, as I said. This early in the day, the world seemed empty of human life, excerpt for a few curls of smoke over the kitchen quarters. And I, I was wishing I could undo parts of the last few weeks. Or months. Or years.

Then, of a sudden, a wrenching pain

took me. My vision wavered and blurred. *The wine,* I thought confusedly, gripping the windowsill to keep my balance.

But it was not the wine. I blinked and stared until my stomach calmed and the landscape steadied before me. It was an ordinary dawn, with smudges of saffron and indigo against the dull dark sky, the thin scarlet line running across the horizon. Yes and no. Ordinary, but unsettled, as though an earthquake shook my perception. I stared harder. There, in the distance, the clouds roiled. Again my stomach lurched, as though I stood aboard a plunging airship. The clouds narrowed into a funnel that raced toward me . . . .

Hours later, I came to, lying on the floor of my bedchamber. All I could remember was a terrible dream about the world tipping into chaos. A bruise over my left eye told me I'd fallen, but when my maid arrived, they could not remember anything of that strange dawn. Indeed, they had difficulty pinning down memories of the previous day or even the week before.

More strangeness followed. Lord Kiley appeared at mid-morning to report a strange incident. Commander Adrian Dee had collapsed in Awveline City in a fit of madness. Of course the police there had taken custody of the man, and had him sequestered at once in Aonach Sanitarium, but it was odd that neither I nor Lord Kiley could remember why I had sent him away from Court.

If I had.

Part of me remembered a terrible tragedy, but the details refused to come into focus. Another part remembered a different tragedy, but that one too eluded remembrance. As the days melted away, I stopped struggling to remember. It was enough to ensure that Commander Dee received the best care, and to plan his eventual return to the Queen's Constabulary. (Though, to be sure, the doctors at Aonach Sanitarium were not sanguine.)

Those were the days of confusement, as I called them.

Now to explain how I remembered what had never been.

(Or rather it had been. Once. In a different world.)

It was a bright cold November day. For once, I had an hour of leisure from my duties. A restlessness overtook me, and so, trailed by my guards, I wandered far from my usual paths, away from the public galleries and audience halls, through a series of ever-narrower corridors into an unused wing of the palace. On and on, to a pair of high metal doors, with a heavy bar across them. My curiosity piqued, I ordered my guards to remove the metal bar. Leaving them behind, I entered the vast chamber that lay beyond.

Inside, it was dark and empty. A puff of cold stale air met my face. The scent of something old and forgotten. Memory pricked at me.

We had lately added electric illumination to the palace. I pressed the switch, and light flooded the room.

It was empty. A cavern filled with dust and shadows. But my skin itched, and I took another few steps forward. Saw my first impression was not entirely correct. Off to one side, empty shelves stretched from floor to ceiling. And there, in the nearest corner, a few scraps of crumpled paper, also coated with dust, as though someone had abandoned them years be-

fore. Ahead of me, however, the room stretched unimpeded by any obstacles. It was amazing, I thought, that such an enormous space could exist within Cill Cannig without me knowing it . . .

It was then I saw the bright patch on the floor. I bent down to inspect it.

The air shimmered. Startled, I plucked back my hand.

And stopped.

There, in the middle of the bright patch, lay a miniature balloon and a pile of loose papers. The balloon had once been an exquisite work of art, I saw at once, constructed of gold and silver and set with tiny ruby and emerald jewels along the jet-black basket and over the perfect red sphere of the balloon itself. But the wires connecting the balloon to its basket were bent, and spots on the carriage itself were blunted, as though someone had set the balloon too close to a hot fire.

I set the balloon aside and took up the papers, which were even stranger than the balloon. They looked as though they had been sewn into a book, but the edges near the binding were torn, and the rest had turned brown, obscuring the rows and rows of neat dark handwriting. Curious, I picked up the top page.

June 18th, 1900. Cill Cannig, Osraighe. To Áine Lasairíona Devereaux, Queen of Éireann, and my patron and benefactress in these investigations into the nature of the future . . .

An electric shock traveled through me. I snatched up another page. Here were formulas and schematics for a strange machine, one that resembled nothing I had ever seen before.

Except I had.

More pages. More electric shocks. The pages were from a journal, written by a scientist detailing his research. It was all fantastic, and yet, not entirely so. As I read about balloons and time travel, about batteries and energy sources based upon work from certain Frankonian scientists, I recognized terms from my father's discourses about philosophy, about a certain young scientist with theories about time fractures and travel between the present and the future . . . .

Time fractures.

I release a long-held breath.

And remembered.

Breandan, I thought. *Breandan, what have you done?*

Except I knew. Or thought I knew.

My hands shook as I set aside the paper. I glanced upward to the darkened ceiling, half expecting a rain of papers to descend upon me, describing an unknown past and future. Memory pricked at my brain, reminding me of a past I had forgotten.

(Forgot. Or never lived.)

I took up a second page from the middle of the set. Glanced over a description of a failed experiment. Once more the name Breandan Reid ó Cuilinn made my brain ache with half-remembered events. He had demonstrated a machine to my father. That much I was certain. But the rest . . . a balloon, a diary of experiments conducted here, at Cill Cannig?

I took the balloon and the papers back to my private chambers. It was strange, but their presence gave me a stability I lacked and longed for these past four weeks. And so, between brief investigations into the past, and certain inquiries onto the Continent concerning recent findings about time

fractures, or the inconsistencies in present times. The more I investigated, the more I remembered from that other time, from that other past. Someone had closed the time fractures over Osraighe and Awveline City. Murders were undone, the past rewritten. Because of that, Lord Kiley's daughter lived, and Breandan had died.

(Perhaps. Or if he lived, it was in a different time. In a different world from the Éireann I knew.)

And what if I could travel into the past, forbid Breandan to make his fateful journey through time? Would he listen to me, a stranger? Or would he nevertheless press onward, to be the first of all scientists, to breach the walls of time?

I thought I knew the answer to that question.

Oh, Breandan, what have you done?

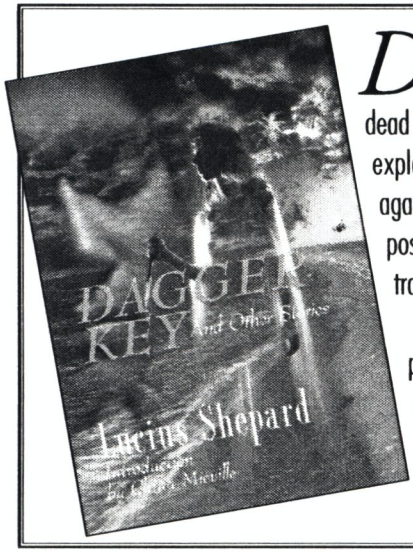
Except I knew.

He had launched himself forward to a future that had vanished. No, not vanished. According to the many treatises I had read, his future had jumped to a different path, severed from mine.

And now I knew the choices my father had faced, when my mother died. It was not merely an acceptance of death. It was the knowledge that our duties and our path lay with Éireann, not with any other person who happened to share our lives.

I picked up the miniature balloon and ran my fingers over its delicate tracery of wires, over the perfect sphere, now marred and blunted by its impossible passage through time. I would keep it, and its companion record of the vanished past. Ah, but that was all.

Wherever you are, Breandan Reid ó Cuilinn, I thought. Wherever you travel. Fare thee well. ⊠



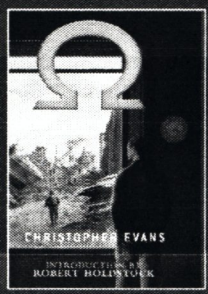
Dagger Key may well be Lucius Shepard's best story collection. In nine novellas and stories, he traces a long-dead pirate's murderous possession of a Caribbean islander, explains a grand tantric conspiracy, pits a fugitive killer against the malignant energies of the Dragon Griaule, exposes a small Pennsylvania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

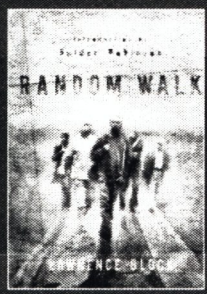
Written in Shepard's characteristically brilliant moody prose, these are amongst the finest dark fantasies on offer today.

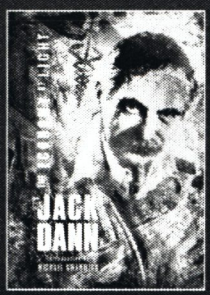
The slipcased edition is sold out; trade hardcovers are: £20.00 [$40.00]

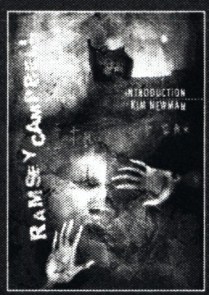
PS PUBLISHING

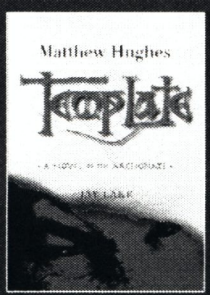
YOUR PASSPORT TO STRANGE PLACES

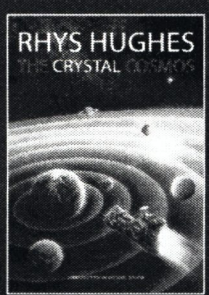












Available direct from PS Publishing
http://www.pspublishing.co.uk/

Paul Di Filippo's story was inspired by a reading of The Dirt On Clean, *a history of hygiene. "And also," he adds, "perhaps by a long-ago visit to the spooky ruins of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome." Now go wash your hands and we'll begin . . .*

Professor Fluvius's Palace Of Many Waters

Paul Di Filippo

I awoke in a soft, damp bed, atop the covers, not knowing my name.

A standing man hovered solicitously over me. His genial face, with wine-dark eyes, reminded me of someone I thought I should know. Thick white wavy locks cascaded to his shoulders. A Van Dyke beard of equal snowiness did little to conceal his jovial, ebullient expression. Yet despite this arctic peltage, his unlined face and clean limbs radiated a youthful vitality.

"Ah, Charlene, you're with us now! Splendid! We have much to do."

My name was Charlene then. That seemed right.

The man announced, "I am Professor Fluvius. Can you stand?"

"I think so . . ." Professor Fluvius placed a hand on my shoulder, and a sudden access of galvanic spirits coursed through me. "Why, certainly, I can stand!"

In one fluid movement I came to my bare feet on the warm wooden floorboards. I was wearing an unadorned white samite smock, the hem of which hung to just below my knees. A balmy wind blowing in through an open window, past lazily twitching gauzy curtains, stirred my robe and conveyed to me certain bodily sensations indicating that undergarments of any sort appeared to be lacking in my wardrobe. But the clement summer atmosphere certainly did not require such.

Professor Fluvius, I noted now, was dressed entirely in aquamarine blue, from long-tailed coat to spats. He took my hand as a favorite uncle might, and again I felt a surge of vigor through my cells.

"Let me introduce you to the other ladies first."

We stepped forward toward the door leading from the single room, which appeared to be a guest bedchamber of a quality sort.

Looking back at the bed where I had awakened to myself for the first time, I saw a long slim twisting tendril of bright green water weed adorning the damp duvet.

The carpeted corridor beyond that room hosted a dozen other doors, each bearing a brass number. Professor Fluvius and I crossed diagonally to Number 205.

"You rejoined us in my own modest quarters, Charlene. All quite proper, I assure you. But just across the corridor here, I have chartered an entire suite for you and your peers."

Professor Fluvius knocked, then cracked the door of 205 wide without awaiting a response.

Inside, draped languorously across an assortment of well-upholstered chairs and divans, six smiling women calmly awaited our arrival; plainly, they had been expecting us. Exhibiting a variety of beautiful physiognomies of mixed ethnicities, they all wore simple shifts identical to mine, and remained similarly unshod.

I caught my own reflection then in a canted cheval glass, and was perhaps immoderately pleased to find myself wholly a match to my sisters in terms of mortal beauty.

"Charlene, allow me to introduce your comrades to you. Callie, Lara, Minnie, Lila, Praxie and Sally. Ladies, this is Charlene."

The six women trilled a tuneful assortment of greetings, several of them playfully abbreviating my name to "Charl" or "Charlie," and I responded in kind. Once they sensed somehow my ability to blend into their pre-established harmony, they were up off their perches and clustering around me, indicating by various endearments and mild sororal caresses how happy they were to have me among their number.

Professor Fluvius watched us benevolently for a short while, but then cut short our mutual admiration society.

"Ladies, have you forgotten? We have an important appointment to keep. Let us be on our way now!"

So saying, and recovering his ocean-blue topper from a hat-tree, the Professor led the way out of the suite, and we all obediently followed.

A staircase at the end of the corridor debouched after a long single arcing flight into a splendid lobby, and I received confirmation, if needed, that this establishment was a commercial hotel. The large pillared space was thronged with people—all of them, male and female alike, dressed with considerably more formality than I and my sisters. Nor did I see any man sporting anything like the beryl suit worn by the Professor. It was unsurprising, then, that our passage across the lobby toward the street entrance should attract stares and semi-decorous exclamations. And this attention was not minimized by the Professor's unprompted yet effervescent lecture to us, his charges.

"Witness the glories of the Tremont House, ladies. The first hotel ever to incorporate running water, and thus a fit establishment to temporarily host Professor Fluvius and his Naiads during the early portion of our Boston stay!"

The Professor seemed intent on advertising himself and us, and it was at this juncture that I began to apprehend that I had become, willy-nilly, part of a commercial venture of some sort.

We exited the hotel through its grand colonnaded entrance on Tremont Street and crossed a miry sidewalk and concourse, nimbly dodging carriages and carts.

Amazingly, I found myself stepping unerringly on an irregular trail of clean patches amidst the offal and manure, thus succeeding in keeping my bare feet unsullied. I noticed that my sisters trod a similar random series of sterile steppingstones.

Or was it that the uniformly dirty pavement spontaneously developed virginal patches beneath our feet?

As we seven attractive women and pavonine man hiked determinedly through the streets of Boston, we began to attract a crowd of followers, picaroons and mudlarks mostly, whose unsolicited comments veered more toward gibes and lewd offerings of unwanted intimate services than had those of the Tremont House crowd. But I and my dignified sisters ignored the verbal affronts from the swelling ranks of our entourage, and Professor Fluvius seemed actually to relish their attentions.

"That's it, lads, that's it! Roll up, roll up! Follow us for the most exciting news of the decade!"

Almost immediately after leaving the hotel, we found ourselves in a park full of greenery, and were able to indulge our bare feet on grass. But this respite was short-lived, as we soon exited the Public Gardens and proceeded uptown on a street labeled Boylston.

My eye was drawn to a posted bill advertising a new play—*The Children of Oceanus*, by Eleuthera Stayrook—at the Everett Hall Theatre, and bearing the commencement date of July 12th, 1877.

And so it was that I had my first inkling of what year it was in which I had awakened—assuming the poster to be of recent vintage, an assumption which its unweathered appearance supported.

Reaching a cross-street named Clarendon, we turned and encountered a construction site. Here, a vast project sprawling across several blocks was in its obvious end stages.

The building at the center of the site was a church of soaring magnificence. Not as large as a cathedral, the brown-hued sanctuary nonetheless radiated a deep gravitas counterbalanced by an exuberant sense of joy.

Workmen swarmed around the nearly complete structure, taking down scaffolding, entering the interior with loads of fine materials, sweeping up debris. One man seemed in charge of the general organized hubbub, and it was toward him that Professor Fluvius made a beeline.

At my side, the woman introduced to me as Plaxie now spoke in a stage-whisper, leaning her pert-nosed, black-ringleted head close to my own auburn locks. Her breath smelled mildly of fish.

"If you think you've seen the Prof put on a show so far, just wait till he gets to work on this mark!"

We now—my comrades, and the ragglety-taggle flock that had attached itself to us—came to a stop around the overseer. He was a plump gent with a thick chestnut beard, hair parted down the middle, and an intelligently playful twinkle to his eyes that offset his otherwise stern demeanor. He wore an expensive brown suit.

Professor Fluvius hailed him in a loud voice more suited to the baseball outfield than face-to-face conversation, and I could tell he was playing to the crowd.

"You, good sir, are Henry Hobson Richardson, the veritable visionary architect of this grand dream in rough stone we see before us!"

Richardson seemed more amused than perturbed. "Yes, sir, I am. And may I enquire your name and purpose?"

"I am Professor Nodens Fluvius, and I am here to give you your next commission!"

"Indeed? And what might that be?"

"A public bath house!"

Loud guffaws and taunts arose from the spectators, but Fluvius remained unperturbed, and Richardson continued to express some unfeigned interest at this odd commission.

"A public bath house, Professor Fluvius? I assume you are thinking along the lines of the municipal facilities found on the Continent. But are you unaware of the spectacular failure of the Mott Street Bath House in New York City, some twenty years ago? Since then, no private investor nor any municipality in our great nation has deemed such an enterprise feasible. Nor has the public clamored for such facilities."

"Ah, but that is because all businessmen and politicos have lacked my farsighted conception of what such an establishment could offer. And as for the public—they know not what they want till it is presented to them."

At this point, the Professor encompassed us seven maidens with a sweep of his arm, as if to indicate that we would appear uppermost on his bill of fare. Some of my sisters lowered their glances demurely, but I maintained a bold gaze directed at the hoi polloi, even when raucous huzzahs went up from the crowd. For a moment, I wondered with alarm if we were meant to be courtesans in this hypothetical establishment. But then I recalled the clean organic thrill of the liquid energies that had flowed from the Professor's touch, and felt reassured of his honest intentions toward us.

"Moreover," continued the Professor, "no prior entrepreneur has held a doctorate in hydrostatics from La Sapienza University in Rome, as do I. Surely you know of the marvelous accomplishments of the ancient Romans in this sphere . . . ? Well, the ultramodern technics of boilers, valves, conduits, gravity-fed reservoirs and suchlike that I intend to install will make the Baths of Caracalla look like a roadside ditch!"

At the mention of a technological challenge, the architect Richardson developed an even keener expression. "Speak on, Professor."

"I have conceived of a palatial public bathhouse that will employ the latest in hydropathic techniques to promote robust health and energy in all its patrons. Combining methodologies I learned at first hand from Vincenz Priessnitz himself at Grafenburg with subtle refinements of my own devising, I can guarantee to reform drunkards, cure the halt and lame, invigorate the intellect of scholars and schoolboys alike, and induce passion in sterile marriages—all for mere pennies a visit!"

This last boast raised further hoots and japes from the crowd, who nonetheless, I sensed, evinced real interest on some deep level at the Professor's pitch. Richardson, meanwhile, seemed to be cogitating seriously on the proposal as well, unconsciously rubbing his sizable vest-swathed tummy as an aid to cogitation.

Grinning, Professor Fluvius awaited the architect's response—which finally came in the form of a question.

"How is this ambitious project to be funded, Professor? I do not work in anticipation of a portion of future profits."

"All is assured, Mister Richardson. I assume pure alluvial gold would be deemed legal tender . . . ?"

The Professor removed a cowhide poke from a suit pocket. Uncinching the poke's neck, he grabbed Richardson's hand and poured a mound of glittering golden grit into his cupped palm. Richardson's eyes expanded to their full diameter. Professor Fluvius dropped the poke atop the mound and said, "Consider this your retainer, I pray, good sir."

Very carefully, Richardson poured the gold back into the poke and deposited the pouch in his own suit. "Professor Fluvius, you have your architect."

A roar of acclaim went up from the crowd. I realized that their massed attention had been part of the Professor's sly plan to add public pressure to compel Richardson's assent. Surely by tomorrow this commission would be spread across all the newspapers of Boston.

The two men shook hands. Professor Fluvius said, "I am staying at the Tremont House, Mister Richardson. I anticipate your dining there tonight with me, so that we may refine our plans. And oh, yes, one last matter. I shall need the establishment finished and ready to open its doors in three months' time."

"Three months' time! For an edifice of any sizable scale? Impossible!"

Professor Fluvius removed two more plump pokes from his pocket and handed them over to Richardson, saying, "That, Mister Architect, is a word we shall not allow to trouble us again."

I approached the Palace of Many Waters across the modest plaza of varicolored granite from Barre, Vermont, that fronted its façade. A warm November day, its sunshine still only half exhausted, had left the stones comfortable to my bare feet. But I imagined that neither I nor my sisters would be discommoded even by the arrival of winter.

At my elbow strode the visitor I had met at the train station: Dr. Simon Baruch. Of medium height and trim physique, dressed in a respectable checked suit, he boasted a full head of dark hair and neatly trimmed thin mustache and chin spinach. He walked with a dignified bearing that reflected his past military service, as a surgeon during the War Between the States.

I had met the doctor at the terminus of the Boston and Providence railroad line, adjacent to the Public Gardens. From thence we walked a few blocks riverward, until we came to Beacon, that avenue which bordered the Charles River. We turned left and proceeded a few more blocks to the intersection of Beacon and Dartmouth, where the Palace reared its mighty battlements.

Perched on the banks of the River Charles (one single-story wing housing the Professor's offices and private quarters in fact extended out on stilts above the flood), the Palace was a fantasy of minarets and oriel windows, gables and slate slopes, copper flashing and painted gingerbread. Like some Yankee version of the famous Turkish Baths of Manchester, England, the Palace seemed a *hamam* fit for *ifrits*—to adopt a Muslim perspective.

After demolition of a few inconvenient pre-existing structures, construction of the Palace had been accomplished in a mere ten weeks, without stinting materials or design,

thanks to an army of laborers working round the clock; the ceaseless management and encouragement of Mr. Richardson; and a steady decanting of alluvial gold from the seemingly inexhaustible coffers of our dear Professor. (And how marvelously I had matured myself in those weeks, almost as if a new personality had been established upon my own nascent foundations in synchrony with the Palace's construction.)

Our doors had opened in mid-October, just three weeks ago, and in that time the Palace had been perpetually busy. We were open for business seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, and there were very few stretches when the influx into the Palace was not a copious stream.

Now Dr. Baruch and I stopped hard by the large, impressive main entrance so that he could marvel for a moment at the parade of patrons: mothers with children, horny-handed laborers, clerks and costermongers, urchins and peddlers, soldiers and savants from Harvard and the Society of Natural History. I noted every type of man, woman and child, from the most humble and ragged to the most refined and eminent members of the *bon ton*, all desirous of becoming clean in a democratic fashion. True, their entrance fees differed, and they would be diverted into different grades of facilities once inside. But all had to enter by the same gate—a gate above which was graven the Palace's motto:

> KEEP CLEAN, BE AS FRUIT, EARN LIFE, AND WATCH,/TILL THE WHITE-WING'D REAPERS COME.
>
> —HENRY VAUGHAN,
> *THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY*

I noted Dr. Baruch's gaze alighting upon the motto, and, after taking a moment to apprehend it, he turned to me and said, "An apt phrase from the Silurist, and not without a metaphysical complement to its ostensible carnal focus. Were you aware that the poet's twin brother, Thomas, was an alchemist?"

"I fear I am uneducated in such literary matters, Dr. Baruch. Our Professor, however, is a man of much learning, and is highly desirous of your conversation."

Dr. Baruch laughed. "I can tell when I am being politely hustled along. Let us go visit your employer."

We circumvented the Bailey's Baffle Gates through which the paying customers had to pass and found ourselves in the Palace's lofty atrium.

Like most of the interior spaces of the Palace, the lofty, vaulted atrium was tiled with gorgeously glazed ceramic creations, representing both abstract and pictorial designs, the latter of a predominantly marine bent. The hard surfaces granted an echoic resonance to the gabble of voices and footfalls. High stained glass windows rained down tinted light upon the hustling masses as they filed in orderly lines towards the towel-dispensing stations and thence to the disrobing rooms. Naturally, the sexes were separated at this point—save for mothers shepherding children under a certain age—as they would be in the baths.

I guided Dr. Baruch behind the scenes, until we reached the door to Professor Fluvius's private offices. I knocked and received acknowledgement to enter.

Professor Fluvius's unique maple desk, a

product of the Herter Brothers firm of New York, was shaped like a titanic conch shell. Behind this cyclopean design sat the man whose face was the first visage I had seen upon attaining consciousness. His ivory tresses, longer even than before, fell past the shoulders of his cerulean suit.

Behind him, a window looked out upon the sail-dotted Charles, toward the Cambridge shore. It was cracked a few inches to allow the heady scents of the river inside.

Professor Fluvius ceased fussing with a ledger when we entered, slapping its boards shut decisively, then rose to his feet with a broad smile and came out from behind the desk, hand outstretched.

"Dr. Baruch! A genuine pleasure, sir! Thanks you so much for responding to my humble invitation. I hope to present you with a professional challenge worthy of your talents . . . "

I hung back near the door, hoping to hear the Professor's proposal, as I was intrigued by Dr. Baruch's character, insofar as it had been vouchsafed to me in our short acquaintance, and his potential role in our enterprise.

But Professor Fluvius would have none of my impertinent curiosity. Pulling a turnip watch from his pocket, he examined it and then addressed me.

"Charlene, don't you have an appointment soon with one of your special clients?"

I knew full well who awaited me upon the hour, but dissembled. "Oh, Professor, I had forgotten. Pardon me."

"No offense needing pardon, my dear. But you'd best be streaming onward now."

I had perforce to leave their presence then.

But I was not to be stymied from my eavesdropping.

What a change in my nature from the humble, timid deference shown to the Professor upon my first foray into consciousness! It was not that I honored him any the less, nor did my desires deviate significantly from his—insofar as I plumbed either his motives or my own. But I had developed a stubborn sense of my own desires, and a reluctance to be thwarted.

Outside in the hall, I did not head immediately back toward the main bulk of the thronging Palace, but instead approached a nearby window, lowered of course against the November chill. I opened it and peered out.

Some twelve feet below me, the happy waters of the Charles burbled past on their way to the sea, chuckling among the freshly tarred pilings supporting this wing. It would have been a straight, uninterrupted drop to that wet embrace, had it not been for one feature: a kind of catwalk or boat-bumper about halfway down, installed against accidental collisions.

I slipped over the window sill and lowered myself down till my toes met the rough planks. Then I made my way stealthily to a position just below the window of the Professor's study.

"—but inside," boomed Fluvius's voice, "inside, Dr. Baruch, I think you will agree with me that they are as dirty as ever. The waters beneath the skin. You can clean the outer man—and that's a fine start—but the inner man is another matter entirely. A much-neglected matter."

"I confess," responded Baruch, "that I have often considered the possibility of tin-

kering with the interior flora of the human body, with an eye toward remedying several inherent bodily ills. Many are the moments, mired in the bloody tent of a field hospital or the sputum-flecked ward of a slum asylum, when I fantasized about bolstering the body's natural defenses with a dose of some beneficial live culture."

"Yes, yes, I knew of your researches, Dr. Baruch! Just why I summoned you out of all your peers. And my dreams tally precisely with yours! I believe I have formulated a potent nostrum that will benefit mankind in just such a fashion as you envision. My potion will not only re-order the patient's defensive constitution, but also contribute to a more orderly patterning of nerve impulses in the brain, promoting more cogent and disciplined thought forms."

Baruch was silent for a moment, before responding: "If that's the case, Professor Fluvius, then what need do you have of me and my skills?"

Fluvius sounded slightly embarrassed, for the first time in my memory. "My trials of this patent medicine of mine have been not wholly successful. Certain of my subjects did not sustain a full recovery. Admittedly, I was working with gravely ill specimens to begin with, but still—I had hoped for better results. But I realized after such setbacks that I lacked the precise anatomical knowledge of a trained physician such as yourself. It is this expertise that I desire you to contribute to the cause. As for salary, I know you are above such plebeian considerations. But let me assure you, your monetary compensation will be far above any salary you could earn elsewhere. Will you join me in this quest to improve the lot of our fellow man, Dr.?"

Crouching below the window as the sun continued to sink and a brisk breeze blew up my gown, I eagerly awaited Dr. Baruch's response. But my concentration was shattered upon the instant by the sensation of a cold and clammy hand encircling my ankle!

Only with supreme willpower did I stifle all but the most muted involuntary shriek that would have betrayed me to those inside. Luckily, a gull screamed at that very moment to further cover my inadvertent alarm.

Heart pounding, I whipped my head down and around to see who could possibly have grabbed me under such unlikely circumstances.

The shaggy head and leering ugly countenance of Usk greeted my gaze. He stood apelike on the crossbeams of the pilings, evidently pleased as Punch to have caught me in this compromising situation.

Just prior to the Palace's opening three weeks ago, a contingent of the Swamp Angels had visited Professor Fluvius as he was giving us Naiads a lecture on our duties. We watched with some trepidation and unease as these hoodlums swaggered into our sanctuary. They boldly demanded a weekly stipend as "protection money," in order to ensure that the Palace remained unmolested in its operations. Professor Fluvius seemed to agree, and they went their way.

But then he summoned Usk.

As if out of the woodwork, the gnomish gnarled fellow, dressed in rough workingman's garb, appeared. None of us had ever seen him before. But he seemed on intimate terms with the Professor.

"Usk, would you see to it that those churlish fellows do not disturb us ever again?"

Usk laughed, and shivers went down my spine, and likewise along my sisters', I sensed sympathetically.

"Righto, Prof! I'll learn them a lesson they won't soon forget."

As mysteriously as he had appeared, Usk vanished.

The Swamp Angels had not troubled the Palace since. And I had heard that, after some enigmatic cataclysm among their ranks, the wounded remnants of their forces had been absorbed by the Gophers and the Ducky Boys.

Since that incident, Usk had surfaced occasionally to carry out the Professor's bidding. But none of us knew where he lived, or how he passed his idle hours.

Now I was face to face with him—in a manner of speaking, since actually he had a more prominent view of my bare nether parts than of my countenance. I resolved not to let him know how much he had affrighted me.

In a whisper, I demanded, "What do you want of me?"

Usk husked out his own words. "Prof'd be a tad peeved, if'n he found out you was keyholing him."

I adopted my most winsome ways. "Must you tell him?"

"Not if'n I don't choose to."

"And what could possibly induce you to choose such a merciful course?"

"Let's say if'n I were to receive certain favors from a certain lady—favors which I'd be more than happy to make explicit to you. Tonight, for instance, after your work's all done."

Usk's grip tightened on my ankle—the rough skin of his palm feeling like scales—and I quailed interiorly. But he had me in a bind. I certainly did not wish to appear a sneak and gossip in the eyes of Professor Fluvius. No, I had to submit.

"Where should we meet?"

"I dwell in the lowest cellar, by the boilers. Southwest corner. That's where you'll find my doss."

"I—I'll be there."

Leering once more, Usk released my ankle, prior to slipping away under the floorboards and among the pilings, sinuous as a fish.

Refocusing my attentions on the study window, I heard only the clink of glasses and an exchange of pleasantries. I had to assume the deal had been sealed, and that Dr. Baruch would be staying with us.

And now I needed to keep my appointment.

I pattered barefoot swiftly past the gaudy marble entrances to the enormous, rococo common rooms, big as ropewalks, where the masses of men and women bathed in segregated manner. The sounds of gay and enthusiastic splashy ablutions echoed outward from these natatoria. I could picture the water jetting from the bronze heads of dolphins, the flickering gas lights reflected off the pools, the cakes of fragrant soaps embossed with the Palace's trademark conch shell, the long-handled brushes and plump sponges, the naked human bodies in all their equally agreeable

shades of flesh and states of leanness and corpulence. The imagined scene delighted me. The conception of so many happy people sporting like otters or seals in a pristine liquid environment seemed utterly Edenic to me. I was more convinced than ever that Professor Fluvius's Palace of Many Waters was a force for beauty and goodness in this often shabby and cruel world.

Once beyond this area open to the general public—the hubbub abating and I having circumvented with a smile and a nod one of the Palace's liveried guardians stationed so as to limit deeper ingress solely to the elite—I had access to an Otis Safety Elevator. I stepped aboard along with a man I recognized as the Mayor of Boston, a Mr. Prince: grey hair low across his brow, walrus mustache. He nodded politely to me, and sized me up with the same look a chef might bestow on a prize tomato.

"You're the one they call Charlie, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm slated to see your sister Praxie today. But perhaps next time you'll attend me."

"I'd be delighted, sir."

The rattling mechanism brought us to the second floor of our establishment. I parted from Mayor Prince, and watched him enter the room labeled "Praxithea."

On this level of the Palace were the private rooms for our more privileged clientele, where bathing occurred in elegant tubs accommodating from two to several bathers. Included on this level were the seven special suites assigned to us Naiads. In these chambers, the waters themselves were perfumed and salted, and certain luxurious individual attentions could be paid to the selected patrons.

I did not enter directly the suite whose brass plate proclaimed it "Charlene," but instead stepped through an innocuous unmarked door and into a connecting changing room. There I doffed my gown and donned a bandeau top across my full bosom and a loin cloth around my broad hips, leaving most of my honey-colored skin bare. I let down my long chestnut hair, and stepped through to where my client awaited.

Frederick Law Olmstead had accumulated fifty-five years of life at this date. The famed architect, known to the nation primarily for his magnificent design of New York's Central Park, boasted a large head bald across the crown, a wild crop of facial hair, and a penetrating expression betokening a certain wisdom and insight into the ways of the world, as well as hinting at burning creative instincts. His supervisory work in the field had kept him moderately fit, although he had not entirely escaped a certain paunchiness of middle-age.

Now he sat, naked and waist-deep in a capacious ceramic footed trough steaming with soapy, jasmine-scented water, puffing on a cigar and looking already well advanced on the road to relaxation and forgetful of his vocational cares, even before my ministrations.

Olmstead had been my client since the Palace opened, and we were on familiar terms. He evidently found me a congenial bath partner, and I had to confess that I had become more than professionally enamored of him. He had always treated me with

kindness and respect and a liberal generosity.

"Ah, Charlie, you're a sight for weary eyes! Join me, dear. I need to disburden myself of the day's headaches."

I slipped gracefully into the tub, sliding up all slippery into his embrace, and Olmstead began to soliloquize me. I kept mum yet receptive.

"This newest project of mine is a bugger, Charlie. Turning a swamp into a park! Sheer insanity. The Fens were never meant to be other than a flood plain or tidal estuary. And yet somehow the city wants me to convert them to made lands, a pleasure pavilion for the masses, part of what they're already calling my 'emerald Necklace.' Can you fathom what's involved in such a project? Not only do I have to contend with the waters of the Charles, but also those of Muddy River and Stony Brook, which likewise feed into that acreage. I'm going to have to erect dams and pumps, then drain and grade, before layering in an entire maze of culverts and sewers. Truck in gravel and soil, landscape the whole shebang—So much of this city is made land already, hundreds of acres reclaimed from a primeval bog. The civic fathers imagine they can wrest any parcel they desire from the aboriginal waters. Mayor Prince and his whole Vault cabal are dead set on this project. But this time their reach exceeds their grasp. It's a mad folly, I tell you!"

Olmstead paused, puffing on his cigar, then said with altered tone, "Yet if it could be done—what a triumph!"

I felt proud of Olmstead's ambition and fervor. Intuiting that he had expended his verbal anxiety, I said, "If anyone is capable of accomplishing such a feat, Frederick, it's you. But you must return to the project tomorrow with a relaxed mind and body. Enough speech. Allow me to do my job now."

Willingly, Olmstead stubbed out his cigar in a wrought-iron tub-side appliance. I secured a cake of lanolin-rich lilac soap and began thickly to lather up my own form with graceful motions, all the while allowing the ends of my wet hair to drape sensuously about Olmstead like enticing tendrils.

When I had attained a sufficient soapy slickness, I commenced to apply my rich body as an active wash-cloth across his whole frame.

I understand that in far-off Nippon there is a class of women known as *geishas*, whose professional practices resemble what we Naiads at the Palace deliver. But how Professor Fluvius ever came to know of them, in order to use as models for his business, I cannot say.

Because the business of the Palace continued round the clock, and some of us must perforce tend the evening shift, the third-floor communal sleeping suite for us Naiads held only four of us at midnight: myself, Lara, Minnie and Lila. It were best to picture us, lounging drowsily on our respective feather mattresses, as four Graces, hued in the sequence above-named: honey, olive, alabaster and tea.

We chattered for a while of gossipy inconsequentials, as any women will, before Lila said, "I see that our newest employee has already been assigned a laboratory."

How quickly news traveled in this aqueous environment, like scent to a shark!

"Do you mean Dr. Baruch?" asked Lara, batting her thick eyelashes. "I wouldn't mind being his assistant. It would make a nice change from the soap-and-slither routine with the high muck-a-mucks."

Minnie asked, "What's the nature of his work?"

"Rumor has it he's crafting some kind of purgative for the rubes," responded Lila.

Lara pulled a face. "I shouldn't care to help in that case, lest he need a subject for his trials."

I did not add any details from my own stock of overheard information. The thoughts of the payment I owed Usk in return for that data were too discouraging.

Pretty soon after this, my sisters fell asleep, allowing me to slip out without needing to respond to any inquiries about my late-night errands.

The same elevator that had delivered me from street-level to the second-floor now took me from third to lowest cellar. Here I entered a phantasmagorical, almost inhuman world.

The sub-basement held all the apparatus that allowed the Palace to function. I felt much like an animalcule venturing into a human's guts.

Congeries of brass pipes of all dimensions, from pencil-thin to barrel-thick, threaded the space, producing a veritable labyrinth. Some pipes leaked steam; some were frosted with condensation. Valves and dials and taps proliferated. The pipes led into and out of huge rivet-studded reservoirs, from which escaped various floral and mineral scents.

Beyond this initial impression of tubular matrices loomed the many boilers, giant radiant Molochs, each one fed and stoked by its own patented "automatic fireman" apparatus, which fed coal in from vast bins at a steady clip, obviating the need for human tenders.

Indeed, Professor Fluvius's early boast—to render the Baths of Caracalla insignificant—appeared fulfilled.

I began to perspire. Vertigo assailed me. I felt incredibly distant from all the sources of my strength, amidst this controlled industrial chaos. Usk had said the southwest corner was his lair. But which direction was which?

I wandered for what seemed like ages, meeting no one in this sterile factory, before glimpsing, beneath a large, wall-mounted mechanical message-board affair, a tumbled heap of bedclothes. As I approached, I noted that the message-board was of the type found in Newport mansions, by means of which masters could communicate with distant servants through the medium of dropped or rotated printed discs. This must be how Profesor Fluvius summoned Usk at need.

The musty midden of bedclothes stirred and out of the stained regalia rose Usk. To my horror and disgust, he was utterly naked, his powerful, hirsute twisted limbs such a contrast to the well-formed appearance of Olmstead or my other clients.

Usk conferred a look of randy appreciation on me, a favor which I could easily have foregone.

"Ah, beauty steps down into the gutter. I am glad you made it unnecessary for me to communicate with the Professor. He's

got too many pressing matters on his mind. Big doings, big doings. If you only knew . . . "

Usk seemed to want to disclose some secret to me, but I did not pursue his bait, for fear of a hook within. So he continued.

"It's a kindness to spare ol' Fluvius any knowledge of your trifling indiscretions. Howsomever, you are not here for us to discuss our mutual master. Sit down, sit down, join me on my humble pallet!"

I sat, and of course, to no one's surprise, Usk immediately began to paw me without any charade of seduction, his hands roaming at will under my gown.

I would like to say that his touch left me cold. But the truth was otherwise. To my chagrin, I sensed in Usk's blunt and callous gropings a portion of the same galvanic power that had thrilled me when the Professor first touched me in the Tremont Hotel, so many months ago. It was almost as if Usk, the Professor, and I were all related, sharing the same sympathies and humors I felt with my fellow Naiads.

No merit resides in delving into the sordid details of the next two hours. Usk had his lusty way with me, not once or twice but thrice, and deposited his thick spunk in several unconventional places.

At last, though, he seemed sated. Sated, yet still demanding.

"You'll be back tomorrow night, my dear. Or the Professor and I will have that unwelcome conversation about your goosey-goosey-gander-where-do-you-wander ways."

I sighed dramatically in a put-upon fashion, yet not without some falsity of emotion. Truly, after tonight's tumble, future encounters with Usk would not be such an unknown burden. "I suppose I have no choice . . . ."

Suddenly, as if my words had pleased him or opened up some further bond between us, he reached beneath his pallet and pulled out—a book!

"Would you—would you read this to me? Please? I—I can't . . . "

I took the volume. The title page proclaimed it to be *The Water-Babies*, by Charles Kingsley.

"'Once upon a time,'" I began, "'there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom . . . '"

The next several weeks sped by in a busy round of work, sleep, intercourse and two-person Chautauqua between Usk and myself, with the text of our studies moving on, after *Water-Babies*, to Mr. MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*. I could not honestly say I found this regimen imposed by Usk without its thrills and rewards, and on the whole, what with work and all, each of my days passed in a pleasant whirl of activity.

Several times the Professor took all seven of us girls out with him on various expeditions across Massachusetts and nearby New England. Ostensibly, these were gay recreational outings to reward us for our diligent services. But in reality, I suspected that they were calculated to serve at least as much as advertisements for the Palace.

Late in December, on a mild day, we went to Rocky Point Amusement Park in Rhode Island. The place had been much in the news, since President Hayes had re-

cently visited and become the first sitting President of this forward-looking nation to utilize a newfangled telephonic device located on the premises. (He had placed a call to Providence, purpose unreported.)

Even this late in the season, the Shore Dinner Hall was still serving its traditional quahog chowder and clamcakes fare, and we all ate to repletion, amidst much laughter and chatter.

At one point, without warning, the skies darkened and the waters of Narragansett Bay became troubled. It seemed as if our little excursion would be dampened. I looked up from my half-eaten tenth greasy clamcake and noted that, across the hall, Professor Fluvius was arguing with the manager of the establishment, about what I could not say. Several park employees intervened, and both men calmed down. At the same time, the sun returned and the sea grew still, and so all was well.

During this period, I spent whatever minutes were not otherwise occupied with Dr. Baruch in his laboratory, which was located in the same wing that housed the Professor's quarters and office. I had taken a shine to the humble physician, and was in awe of his learning. His cosmopolitan air spoke to me of the larger world, a venue I hoped one day to experience firsthand. I was resolved not to spend all my days in the Palace of Many Waters, despite whatever debt I owed to Professor Fluvius for first awaking me. I wanted to travel, to broaden my horizons.

Dr. Baruch was careful not to divulge the nature of his researches to me—a secret he was unaware I already knew—but accepted me as a mascot of sorts to his scientific endeavors, a pleasant female ornament to his glassware-filled, aqua-regia-redolent workspace.

It was in this manner that I became privy to his ultimate success, and arranged to be at my secret listening post when he rushed into the Professor's office to deliver his good news.

"Professor Fluvius, I am happy to report that your generous faith in my talents has been rewarded. Administration of the biotic infusion of your devising is perfected at last. Delivered as a lavage to the lower intestines, the colony becomes well-established and active. Although I forecast that frequent infusions will be necessary to maintain its presence against the body's innate capacity for driving out foreign invaders."

"Excellent, Dr., excellent! I can now begin improving the material condition of the community. And the best way to do that is to start with the health of the men at the very top. With a public servant such as the Mayor, perhaps. If you would be so good as to prepare a dosage for Mr. Prince, and stand ready to offer your testimonial as to its efficacy . . . "

Perched not uncomfortably on the frigid catwalk, listening to the formation of ice crystals in the burbling water around the pilings below, I received this news as a sop to my curiosity, but did not regard it as any item of significance.

How little I witted or foresaw.

A few days later, Olmstead and I were reclining in our tub prior to my sudsing us up. He looked ill at ease for some reason I could not immediately fathom. His wetted

bedraggled beard resembled a nanny goat's. My heart went out to him, and I resolved to exert all my charms to get him to relax. But most uncommonly, I could not. Finally he disclosed what was troubling him.

"You know my project to reclaim the Fens? It's cancelled. Funding's been suddenly withdrawn. The Mayor and his tribe have had a change of heart. They're full of talk about making an end to 'trespassing on the natural order.' Claim the city is big enough as it is. It's as if they've all gone Transcendentalist on me! Progress be damned!"

I ached for his disappointment. "Why, Frederick, that's simply awful! You had your heart set on accomplishing this!"

"I know, I know. But what can I do? My mind's so disordered at this development. Perhaps I should take one of those new treatments the Professor is offering. It seems to have perked up the Mayor and his crowd. Fostered a strange implacable resolve in them."

I could not offer a solution to Olmstead's worries, and so concentrated instead on delivering the most agreeable whole-body massage I could to this client whom, to my surprise, I had become so very fond of.

The hour after midnight that same evening found me once more down in the depths of the Palace with Usk. After our robust hinky-jinky and a chapter or two of Mr. Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River*, I made to leave. But Usk detained me with a teasing query.

"You picked out your dress yet for the Prof's coronation ball down in Washington?"

I halted in my tracks. "Whatever do you mean?"

"He's got the Mayor and his cronies in his pocket now. Only a matter of time till the whole country's his to command."

"How so?" I demanded.

"That bum-wash what he and the doc cooked up. Makes any man the Prof's slave. Saps their native will and substitutes the Prof's."

"I don't believe you! The Professor is a noble intellect! He'd never stoop to such a thing!"

Usk shrugged. "Believe as you will, makes no nevermind to me."

I stormed out, all in a dithery confusion. Should I confide this news to my sisters, and ask their advice? Confront the Professor directly? Or do nothing at all?

I resolved to seek Olmstead's guidance first.

The hours till our next appointment dragged their feet, but at last we were fragrantly en-tubbed together.

Before I could venture my request for guidance, Olmstead burst forth with plentiful yet somewhat inane zest.

"Lord above, I've never felt better nor been more peaceful of mind! All those troubles I was blathering about to you—Vanished like the snows of yesteryear! Who cares if the Fens ever get transformed? Not me! And to think I owe it all to high-colonic hydrotherapy!"

Rain in great sheets and buckets; rain in Niagara torrents; rain in Biblical proportions.

The skies had poured down their burden

unceasingly for the past twenty-four hours, ever since I had left Olmstead, as if in synchrony with my foul, black mood. Nor did they seem disposed to stop.

Just beyond the walls of the Palace, the throbbing, gushing waters of the Charles were rising, rising, rising. I could feel them, even out of sight. It even seemed possible they would soon threaten to lap at the catwalk where I had eavesdropped, high as it was.

All the talk among the patrons of the Palace centered about roads swamped, bridges washed away, dams upriver that were bulging at their seams.

Something had to be done. About my anger, about the Professor, about the subversion of poor Olmstead. But what?

The Professor had been like a father to me and my sisters. We owed him our work, our maintenance, our purpose in life.

But didn't he in turn owe us something? Honesty, if nothing else?

Finally, when I had worked myself into a right tizzy, I stamped my way to Professor Fluvius's office, and barged in without knocking.

He was there, seated behind his big seashell desk, idle, back to me, looking out the window at the incessant precipitation with what I immediately sensed was a melancholy ruminativeness. I stood, quivering and silent, till at last he wheeled to face me. His long tresses, white as sea spume, framed a sad and sober visage.

"Ah, Charlene, my most local and potent child. I should have known it would be you who might tumble to my schemes. I hope you'll allow me to explain."

"What is there to explain! You're bent on accumulating a greedy power over your fellow men!"

The Professor chuckled wryly. "These men are not my fellows. But yes, I need to pull their strings for a while."

"To glorify yourself!"

Professor Fluvius arose and hastened toward me. I took a step or two backwards.

"No, Charlene! Not at all. Or rather, yes. I seek to glorify what I represent. The natural state of all creation. This city—It's an emblem of all that's wrong with mankind. That's why I established my Palace here, on the front lines of the battle. Can't you see what they're doing? Tearing down their hills and dumping them into the waters! It's an assault. Yes, an assault on creation. If they succeed here, they'll go on without compunction, dumping whatever they wish into the seven seas, into rivers and canyons. Before too long, the whole of nature will be naught but a soiled toilet! I had to stop them, here and now and hence forever. You must see that!"

The words of my master tugged at my loyalty and heart. But counterposed against them was my affection for Olmstead, and my own sense of thwarted individual destiny.

"No!" I yelled. "I won't let you! I'll stop you! Stop you now!"

And so saying, I slammed my small fists into his blue-vested chest.

The Professor's face assumed a wrathful mien I had never before witnessed. That blow seemed to unleash greater cataracts from the sky. The noise of the rain threatened to flood my ears. But I could still hear his words.

"You belong to me! You are naught but a tributary! You flow into my vastness! You shall not rebel!"

He gripped me fiercely by my upper arms. Instantly I felt tethers of strange energies enwrap us, coursing into and out of us both. For his part, Fluvius seemed to be drawing on some vast but distant reservoir, while my own forces were smaller, but closer to hand.

Immobile as statues, we struggled mightily in this invisible fashion, while the rain cascaded down.

And then somehow I felt the presence of my sister Naiads at my back, offering support and sustenance. I seemed to hear them speak with a single voice:

"Bold and deep-souled Nodens oversteps himself. He distrusts and hates all men. But we, we who wind our courses gently among them, fertilizing their fields, ferrying their goods, supplying their recreation—we do not. We must give them a chance to be their best selves. End this now, sister."

And I did, with their help.

Out the window that looked upriver, I could see the wall of dirty, debris-laden water barreling down, high as the steeple of the Old North Church, aimed to sweep the shoreline clean, and take the Palace down.

Professor Nodens Fluvius saw too, and in the final moment before it hit us, I thought to detect a trace of pride and even approval in his expression.

When that liquid avalanche struck the Palace, tearing it off its foundations, drowning its boilers, I too dissolved, along with Fluvius and my sisters and even Usk. (Of the poor unfortunate mortals caught therein, I speak not.) I dissolved back to what I had been before I awoke on that damp coverlet, not knowing my name, back to an existence of endless flow, never the same from moment to moment, yet eternal, owning a mouth that pressed wetly against my old master, yet this time retaining my name.

Charlene, or Charlie, or Charles.

EXPLORE THE FUTURE
WITH ROBERT REED

Humanity has never been so happy.

But if the mind has no limits, how can you trust what your mind tells you?

If imagination is more real than the universe, then what is real?

And more importantly, what is right?

Only a few copies left!
Jacketed Hardcover £25.00 [$50.00]
Paperback £10.00 [$20.00]

"I was leaving a hospital after visiting a sick relative," reports Robert Reed. "And while heading for my car, this creature walked past me. She was obviously not a patient. I doubt if she had ever been sick in her life. Well-dressed and beautiful, she had a briefcase in one hand and an elaborate cellphone/auxiliary brain in the other. My first thought was that she was six foot tall, easy. My second thought was that she had to be one of the pharmaceutical reps that stalk every medical facility these days. And my eighty-fifth thought, sometime in the next week or two, was for a story involving a gifted saleswoman."

Robert Reed continues to write from Lincoln, Nebraska, living with his wife, Leslie, and daughter, Jessie. He won a Hugo in 2007 for his novella, 'A Billion Eves'. His major project of the moment is a long episodic novel that he thoroughly enjoys and for which he will probably never find a happy publisher. At least, that's what he thinks.

Six Foot Easy

Robert Reed

"You're new."

"I am new, and thank you for noticing."

Once again, I looked her up and down. Six foot easy and golden blond, with legs longer than most and a face borrowed from an actress who was something nearly thirty years ago. The clothes perfectly matched expectations for the modern professional. No bright or showy colors. Seams neat without being severe. The perfectly fitted shirt and waistcoat and trousers, none of which could be wrinkled or torn or easily dirtied. The long hair rarely needed a comb. Elegant black shoes accented what could be a dancer's long feet. What jewelry there was seemed entirely appropriate to her purpose, good enough to be noticed but never demanding a second look.

"So what do you sell?" I asked.

"At this moment, nothing," she pointed out.

I smiled, reminding her, "Your purpose is to sell."

She nodded amiably. "But as you noticed, I am new."

"I've never seen one like you," I said.

"Brand new," she assured.

"Which means?"

"Flexibility is my gift. Accommodation is my pleasure. Those for whom I work have contracts with a wide array of clients. And my training has been quite thorough. Depending on my given situation, I am prepared to entice consumers with any or all of ten thousand four hundred and six wonderful products."

"For a cost," I mentioned.

"A competitive price, plus a modest commission for my owners. Yes."

"You're the grease of modern commerce," I teased.

She watched me. Then a smooth hand lifted, brushing aside the bright hair before lightly touching the back of her long, narrow neck.

"Is it sore?"

"Not at all," she said.

"I'm glad."

She watched my face, my eyes.

"I buy things," I said. "All of the time."

"People usually do."

"You should try and sell me something."

"Perhaps if I knew more about you."

"No," I said. "We don't play the game that way."

Once again, she explored her neck.

"Is it bleeding?"

She said, "No," but studied her fingertips just the same.

"Your links were set rather deep," I mentioned. "I had some trouble finding them, and the incision could have been neater."

"You did your best, I'm sure."

We sat for a little while.

"I like names," she allowed. "I can see why you won't give me yours. But any name would help, so that I can refer to you as a friend."

"I thought we were friends."

She matched my smile. "Of course."

I waited.

"Terrance," she said.

"What's that?"

"I'm naming you. Terrance."

"I don't like that name much," I said, laughing quietly.

"Names can be burdens," she agreed. "Your environment can be structured in a variety of healthful ways. Your genetics can be modified by many proven methods. But the name bestowed on a boy by some loving parent will always have its hold on him."

"True enough, I suppose."

She waited. Then the pretty face grinned, and without thinking, she tried to cross her left leg over the right knee. The chain on her ankle rattled softly before it pulled tight. But she held the leg in that very uncomfortable position, halfway crossed, smiling at me when she announced, "I know what I'm going to sell you, Terrance."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"No," she said.

I leaned back.

She dropped her leg and scratched at the wound on her neck. Then with a smile that seemed nothing but pleasant, she said, "For the time being, that's my little secret. But it's something that you will need, and probably soon."

We continued to talk about little matters—the hot weather and her comfort, mostly—and then I thought to ask, "Are you hungry?"

Her eyes narrowed.

I mentioned several possible meals.

"How gracious of you," she said with a flat, slow voice. "You are the host. I will leave as your choice."

I walked to the little freezer, selecting the package lying on top. Setting my gift between us, I watched it cook. She watched me. As the aroma of beef stew filled the room, she asked, "Where are we, Terrance?"

I said nothing.

She examined the covered windows and the old LED panels in the ceiling. She watched me open the package and spoon the meal into two identical plastic bowls.

"Pick the one you want," I suggested.

"Select one for me," she replied.

I took the right bowl and used spoon for myself. Then I pushed her dinner close enough for her to reach it, but with difficulty.

My precautions amused her. "I believe you must have had some trouble in the past, Terrance."

I didn't respond.

"Do you always take females?"

The stew was cheap and too salty.

"Your age," she began.

I looked up.

"I'm sorry. You're busy eating," she said. "I shouldn't interrupt."

"No," I said. "Go ahead."

"I was just thinking, Terrance. About you. I am guessing that you were a young man, or maybe even a boy . . . "

Her voice fell away. People never look at people with this kind of intensity, with such an insatiable need to understand the man with a single gaze. I have always liked that element. The azure eyes refused to blink, waiting for me to finally ask, "When I was a boy, what?"

"You fell in love. Didn't you?"

I tried not to react.

Yet she saw something in my face, or pretended to. "The woman was quite a bit older than you, and you didn't expect to fall in love. Is that what happened, Terrance?"

I returned to my stew.

"You were visiting the doctor," she said with assurance. "Your mother was beside you. You were thirteen and very bright, but in certain ways, you weren't like other children. School was too easy, and it was impossible for you to make friends with your peers."

"This is fun," I said. "Keep talking."

"Your parents were divorced, and your mother took you to see the family practitioner. Some little ailment or an annual checkup. Nothing too important, I would guess. But you found yourself sitting in the doctor's lounge, waiting for your name to be called, and then the door opened and a very beautiful woman strode into your sight. She was twice your age and infinitely more worldly than you. For a boy of your age, she was a vision, and with your simmering animal interests, you could not pull your eyes away from her."

I looked up, waiting expectantly.

"The woman was selling drugs. She spoke to the receptionist, requesting a chance to speak with your doctor." Lovely eyes narrowed, peering deeper into the story. "But the fat old lady behind the desk claimed that he was busy and she would have to wait. Wait out here with the patients."

Picturing the scene, I smiled.

"She sat across from you, or maybe in the chair beside you. And then what happened, Terrance? Because I know something happened. There must have been some kind of exchange, if only one-sided."

"Imagine something," I insisted.

"She smiled at you. And at first, that's all she did. But then a little later, and who can say why, she offered a few polite words about nothing. Maybe she told your mother that you were a fine looking boy. I don't know, maybe she asked your name. It was something that small, that harmless. And because you were thirteen and inept with emotions—your emotions, and everyone else's too—you believed in her phony smile. You thought she meant those easy words. She wanted to know your name.

She called you, 'A fine looking boy.' The empty, ritualistic praise on the part of a stranger, and that small moment ended up being the hallmark of your pathetic thirteenth year."

I set my spoon into the uneaten stew and put the bowl on the floor, behind my bare feet.

"Of course that isn't quite what happened," she admitted.

"It isn't."

"Your story is yours. And I know nothing about it."

"You don't know, and you won't."

She shrugged agreeably. "But something rather like that did happen to you. Through coincidence, purely by accident, someone with a passing resemblance to me buried herself inside your consciousness. And now it's thirty years later, and we end up together in this sorry place."

I leaned back in my chair, slowly.

"I know your parents are divorced." She nearly closed her eyes, adding, "Your father left your mother. When you were younger than thirteen. Abandoned her, and abandoned you, in order to live with a younger woman."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's a tidy explanation."

"For what?"

"Everything."

I waited for a long moment. "Maybe you're right," I allowed.

She waited next.

"About the divorce, I mean."

"Congratulations to me." Then she set her spoon aside and lifted the untouched bowl of hot stew, smiling at me before she pushed her pretty face into the gravy and carrots and barley and cultured beef.

I leaped to my feet. "Why did you do that?"

She wore the stew like a mask. Her eyes were more vivid than ever, surrounded by sloppy brown food. "I have reasons," she allowed.

"What reasons?"

She shrugged and licked her mouth clean. Now her lips were bright pink and obvious, much like the pale blue eyes.

I found a washcloth and tossed it to her.

She picked up the cloth, folding it in half and then in half again. Then using one corner, she pushed at the wound on her neck and studied the red fluid stolen from the incision.

"Medical equipment," she said.

"What's that?"

"There is a tidy little kit of surgical tools—AI-managed devices intended for those who wish to perform surgery in emergency circumstances. Or as some kind of grisly hobby, I suppose."

"You sell these kits?"

"I can."

"Is that what you want me to buy? Medical implements?"

"Not at all." Gobs of gravy fell onto her lap, but the legs of her trousers absorbed the worst of the mess, wicking it out of sight. "I'm just making small talk, Terrance. The good salesperson is a master when it comes to empty, disarming conversation."

I said nothing.

"Of course I'm not your first."

I leaned forward, watching her very carefully.

"My guess?" She thought for a moment. "You've acquired half a dozen of us over these last nine years."

I had to ask, "Why nine years?"

"The earliest examples wouldn't have seemed real enough. We lacked the minimal requirements to appear real, and without being able to believe in us, you wouldn't have found any place for us in your fantasy life."

I wasn't hungry anymore. Carefully pushing my bowl far under my chair, I admitted, "You're clever."

"Thank you."

"It's not six," I said.

"But the number is close to six."

"Why?"

With the bloodied end of the towel, she gestured at our surroundings. "You show practice and planning. But I think a man with more experience would have soundproofed these walls better than you have."

I couldn't help but dip my head, bracing myself.

"My ears are quite good," she mentioned.

"How good?"

"I hear the cars passing outside. If I had the opportunity, I could easily match the ebb and flow of vehicles to the city's traffic records."

"You won't have the opportunity," I said.

"I suppose not."

I told her, "You will never leave this room."

"I can imagine that," she allowed.

I laughed. I felt that I had to. Then I sat back down, lifting the front legs of my chair. "Why did you make that mess on your face?" I asked again.

"Terrance," she said. "What exactly do you plan to do with me?"

I didn't answer.

She said, "Yes. I see." Just for an instant, concern revealed itself. But the creature acted resigned to her circumstances, nodding as she explained, "I did this because I wanted to slow you down."

"Is that so?"

"If I'm unattractive, you won't abuse me as quickly."

Feeling the advantage, I leaned forward again. I told her, "'Abuse' is not the best word."

"And why not?"

"My father explained this once. He said, 'You can't hurt iron. You can't abuse machines. Dogs and cats, yes. And most people. But not inanimate objects.'"

She absorbed the lesson. "Was this before the divorce?"

I didn't respond.

"It's a shame," she said. "A shame that the man abandoned you and your mother. He sounds like a fountain of deep wisdom."

I stood up. In the room's farthest corner were a sink and several mismatched plastic cups. I filled the largest cup and returned, sipping the top inch before throwing the rest on her face. She didn't jump, much less blink. She seemed to anticipate my action. The diluted stew began to drip into her lap. Her trousers were soon too filthy to clean themselves. She ignored mess and discomfort. What those huge unblinking eyes concentrated on was my face, measuring how I moved and how I sat in my chair again and how I held my hands against my naked lap.

After a long minute, I asked, "So what is it that you want to sell me?"

"What you need most, of course."

"And what is that?"

She smiled briefly. Then with a quiet, personal voice, she said, "You enjoy these hunts. Don't you, Terrance?"

I shrugged.

"Well I should warn," she said. "You have never snared anyone quite like me."

I started to answer.

But she interrupted, assuring me, "You were right, Terrance. I am something that is very, very new."

She studied me.

"You just seem smarter than the others," I said. "That's all I meant. And your behaviors seem a little more plastic, a little less predictable." I smiled tolerantly. "What are you trying to tell me? You've got sophisticated safety features buried deep inside you? Are there security beacons I can't see? Or maybe you have some special, very secret talents." I made myself laugh, suggesting, "At any moment, you're going to snap that manacle and wrap the chain around my helpless neck. Is that what you're hinting at?"

"Interesting," she said. Yet if anything, she acted disappointed with me.

"What is interesting?"

She wiped her face with the towel, removing all but a last few licks of gravy. "You believe that you are a smart soul. You try to appear worldly and wise. But you don't understand economics. Do you, Terrance?"

"I don't like that name," I said.

She said, "I'm not particularly fond of it either. Terrance."

I glanced at the titanium clasp fitted around her narrow ankle.

"Yes, I'm smarter than my predecessors," she continued. "Particularly on the scales that measure empathy and social talents. But there is no reason to expect special physical powers or any inventive tools of ownership locked into my flesh. And for one very simple, blatantly obvious reason."

"Which is?"

"I am extraordinarily cheap."

I blinked.

She said, "Cheap," again while laughing softly. "That first creature you captured, however many years ago it was . . . she was a very expensive dish. Time and capital and quite a few laboratories were involved in her production. As I'm sure you appreciated at the time, her theft was no small matter. She was born and educated to sell high-end products to men of means, and stealing her was a major crime. If you had been caught, there would have been substantial fines and a charge of grand theft."

"But you're a lot fancier than her," I mentioned.

"Goodness, thank you," she said with a flat, sarcastic voice.

I leaned back in my chair but couldn't get comfortable.

"Do you understand how I was built, Terrance? A sterile mold was filled with totipotent cells siphoned from a culture tank that is about as large as a swimming pool. In a matter of hours, those preprogrammed cells sorted themselves and divided their tasks according to precise menus. And in that same period, a proven personality and thorough education were laid down inside a small commercial AI-drive that happens to be set here, directly behind my eyes. Three days later, I climbed out of my birthing chamber, and after two final examinations and selecting these clothes for myself, I was ready to begin my life."

"I'm familiar this process," I said testily.

"That was nineteen days ago, Terrance."

I shrugged.

"When you cost very little, your owners aren't likely to add special tracking tags, much less endow you with exotic powers."

"All right. Point taken," I said.

"Well then, let me offer you a second point to dwell on." She leaned closer, just a little. "As we sit here, chatting politely, the same revolutionary techniques that built me are rapidly remaking your world. I'm not the only item that has suddenly become cheap. Medicines and gemstones and snail meat are nearly as cheap as the dirt that they're made from. Hearty profits can be earned only from the largest and longest-lived products, plus certain energy-intensive items. And while I could try to sell you a very lovely yacht, or perhaps a private spaceship, I don't think you can afford either."

"Are you certain of that?"

Smiling in a mocking, knowing way, she looked at the rough little room. "I am quite certain, yes."

I waved my hand in the air once, pretending that her verdict meant nothing. "So what would you sell me?" I asked. "What do you carry that I need?"

She sighed. There was a musical quality to that single deep breath. Then carefully and slowly, she explained, "I'm not the last word in this wondrous technology."

"I suppose you aren't."

"But you might be, Terrance."

I blinked and sat up in my chair, one hand scratching the inside of my thigh. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"In another three or four years, the processes that made me will be improved tenfold," she said. "There could be delays, of course. If certain technical matters prove stubborn, another five or six years might be required. But sooner instead of later, the techniques that conjured me out of a thick puddle of living cells will be able to renew existing tissues and bones. A man such as you will be able to replace his aging flesh and his failing mind, living on and on forever as a consequence, free of age or any serious infirmity."

"I'm counting the days," I joked.

Her smile was broad and a little cold. "And if you can rebuild yourself, think how easy it will be to manufacture new humans. People as real as you, but conjured out of water and breath, salt and a few metals."

I said, "No."

She smiled at me.

I told her, "I'm not an idiot. I won't pretend to understand all of the biology, but I know the law. We have strict codes about what is allowed to science, and what is never allowed. There are boundaries here. Lines that people are never going to cross."

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"Yes." My voice was tight, insistent. "It doesn't matter what's possible in another ten years, or in a thousand. We aren't going to let that kind of world ever get started."

"You know this?" she asked.

"I sure do."

"What if these new technologies allowed a man to cheaply duplicate himself? Are you promising me that you'd never feel tempted to make one or two easy copies of yourself?"

I stood up.

She kept talking. "In another five years, and for remarkably little money, a citizen will be able to make a relatively accurate

version of himself. Or his beloved wife, or his darling child. I agree, this won't happen without a fight. Some nations will say, 'No,' long after others have relented. But if you can travel to Gambia or Sweden and make a new Terrance, then what's to stop couples from mixing their genetics and building a quick and enormous family of perfect children?"

The room had a closet. With the key, I unlocked the closet door and dragged out a long black tackle box.

"Laws might sit inside their important books," she continued, "but there will be governments turning a blind eye to the commerce being done by their favorite corporations. What seems unthinkable is never that. You can imagine these things happening, Terrance. Which means that it's inevitable. Once a tipping point is reached, human society will quickly and enthusiastically embrace this fabulous new magic."

"It won't happen," I said.

She shrugged, watching me with a mocking expression. "All right then. For argument's sake, let's pretend that it takes ten years for the revolution to arrive. But ten years from today isn't fifty years in the future. And fifty years is nothing compared to the next fifty thousand centuries."

"What do you mean?"

"Picture one freewheeling society that allows human-generation facilities to be built inside its borders. Just one factory would be able to give birth to a thousand fully-grown human beings every day, and each one of those good people will be ready to take his or her place in the enormous new economy."

I kicked the tackle box out between our chairs.

She didn't jump, or even blink. "Cheap life, Terrance. Are you listening to me?"

Feigning indifference, I asked, "What about life?"

"In another two or three decades, humanity will become extraordinarily cheap. Nobody will grow old. Death rates will plunge. But at the same time, girls won't have to carry babies in their bellies, and the only limit to the size of a family will be the cost of the raw materials. Can you imagine the impact? Cheap people, and they will be educated like I was, for almost nothing. There will be a period of staggering exponential growth. But the earth is only so big. Economic realities never go away. Room will become limited, and what's cheap today won't remain that way. There will always be a finite supply of oxygen and water, carbon and nitrogen. As we sit here, simulations are being run by topflight AIs. The models seem to promise anywhere from two to ten trillion citizens thriving in this splendid tomorrow."

"Splendid?" I was holding a favorite pair of garden shears, looking at her face through the open blades. "This world of yours sounds like hell."

"Except I'll never see this world," she pointed out. "So how can it belong to me?"

I pulled out a leather collar and several lengths of soft rope.

She watched each motion, but nothing in her face or manner betrayed fear. "Terrance?"

"What?"

"I need to warn you: In this crowded new order, a room of these cathedral-like proportions will be beyond the means of all but the wealthiest souls."

I stared at that odd, odd creature.

"Not that any immortal needs to be uncomfortable, or even unhappy. Far from it." Her sales patter was natural, effusive and relentless. "Much of the earth's crust is silicon. Refining and restructuring as little as two percent of that resource will allow rapid data transmission between every citizen and a staggering number of VR realms. The average apartment will enjoy too many windows to count, and more than sight will be possible through them. Touch and smell, not to mention the illusion of being anywhere that you might want to be. If you could move wherever you wanted, which probably won't be the case."

"What exactly are you trying to tell me?" I asked.

"Several models . . . those scenarios at the upper end of the continuum . . . postulate minimal bodies, or nothing but naked human brains bathed in warm salt water. A rather clichéd nightmare, I grant you. But still, even to someone as open to the possibilities as I am . . . well, I shiver when I think of trillions of disembodied souls stuck into buckets and fed sugar water and sensations no more real than those in a lucid dream."

I stepped behind her, shears in one hand, collar and ropes in the other.

One last time, I asked, "What are you selling?"

"A home," she admitted. "To be built in the very near future by a corporation that you know and have always trusted. It will be part of a new city that will be situated inside a stable geologic formation, protected from natural and human disasters by every possible means, and because this is an introductory offer—because I represent farsighted people interested in generating public excitement for their product—I can promise you a promotional cost that will look ridiculously small in another ten years."

"A home?" I sputtered.

"Think of it as a condominium."

I had to stop, trying to sort these ideas out in my head. "What do I get for my money?"

"Eternal safety, at least to the limits of the sun's life and the unexpected rifting of the crust beneath you." With conviction and a smart smile, she looked back over her shoulder, adding, "You'll enjoy ten million years of peace and security. That I can guarantee."

"And for how much?"

She named her price. It was the perfect price. Double it, and I would have been outraged. Cut the figure in half, and I wouldn't have believed any of her preposterous story.

Just the same, I told her, "I don't believe you."

"I can see that," she replied.

"Prove it to me," I said.

"The proof was inside my reader, inside my attaché case."

I destroyed her possessions when I grabbed her up. But that didn't matter, because I refused to let her interrupt my fun now.

Yet the creature insisted on talking, relentlessly pushing at my will, and always aiming at the same impossible target. Even as I fitted one loop of rope over her wrist and pulled her arm behind her lovely body, she insisted, "This offer is limited. Only the first ten thousands buyers will be allowed this incredible price."

"I'm not interested," I promised.

"I realize that, Terrance. I do. But I want you to understand that you probably won't find a colleague of mine who will make you the same offer. This is a discretionary sale, when it happens. Should it happen. I doubt if any salesperson will be as charitable with you as I am trying to be."

"You're trying to save yourself," I complained, finishing my work with her arms. "That's all this is. Busy noise, and desperation."

"No," she claimed. "No, I don't care about myself."

I tried to ignore her, stepping in front of her again.

"This is what I'm designed to do, Terrance. I sell things. And what I am telling you is true. Even if I wanted to, I doubt that I could invent a product in my mind and then pretend that it was genuine. Because I'm not human, and that kind of lying isn't the nature of this particular machine."

I hesitated.

She sensed my mood, and after a calculated pause, she asked, "Are you even a little interested, Terrance?"

"That's not my name," I said.

She waited.

"Okay," I said.

She kept waiting.

"How big?" I finally asked.

But she wouldn't answer me.

I was sweating rivers. Anticipation or nerves were making me perspire; I couldn't decide which. But lifting my arms, I asked, "How big will it be, this palace of mine? This condo for all time. As big as this room, maybe?"

She said, "No."

Then she said, "Somewhat smaller, actually."

"Tell me," I demanded.

"Well," she said. Then she shrugged, saying, "The walls will be constructed from cultured diamond. And you will be free to decorate the interior however you wish—"

"What size?"

She told me.

For a moment, I couldn't believe that I'd heard her correctly. But she gave the dimensions with a smooth, honest voice that left me no choice but to accept what she had told me. Then after a few moments of feeling as if I was falling from some great height, I said, "What you're describing . . . it's not much bigger than a damned coffin . . . !"

"A coffin that will gladly protect you and serve you for ten million years."

I looked down at my naked body.

She waited, ready to say nothing for days, if necessary.

"But what about this?" I finally asked.

"What about what?"

"The chains. The ropes." I felt crazy and embarrassed in ways that didn't make sense to me. "All the stuff that's happened today. What does it mean now?"

Then she laughed, hard and long. I had never heard a more honest sound from anyone, and when she quit, she gasped and tugged at the chain and ropes, saying, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, sir. I am. But already in my life, I've managed a few sales that were a good deal more difficult than this."

Jay Lake tells us that he doesn't often write pure-play science fiction, but 'Skinhorse Goes to Mars' is one of those rare efforts . . . fortunately for us! "There's a distinctive elegance to 'by the rules' SF which makes it a pleasure for both readers and writers alike," Mr. Lake continues. "Of course, one of the greatest pleasures of 'by the rules' SF is arguing about whether a given story indeed follows enough of the rules to qualify. Meanwhile, having just now beaten back a bout of cancer (these comments are literally the first words I have written for publication since my surgery) I have Escapement *out this year from Tor, followed by* Madness of Flowers *from Night Shade, then* Green *from Tor next year. Of all of these, I take the most pleasure in looking forward to PS Publishing's limited edition of my novella* The Baby Killers *in 2010." Us too, Jay . . . us too.*

Skinhorse Goes To Mars

Jay Lake

When I met Skinhorse, my first thought was *old*. Which was weird. Nobody gets old these days. We all die young, some of us after living a long time, if we're lucky.

He was in Piet's Number Seven, a bar-cum-caravanserai in an illegal orbit trailing far enough behind Vesta to be ignorable. Piet's had been instantiated in an old volatiles bladder that had done the Jovian run a few too many times before falling into the surplus circuit. You could store entire cities in Piet's cubage, which made for a somewhat attenuated bar experience. Plus the place had one of those gravity cans—yes, *those* gravity cans—which meant your drink stayed stuck down long as you were near a Higgs carpet.

So there I was annoying myself with three perfectly disrespectable rock jocks, each of us out to fleece the others, when this cadaver starts to stand over me. We're all forever young or forever dead, but this armstrong looked like he'd shaved about half a cent too deep across his whole body, then restored his dermis with spray-on thermal insulation.

I mean, what the hell, everybody's water is their own. But air ain't free in this world, and looks *do* count when settling the bills.

"I'm hunting for Rabbit," the cadaver said to our little foursome. There was something odd in the way his eyes didn't quite track. Like he was being told where to look without actually seeing.

"I know where there's some pussy," said one of the rock jocks, a nominally female genderblend with a high-gee muscle package and optimized pheromones. "Take a left out the airlock and unzip it."

Obligatory laughter from her fellow dust jumpers.

"Yeah?" I said into the trailing silence. "I'm Rabbit." Why not cop to it? One of Piet's tray warmers would finger me for a five or a couple of slivers of something shiny out of a sample bag.

"Suck vacuum, Rab," said another rock jock. "I'm down over two hundred and you're holding air chits I need back."

That was enough for me. "Sorry. Business calls." I laid out my cards and swept my winnings. The genderblend had most of the whiner's two hundred but I was a bit

ahead of Lady Chance myself, as it happened. No big wins this day, I didn't think, which made it a suitable time to fold and go—before the tough boys got too drunk to be good company. I tossed the whiner a couple of bonus oxy liter-tags and stepped out of their space.

There was some grumbling behind me as the cadaver wandered down the Higgs carpet until he found an unoccupied lobe of the bar more to his liking. He wound up among a scattering of broomsaddle chairs, most of them chopped from that old LunaTech series of low duty cycle tenders that had the bad habit of cooking off the fuel cells under full insolation. Cute touch, that. Every rock jock wanted reminding of another way to bite vacuum.

I didn't need this corpse, I was just happy to be away from my latest dance partners. They were boring. But here I was, so I might as well play this hand. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Life." He said it like he'd heard the question a few thousand times before. Weird thing was, even with that gene bomb face, his voice was very ordinary. Just like any tall guy who'd spent too many years with an air tube in his mouth would sound.

He continued in that ordinary voice: "Eden 'Rabbit' Simms." That was a startling shock to me. My full name isn't exactly a state secret, but it ain't widely known either. "Born SY 108 at Old Clavius, served with the Fourth Orbital Assault Dragoons in the Second Rights War."

"Third War, too," I whispered. Good old Fourth. FOAD—the Fuck Off And Die brigade. We don't even live on in the history books, not us. Only in memory. Deep in my cortex dormant subroutines spun up. Buckywires began storing tension inside my reinforced long muscles. "Shank you and the tank you rode on in, dead man. I don't talk that talk no more."

Fingers shivering with induced strength, I put my hand up to ward off my nightmares as I walked away.

His voice followed me. "I need to go to Mars, Rabbit."

Mars.

That stopped me. Nobody went to Mars. Not any more. Not since the FOAD pulled out.

H. sap only ever had three planets, really. The rest are useful, even interesting, but Venus, Earth and Mars were the magic rockballs.

Earth we killed one slice at a time, screwing up the carbon balance and warming the oceans and sucking out the florasphere in the name of property rights. Only good side to that debacle was enough *H. sap* gattaca in high orbit and beyond when the fan spray turned a deep and permanent brown down the gravity well.

No problem, said the big boys. We got money, we got tech, we'll all be young and beautiful and fly on gossamer wings. So off goes the smart crowd to terraform Venus. Little problem with sulfides, little problem with temperature, but cheaper than restarting Earth's smoking ruin, especially after what happened to the atmosphere.

But they had a little problem with genetics, too. Venus is kind of interesting these days, if you're into a 12,000 kilome-

ter ball of cancer. Last probes said the planet's skin was approaching two thousand meters deep. Nasty thing it is, too. Probably smarter than the entire human race put together, but that monster stays home and broods.

Whoops, said the big boys. We'll take real nice care of the Martian Republic. Good plan, until the Rights Wars broke out. Until FOAD got a set of marching orders and some exotic weaponry to dick around with. Until some of us fucking dove from orbit, surfing on little clamshells the size and shape of God's fingernails, being reprogrammed on the way down by fucking conditioning agents in our air supplies so that we landed so far the wrong side of freaked we were a whole new wave of normal, armed for areocide.

Which we committed, with a side order of horror.

So now *H. sap* is dying. Slow, over generations, but there's no place to park a reference genome, no pool deep enough to stabilize what even the best-shielded patch of space does to our forever young and beautiful genes. Those plastic, elastic genes. Takes a planet with a biosphere to make a species work.

All in all, I was damned glad to be Rabbit these days, until skin-face rolled into my hot zone. Vesta's as good as it gets, worldwise, until somebody comes up real smart with one of the Jovian moons. Me, I've killed enough planets, thank you.

So I said, "Nobody goes to Mars."

"I do."

We argued a while, in that special way that only people with nothing but contempt for each other can. I threatened to pull his pelvis out through his jawbone—it's messy, but has been done. I told him I would spit plague. I offered to re-educate his entire family tree, from the base pairs up. He just acted big and stubborn and not-scared.

It was the not-scared that finally made an impression on me. Here was a guy who knew what FOAD was, what we had done, and had enough sense of purpose not to let that bother him. For gagarin's sake, not even my lovers knew I was FOAD, let alone my best enemies.

"Alright," I finally said. "You won't listen to reason. So I'll listen to unreason. What could possibly make you want to go to Mars?"

"I'm Skinhorse."

Now *there* was a name. I just kept a glare focused on him, which also conveniently served as a fire-control lock-on for my combat mods.

He waited a moment longer, apparently to see if the handle meant anything to me. If it wasn't FOAD or didn't owe me money, I didn't care.

"I wrote the gene code that swallowed Venus," he said.

"Damnation and vacuum." It just slipped out of me.

"That's my dermis down there in the sulfur rain. The planet is my clone."

No wonder he wasn't impressed with me being FOAD. I shared my load of ahistorical planet-killing responsibility with a couple of dozen war planners and higher echelon types, a few teams of research boffins, and eleven hundred of my fellow drop troopies. The vast majority of them deceased, as it happened. This dude owned

thirty three and third percent of our collective planet-killing racial guilt all his own personal self.

I mean, who would lie about something like that?

"That explains a lot," I finally said. "Except one little, tiny detail." I paused, took a deep breath, clenched my shivering muscles so tight I felt pain in my bones. "Why the *fuck* do you want to go to *Mars*, Venusboy!?"

"To heal Venus."

"Ooo . . . kay . . . "

He was crazy. Bug-humping, vacuum-frosted, brain-lesion crazy. On the other hand, so was I. And with a pitch like that, I'd follow Skinhorse anywhere.

Even the bloody red pits of Mars, so help me gagarin.

Mars isn't hard to get to. There's a few trillion gigawatt/seconds of firepower dedicating to keeping anything from getting back *off* Mars, but as long as you don't take something with relaunch capability down the gravity well with you, you're welcome to die in your own way.

Every now and then, someone with more ambition than sense shoots an armored probe down to the surface. Usually someone else just shuts off the telemetry after a day or two and puts the researchers out to pasture with mindlocks and permanent healthcare endowments.

Though history is silent on the matter, I was pretty sure I was the last person ever dusted off that hellhole, just at the end of the oh-so-brief Third Rights War. And now I was taking Skinhorse back.

"Problem is leaving again." I thought about that statement for a little while. "Assuming we survive in the first place."

"I shall entrust that portion of our effort to you, Rabbit."

"Ah." I supposed that I was the closest thing to a Martian survival expert. A *living* one, at any rate. "What do you need to haul back up? Goods? Equipment?" I was thinking of tonnage and cubage. There were ways and ways to climb a gravity well, but mass rules us all.

"Little clump of gattaca." Skinhorse held up a hand, thumb and forefinger pinched together to indicate an infinitesimal amount.

That stopped me all over again. "Ain't no genes left on Mars. Not that you or I would want. Furthermore, ain't nothing down there you can't re-engineer up here for a hell of lot less money and trouble." Especially less trouble.

"Not true." He smiled, for the first time in our brief acquaintance. I immediately wished he hadn't. Whatever had happened to his skin had happened to his gums and teeth, only worse. "But that is my problem."

"I drive, you shop."

"Precisely. Surely the Fourth Orbital's finest can manage a trip to Mars, even in these late days."

"Surely," I muttered.

At least there was no point in bring-ing body bags. If we didn't come back whole and safe, we weren't coming back at all.

It took a few weeks to make the preparations. Lightspeed comm lag was always a factor. I needed information from some old FOADs running a suicide co-op in low Sat-

urn orbit. Most days those ex-Sierra Company boys don't even answer the phone, so it took a while to get any handshake at all in response to my requests, let alone actual data back. Besides that sort of waiting around, which was as normal as breathing, there were components to wrangle, permits to secure, passwords to filch.

All of that as normal as breathing, too, come to speak of it. Kind of like the good old days. And a hell of a lot more fun than sitting around Piet's Number Seven skimming poker pots off rock jocks, if somewhat less profitable.

Speaking of profit, Skinhorse seemed to be made of credit. There wasn't even any point in stealing from him.

"If you need to buy a warship," he'd told me, "discuss it with me first, please. Otherwise, this ought to serve." The old freak passed over a bearer credit chip with a metallic rim in a color I'd never seen before, somewhere between teal blue and molten iron. *Waaay* past some strike-rich miner's platinum chip.

"I'm guessing you could buy Vesta with this," I said after a moment's consideration. "I didn't know there could be that much open credit in any one person's hands."

Skinhorse shrugged, a gut-churning motion that strongly suggested that his bones and tendons were as badly out of norm as his externals. "The wealth of planets, Rabbit."

"Right."

What the hell did he really want? To restore Venus? Who cared about Venus? Terraforming efforts notwithstanding, *H. sap* had never been there, not in any way that really counted. Just probes and research stations and idiots trying to start flying sulfur mines. Less going on there at the best of times than a quiet day on Europa.

Not like Mars, before the Rights Wars. There had been seventh- and eight-generation Martians when FOAD kicked down their door

"What I want is to go to Mars," Skinhorse said.

Which made me wonder if he could read my mind, or if I was losing my talent for poker.

Credit can do that to a man.

"Landing's not the problem," I reiterated.

We were in a high Martian orbit, well above the glittering track of Phobos' remnants. Deimos was somewhere else, keeping an appointment in a different sky.

Our ship was a Jovian shell, something not normally employed for rockball landings. However, since all three rockballs were *planeta non inhabita* these days, very little orbit-to-ground hardware with decent atmospheric capabilities remained operational.

As far as I knew, no one had ever tried using a Jovian shell to slice air on an inner planet.

The principle was simple. A lot of odd things happen to baryonic matter down a gravity well the depth of Jupiter's. Sometimes those odd things get tossed back up past the crush zone, to float around on some hot methane wind or another for while. See those pretty sparkles, boy? They've made a few fortunes. So people want to get down as far as they can go without meeting the fate God intended for all tin cans, and then survive to get back up again.

But it's a damned low-margin business. More to the point, low cash-flow. Depending where your quarry is, fuel can be more expensive than air. Down is cheap, up costs dear, thanks to gravity's arrow.

The answer? Make "up" less expensive.

The external format of the Jovian shell was essentially a mutated oversized step-cousin of my old FOAD clamshell, atmospheric landing, one each. Wide, gentle curve at the flat end, rising to a thicker, rounded point at the other end like an old Earth seashell. Filled with a hell of a lot of aerogel—foamy nothing, basically—with a couple of micrograms of Higgs-inert Fermionic matter—what we lovingly called H-iF—at the heart to keep leaching the mass out. Control of those selfsame H-iF particles was the operational bit of the Jovian shell, the magic that made mass go away. Anti-gravity, in effect. The whole business was sort of a consumer-grade black hole, without the energy budget for maintenance.

Plus you could focus the effect at short distances outside the hull, making it possible to snag interesting junk floating by.

Big, light, easy, sail her down the gas giant's layers one slow gradient at a time. Let the mild pressure wave from the rolled edges be your scoop, winnow what you find, store the valuables and useful volatiles, bleed the rest back off. When you get tired or the gravity crunch gets too much even for your H-iF particles, fire off a little directed energy to speed up their leaching processes and you don't weigh anything at all. Easy down, easy up, for a staggering capital investment in the H-iF gear but only the operating cost of a few battery packs' worth of power. And equally quiet on the way up as on the way down—no EM signature, no vapor trail, nothing more than a leaf on the wind. If Mars had leaves. In any case, just the thing for sneaking past all those gigawatt/seconds of orbiting firepower.

Thing is, they were never meant to land on solid ground. However, with sufficient motivation, all things are possible.

For one, staggering capital investment was right up Skinhorse's alley. My Saturn-based Sierra Company buddies fortuitously emerged from their skank dreams of simple, unretributive death long enough to cooperate in scoring us the shell.

Turned out some numb-lobes had one on a lease to sieve trans-uranics out of the general colloidal dust of certain murkier portions of the Belt. His lease was pulled and he was sent off to the cancer ward to contemplate his errors during what short time remained to him. The shell was scrubbed, decontaminated and delivered into a cold trajectory towards Mars months faster than we could have hauled one in from Jupiter-space—my original plan.

Skinhorse, for all his philosophical sense of urgency, seemed indifferent to matters of mundane scheduling. It was enough for him to know that plans were progressing.

Now we were high, cold, and dark, well above the areosynchronous monitoring net, crammed into the oddly sensual curves of the Jovian shell's living space. It was as if someone had misappropriated a decently-designed suite of cabins and stretched them like taffy, so that every deck was too low, every compartment too wide. The design motif had been taken to an extreme with resin-cast fittings in biological shapes, like so many glistening plastic fetuses.

Hell, even the coffee maker had taken me an hour to suss out.

Nothing if not consistent, those Jovian-orbit settlers.

"Getting up is no longer a problem, either," said Skinhorse finally, in his slow way.

It took me a moment to re-integrate the conversation. "The problem is on the ground. We're heading right now for Utopia Planitia. Trust me, from a survivability point it's all the same down there. Deadly is as deadly does. Varies a bit by altitude, perhaps. Higher is marginally better. So where *is* your blessed gattaca?"

"At the bottom of Valles Marineris."

I digested that information for a while, making minor course corrections with an ambient-temperature gas jet system mounted for just that purpose. Very stealthy, us. "Remember that 'varies a bit by altitude' comment of mine? Low is worse. Bottom of Marineris is . . . well, you could have told me first."

"Would you still have come?"

"Yes."

"Then it does not matter. This is how we become who we are."

"I already am somebody."

"No." Skinhorse stared at me a while, his eyes not quite pointing where they should. "You are still someone you used to be. On Mars, you will find yourself as you are."

"I will probably find myself dead."

"Perhaps that is who you are meant to be. A dead man."

I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd been a dead man since the Rights Wars.

But then, if he knew about FOAD, he already knew that too.

The Jovian shell wasn't stealthy on purpose, not really. No reason to be. Nobody except the pathologically bored spent a lot of time scouring the middle atmosphere of a gas giant for stray ships. But the fantastically slim cross-section, along with the peculiar electromagnetic profile of the H-iF drive, meant that with a little bit of careful management we pretty much returned the sensor profile of a five-kilogram rock. Once we got in the atmosphere and start doing our falling leaf act, we'd be indistinguishable from a substantial dust cloud.

Easy, slow, the way I liked it and never got to do before.

"Should have thought of this years ago," I told Skinhorse.

It had taken us six days in close confinement to drop below a sustainable orbit and become irrevocably committed to our descent, at least given our current mass configuration.

"You wanted to go back before I found you?" he asked. We hadn't talked much. He spent most of his time playing Go with some little handcomp of ancient vintage, though the guts could have been anything. It didn't put out an EM signature, which was all I cared about.

Every survivor of FOAD wanted to go back. Nobody ever thought they would. Skinhorse must have known that. "No," I lied to both of us. "It's just a neat way to travel."

"We all journey on death's road. Some of us toward it, some away."

"So now you're a Zen master in addition to all your other social graces."

He just smiled that hideous smile and went back to his black and white stones.

How do you kill a planet?

Earth you just rape and scrape to death until she goes toxic in one giant moment of metastatic transition. Never needed that nasty old atmosphere anyway.

Venus you give cancer to. Or maybe your own flesh, going by what my new buddy Skinhorse had to say.

Mars. Well, Mars. The old Republic. You send eleven hundred screaming combat-modded troopies down the well with the latest biopsyops contaminants and some wunderkind conditioning like no one's ever thought of before. Or thought of since, thank gagarin—on return FOAD's survivors tore the entire medical unit apart with bare hands and clicking teeth, shredding man, woman and computer alike.

My little combat shell had fallen out of the thin Martian sky real close to a third/fourth-generation cropping town name of Walloonia. A couple of hundred Euros mostly worked the field tents, a handful of South Asians mostly ran the inside commerce, everybody under *n*-generation contract to InvestAresia—hence the Rights Wars, ultimately. I linked up with two squaddies from Foxtrot Company and one lost support johnnie who'd come down on the wrong hemisphere. The four of us walked into town without any idea what the fuck FOAD's planners and medics had done to us.

First clue I had something stunk was when I met a dark-skinned kid with manga eyes just past the airlock. I mean, I knew that was what he was, but he was also Enemy. Like the roach in the galley is Enemy. Like the vacuum leak in your suit joint is Enemy. Like the tiger in the jungle of our race memory is Enemy.

So I cracked him upside the head with my own helmet even as he tried to smile and say hi, snapped his spine, tore out his throat with my teeth, then vomited into the wound.

I had no idea I knew some of those tricks.

I was still smiling when I dropped his ragged corpse, and wondering why.

Seventeen minutes later the four of us troopies had killed two hundred seventy-eight people, twenty-nine cats, four sheep and too many fish for us to keep count of.

Our aching, empty stomachs stung as we licked the blood from our lips and smiled at each other, still wondering.

We were still wondering when the first of the dead started groaning.

After that it got ugly.

How many times can you be attacked by yourself? By some twisting, dancing, grinning ghost of yourself? Shouting with your voice in a throat-torn wheeze? Looking at you with the eyes you see in every mirror? Telling your secrets to everyone under the billowing pressure cap, the dozens and dozens of your victims taking up the refrain of who you'd fucked and who you'd hurt and who you still wept over in the cold watches of the night.

The support johnnie finally blew himself up along with a few dozen meters of pressure wall, but that didn't seem to matter much to anybody but us troopies. The dead didn't mind the Martian air at all. Not even all the late johnnie's dead.

Madness. Biology. Accelerated mitochondrial RNA transfer. Digestive bioreactors. Conditioning. Viruses. Psychotic

agents. It was a stewpot beyond a hell kettle, and all over Mars the troopies of FOAD were spreading something more than death. Something that no one had bothered to warn us about.

And the dead of us, they just made more dead of us.

I don't even dream about how I got off Mars. I just did. Scars webbing my throat. Somehow they let me live. I've been impossible to kill ever since—gagarin knows I've given the universe plenty of chances.

Am I really me, or just a weaponized copy?

Maybe the real Rabbit Simms is still down there, searching for a way home.

I started to weep.

Skinhorse didn't even look at me. Just kept playing Go.

We got down below the horizon of Valles Marineris without any of the passive sensor alarms going off. Which made it damned likely no one saw us landing. Which in turn made it somewhat possible no one would see us coming back up again.

I'd forgotten how beautiful the Valles is. Some things only make sense on a planetary scale. I mean, there's rocks tumbling in the belt would have made Michelangelo cry for the aching glory of their curves, but out there in hard vacuum, they ain't got much context. Down here, where the winds blow and the dust flows and the sun wanders over the rim of the canyon once a day, those wild hard-carved headlands and knees of rock mean something. It's all red and brown, at least in the upper reaches, but that's Mars. The beauty's in the shapes, each one telling the story of how that place came to be.

I had worried some about the Jovian shell down here among the rocky walls, but the H-iF drive was sensitive enough that I could steer against the winds by sheer weight management, along with the occasional blurt of my ambient-temp gas jets. A good Martian howler might do us in, but the Valles was kindly today.

Skinhorse wanted to be down not far from Delany City. Delany had been one of the verts, a development along a power feed that took advantage of the Valles' depth to get closer to the Martian core for free before drilling deep for areothermal and piezolithic generation. All that juice buzzing up the line had attracted little parasite platforms in the early days of the vertical projects. By the time of the last of the Rights Wars those pirate environments had evolved into thriving cliff cities that prospered without much horizontal at all.

I hadn't personally killed Delany City, though maybe some of the dead mes had helped. They spread faster than rumors, at least back during the war.

Now the city was an eerie vertical architecture of ruin. Flapping sheets of bladderplastic extended like the banners of a vanished army. Great skeletal hoops clinging to the cliffs showed the outline of old pressure tents. Crystal domes had shattered, leaving jagged knives embedded in the canyon wall to glint within the shadows of morning.

And it all seemed to move. I watched on the Jovian shell's vid pickups. Everything sort of rippled.

We slid on past before I realized I was seeing people.

Dead people.

Clinging to the power feed.

As we moved on they dropped away, scrambling across the cliffs and downward to follow us.

I nearly vomited into my lap.

"There they are," said Skinhorse. I hadn't realized he was standing behind me. Bent, really, with his height in our taffy-stretched cabin.

"You know them?" I wanted to kill him in that moment. He could have been Enemy, with just a little push of my own unstable sense of reality. Especially in this place.

Mars had been very, very bad for me. Returning was worse.

"Venus was my project," Skinhorse reminded me sharply. "But I know about what happened to Mars."

"What the *fuck* were they thinking?" I asked, clenching my fists and jaw. The shell bobbed with my inattention to business.

"Epidemiological modeling applied to biopsych warfare. They made a few bad assumptions, unfortunately."

There was an epitaph for the human race.

The vids continued to display a surging mass trailing us along the valley floor. How had they lived? I couldn't believe there was enough energy leaching off the power feed to sustain all these dead all these years.

I didn't live off electromagnetic fields. I ate. I drank. I pissed and shat and wept and sometimes even got to fuck when I was lucky.

I wasn't one of them.

I couldn't be.

"Bad assumptions . . . " I said, trying to break the morbid thread of my thoughts. "Yeah, I'll say."

"Something went wrong with the self-limiters."

"After Venus you people couldn't just fucking *stop*?"

"They were trying to fix Venus, field testing it here."

I had to laugh at that. A bitter, long, raw howl that tore at my stomach muscles and filled my mouth with bile and made me want to claw his throat. Not quite, but almost. "Didn't work, I guess."

"Not yet. That's why I need the gattaca that was left behind."

We were coming up on his coordinates, pursued by the angry dead.

"They'll swarm us by sheer numbers," I said. Not to mention how fiercely they fought.

"I only need a few moments."

I thought about letting him out, then leaving him here. But what if some of those pursuing were dead mes? What if one of them was the real me?

I don't eat electricity.

What if?

Following the coordinates he'd provided, I put the Jovian shell down on a sandy spot in deep shadow. There was no installation nearby, nothing that would seem to be a place where a mad scientist like Skinhorse might have stored his precious gattaca. He said nothing, just glanced at the instruments and suited up for the Martian pressure and temperature.

"Four minutes, tops," I told him.

Skinhorse nodded, then bent nearly over to crawling height to exit the lock. I watched the telltales on the control board. When lock integrity was restored, my fingers brushed the H-iF controls.

The shell could lift right now. No one would ever be the wiser. I'd come home with it, packing enough of Skinhorse's credit to spend the rest of my life not playing cards with rock jocks. I wouldn't run out of funds. Not even if I lived forever.

The crowd in the vid was getting closer. They were running in an almost eerie unison. Were they all the same dead man?

I had the sick feeling they were all the same dead me.

Slapping the lock control, I exited.

Don't need a helmet for Mars. Not me. I can't breathe vacuum, but I can tolerate some damned surprising pressure and temperature ranges way outside human norms. Don't quite remember any more which round of FOAD combat mods did this for me, probably the last, but it certainly came in useful now.

I walked out into the shadowed floor of the canyon, sliding in the Martian gravity, while I dialed up the gain on my vision until the running crowd was bright as a drive flare.

They were me. Hundreds, thousands of me. Every shape and size and color, weathered badly by a couple of decades of Martian exposure, but I could see it in the set of every head, the posture of every body, the rhythm of every stride, the way the virus had caused the curve of each jaw to conform with my genome.

I surged around myself, coming to a stop face to face with me. I left one of me in a little pocket in the middle of myself, the rest in concentric ranks so precisely spaced I could have delighted an analytic geometer.

I raised my hands to my throat. The scars were ropy and worn on the lone me, raw and abraded on so many other mes.

The dust, naturally.

My sense of Enemy was gone.

But of course. I was not Enemy. I was me. The ultimate survivor. There was no one else left.

"Hello," I said. My voice didn't carry much in the thin Martian atmosphere, but I knew what I had meant.

"Welcome home," I told myself from a thousand mouths.

Where was Enemy?

"There is only me," I told myself.

"Me."

"I am Mars."

"And I am Venus," said Skinhorse, stepping through the crowd. His voice crackled on his suit speaker, tinny but audible. He had something like a small lance in his suit glove. A probe, I realized, which could have been dropped from orbit with a gene package aboard.

My sense of Enemy, which had been intruding in those last moments inside the Jovian shell, re-emerged. Not with the violent irruption of those early days during the war, but rather as a broad, slow tide.

The anger of a planet, mortally wounded.

"Think," said Skinhorse. He raised a hand. All of me was transfixed. "What have you become?"

"Mars," I whispered, my voice an echoing ripple around the shadowed base of the canyon as I repeated myself in a cycling canon of regret.

"Do you believe that I am Venus?"

I could see the morning star in his eyes, the quadrillion-ton cancer that his skin had become. "Yes," I whispered, still echoing.

"Would you slay me?"

Oh, yes. Mars is War, and the dead me are the bloodiest veterans who ever died to fight another day. But none of my mouths stirred in that moment.

"Slay me now and your mission planners will have their rockball back. The Venus-cancer will die with me, and humans will once more crawl down that gravity well to establish our race." Skinhorse looked around, catching my eye over and over again, reflecting every color and shape of my face in the visor of his helmet. "Or join me and bring a new Earth to pass." He held up the probe, shaking it like a spear. "My cancer and your death together will make our mother world greater than she ever was. In *our* image."

In that moment, I could feel all my thoughts. Murder. Vengeance. Enemy. The silent, cold years of dust storms and starvation after there had been no one left to kill on Mars except me and more of me. The misery of my fellow undying FOAD troopies spread through the solar system.

The brown-skinned boy with the manga eyes smiling to say hello as I entered Walloonia. I could remember him as clearly as if he had died only moments ago.

The fate of worlds was in my hands, all thousands of them. The fate of *H. sap*, for all that the race had ever done for me.

I sent me creeping back into the Jovian shell, to the H-iF controls, even while I spoke to Skinhorse. "It will never be so easy," I said, pulling words from nowhere. "You told me I would become who I am. I want to be who I was. A comfortable killer, not the father of worlds."

"Has all this suffering been for nothing?"

The argument of tyrants.

Inside the shell, I focused the H-iF drive on an external point.

"All this suffering has been for too much," I told Skinhorse.

Did I go with him, believe him, save the Earth, if indeed we would be saving it for some new generation of human evolution? Or did it end here?

"We must evolve," he said, echoing my thoughts once more.

I've been a poker player most of my life. I never could abide the idea of a mind reader. Using H-iF, I threw Skinhorse up into the sky.

Maybe he'd make orbit. Then his suit would fail, it was only surface-rated. Maybe he'd go suborbital and burn up on the way back down. Maybe the monitors up high would fry him with lightning from heaven. I didn't give a captain's crap what happened to the world-killer. If he'd told me the truth, then his death would release the Venus-cancer and we might get one world back. If not, well, things would be no worse than they already were.

Then I gathered me in, looking for a manga-eyed child and, possibly, a very lost troopie who might have been the original me. I would find a way to give the real me a clean and simple death, I promised myself.

Once I was all dead, for real and permanent, *H. Sap* could have Mars back.

All of me smiled, imagining Skinhorse's dying screams.

"One of the joys of research," Ian McDonald tells us, "is the unexpected it throws up in addition to the expected. While I was researching Brasyl *I became a really-o, truly-o aficionado of Brazilian music. It was a musical education: I'd approached Brazilian music with the usual Northern sniffy attitude that it's basically glorified elevator music but with time I heard something new, something with its own musical language and history. It was a completely other black musical culture, in counterpoint to—and trading DNA with—the black music in North America. It's a huge terrain to discover and I think it willbe an enduring love. It's great then to have a story idea pop up that seemed to demand it be set in that huge nation of Música Popular Brasileira." And it's particularly great for us!*

[a ghost samba]

Ian McDonald

When Seu Alejandro played, men kissed each other and women ovulated. Brasil is the land of the boy from nowhere, the footballer from the favela, the musician from the mines, the sugarcane cutter from the sertão. Milton Nascimento was a Minas Gerais boy. The late great Chico Science, father of Mangue, was from Olinda. It's part of our national mythology: in this great nation anyone can rise to anything from anywhere. Cane cutters can become Presidents. It's also part of our national mythology that, like Chico Science, like Seu Alejandro, they should die young. There's a pure beauty in imagining what they never achieved. The ghost samba can never disappoint you.

He went back for the tapes. He should never have gone back for the tapes. But he was a musician. It would have been like leaving a child in that burning studio. They were the masters for his new collection, the long-awaited second album that would crown the achievement of *Boy on the Corner*. All second albums are difficult—that's music—but some are more difficult than others. Seu Alejandro threw out a batch of songs because he wasn't happy with them. He was going to use Paulistano punk band, then he wasn't. He was going to duet with LoveFoxxx, then he wasn't. It was going to be him, alone, with his guitar and a drummer, the way I first heard him in that club in Lapa. Then it wasn't. His record company put out press releases that it was coming out in two weeks time; that would slip. Months, a season, a year. Four years. That would be the end of a career for anyone less angelically gifted than Seu Alejandro. It merely served to increase the appetite. Then word came that he was going back into studio. The songs were right. The musicians were right. The arrangements were right. The soul was right and the ideas were running through him like lightning. We'd heard it before. But of course the producer wasn't right and the studio wasn't right, so he was going home, back up into Vila Canoas to the little bedroom studio where he produced the first collection of three songs for the MySpace site. And that was

where on April 11th 2012 Wilson Severino de Araujo, known as Seu Alejandro, died in a stupid studio fire trying to save the masters of his second album. *Pretty Petty Thieves* joined the list of legendary albums-that-never-were.

It's five years since Seu Alejandro died and in that time he has grown from cult to myth to legend. Five years it's taken me to track down those masters, from legend back through myth to a scorched hard drive. I'm at a bar in Laranjeiras. You wouldn't know it, you've never even heard of it; if you were to come here you would think it dazzlingly trendy but the moment has already moved on from it. It's my job to know such things. The people who know all know me as Cento-réis: hundred-réal Man. The joke goes that that's the amount of money I'll spend in one session on music. You'd know me better as Rubem de Castro. Columnist reviewer commentator blogger pundit radio-wit and professional idler: the last of the Real Cariocas. All those little things a man must do not to be seen to be trying too hard. If you met me you'd hate me. I'm the guy on the music forums with so much cooler recommendations than yours. At a party I'll sneer at the host's unforgivably populist playlist and tell you who you should be listening to now and where to find them. I might even slip on my own podcast and you'll say, *who are these guys?* While you're jabbering away on your social networking sites about have you heard Tita Maria and Duane Duarte and Bonde do Role? I've already moved on to the next thing after the next thing. I could take you to the clubs and the bars and the sound systems but once I'd taken you, that would be the end of it, you know? For four decades I've surfed the sea of music that breaks around the rocks of this most lovely of cities. It's tiring and relentless and it's no way for a middle-aged man to live, but the moment you lose the wave, you go under.

Because I'm a middle-aged man still living on teenage overhang, when I hear the word 'masters' I expect tape. I expect digibeta, DAT; the romantic part of me I hope for reels. The masters for *Pretty Petty Thieves* are on a hard drive the size of a cigarette packet. They sit on the table next to Guinle's real packet of Hollywood Blues. Some bright-eyed singer-songwriter is picking out her heart-fluff to the fourths and fifths on the little stage. I've heard a thousand heartbreaks just like hers. I move my beer away from the drive. It's been through fire and deep lost time but I'm terrified of spilling Antarctica over it.

'Can I hear some?'

'It's a hard-drive.' When Guinle left the police, like most of the cops who paid enough to be safe up in the favelas, he set up a private detective agency. His specialism was kidnappings: footballers' mothers and pets. Now he runs a successful stable of gumshoes so he no longer has to hack security cameras or go through anyone's garbage with chopsticks and only tackles those cases that interest him. I know him from the days when the New Bossa swept through the city. There's an old musicians gaydar: we recognised each immediately at our tables on opposing sides of the dark, noisy club. It's the set of the body, the sit and slight lean, the tilt of the head that says that whatever else you are hearing, you are always listening to the music.

I say, 'I could be buying someone's collection of boy-porn.'

Guinle holds out his phone. A set of white earbuds is plugged into it.

'Do you want to listen to it?'

'Have you listened to it?' Panic snatches sudden and cold at my heart. I can't bear it that Guinle could have listened to the masters before me. It makes it dirty, used. It's almost a sex thing, like someone else's girlfriend after an indecently short interval.

'Not a note. What do you take me for? I just copied it because I knew you'd ask me that.'

'Promise me you won't . . . ' The need in my voice is ridiculous. Have some dignity man.

'I'll give you until tomorrow morning. Once you've remembered that other little matter.'

I slide the envelope of cash across the table. It's a big envelope, A4, too full to seal down the flap. There's a pheromone of notes, of ink and hands and trade. Guinle scoops it into his briefcase. He's too much a carioca to count the notes and too much a pro to query his clients' cash calls.

'I make no representations about the state of the contents. You asked me to get the masters, I got them.'

'I must ask you how you did that sometime,' I say but I can hear my voice go off the moment, the way you hear it when a singer loses a cover of a song he doesn't really understand or believe in. Just words. Because I have it. I have the lost *Pretty Petty Thieves*. In that slightly blackened titanium box is the last musical testament of Seu Alejandro. The world thought it was lost, but I found it and now it sits in the palm of my hand. I see that hand shake.

'Yes, you really must,' says Guinle.

I have a ritual. Everyone has a ritual. I know a great great singer who can only face an audience if he's masturbated. You'd know him too. He's a household name. There are footballers who have to put on one boot first, or never wear two the same colour, or carry a picture of the Pope or Our Lady next to their hearts. Truckers bless their rigs, coders bless their keyboards, policemen bless their guns. And then there is sex. There is always sex. Some have times and places and positions: some have foreplay as scripted and rehearsed as a high mass. Some cannot achieve anything with the lights on. For some it's clothing: something they have to wear, or have the other wear, without which they cannot be remotely aroused.

I practice my ritual in the best room in the apartment. It's not the biggest or the best aired or the quietest but it has a breathtaking view out over Botafogo and Guanabara to the hills of Niteroi beyond. Out of the right-hand window are Leme Morro and the Sugarloaf. In the evening, in the sudden lilac twilight when the lights come like a necklace around the shoulders of the moros, it is heartbreakingly beautiful. Here's what I keep in this room. A chair of course; an old, deep leather armchair with the springs going so I can sag into it. A beer fridge. A small side table for the beer and the remote. The sound system, in the holy corner where the two views meet. This is my listening room. This is my church. I take my place in the chair. I've had it positioned scientifically to get the best surround sound separation. My cleaner is under or-

ders never to move it on pain of instant dismissal. I settle my fat ass deep into the seat. It's important to get comfortable. I'm going to be there for a while. I take one Antarctica from the fridge and pop the can. Rio spreads like wings on either side of me. I love her so hard it hurts. Then I lift the remote control and start Seu Alejandro's *Pretty Petty Thieves*.

On the first listen through I never do anything. I need to get the whole recording. The whole concept, entire, the song order, the big idea. Marcelo from the Tuesday Afternoon Boys calls it the gestalt. He's some kind of therapist in it. Call that first pass the *hearing*. This second pass is the *listening*. It's then you notice the details of the arrangements, the engineering, how the lyrics work with the melody. Is that a horn section there? He's pulled the bass up here, pushed it back there. Why has he used a cello line, for God's sake? The third time is the savouring. You know how the songs work, what they are trying to achieve and the way the music is constructed and how it works on your heart. Now you can appreciate the details. The way drum and bass syncopate against each other. The complex time signature—11/8—that always eludes your four-square tapping toe. That ever-shifting harmony line that disguises a very simple, almost folk melody and gives it a dress of carioca sophistication. The twists, the false starts and surprise endings, the games you can play with middle eights, joys you can only appreciate after a lifetime of immersion in MBP.

But there are holes. There are hideous holes. Trans-Amazonian-Highway holes, that can swallow an entire truck. The main vocals are unmixed. On some of the songs Seu Alejandro sounds like he is bellowing like an old and angry beach bum, others like he is humming to himself trying to find his car in a supermarket car park. Arrangements are fragmentary; there are suggestions of 70s funk horn sections or his signature trip-hop rhythms, which he lifted from another age, another culture and made unmistakably Tropicalismo. Back vocals are either non-existent or too far to the front and the bass is painfully low in the mix. There is a screamingly frustrating twenty three second gap in the middle of *Immaculate Conception* and track 8: *Bottle Club*, just ends, full stop, whether by fire or intention I can't tell. The title track doesn't exist beyond an opening carnaval blast of drums, brass and what sounds like sampled traffic noise. Astonishing, but a shard. Again, this could be a Seu Alejandro joke or the effects of the fire. The last two tracks are sketches: *Breakfast News* is an acoustic guitar piece—few ever tugged the heart so with his strings than Seu Alejandro, with suggestions of lyrics muttered into the mike; scraps and lines and euphonies. The final track, provisionally titled [a ghost samba] is his joyfully melancholy guitar with a severely simple cello line.

But it is Seu Alejandro. Unmistakably, gloriously Seu Alejandro.

I crack a fresh Antarctica and start the third listen. My hand is shaking. As I listen with the ear of savouring, the shake becomes worse until I can hardly hold my beer. My whole body is tight, every muscle like a drumskin; I am quivering as if trying to keep back tears. Not just tears, but the kind of uncontrollable, on-the-floor howling and quaking that leaves phlegm pouring from your nose and mouth, the kind

men must never be seen doing, the kind men do when love walks away from them and they realise their lives have been lies. It's the holes, those Amazonian holes; they join together into a void. How dare Seu Alejandro die and leave it incomplete and damaged? How dare Seu Alejandro leave me with just this? It is an abandonment as complete as any of my brief wives and girlfriends. I am bereft, I am furious with him.

It's full dark now. The lights draw the curves of the bays and the breasts of the hills. *Pretty Petty Thieves* comes to its third ending and I am all right. I'm all right. I'm already starting to think of how I might put it all together and complete what the Seu left broken.

We are the Tuesday Afternoon Boys and every Tuesday afternoon we play at the Lagoa futsal court. We've been playing every Tuesday for seven years, ever since the first of us turned forty. In the afternoon the only other teams are skinny kids in basketball vests and baggy shorts. We don't play them, they can dribble the ball around us like Garrincha tying a left-back in knots; we play each other. We play futsal to show we're still alive, we play in the afternoon to show we're masters of our own time.

I'm on the subs bench. When the average team age is in the low forties, you spend most of the game on the subs bench, but everyone gets a turn on court. That's the point of turning up on a Tuesday afternoon. But the real work gets done on that bench.

The ball goes out and Carlinhos, our manager for this week, calls Captain Spooky off. He looks like he's dying. Face so red it could explode, chest heaving, the sweat lashing off him. He crashes down on the bench beside me and it's a full two minutes before he can get a word between the death-gasps.

'Jesus and Mary,' I tell him. 'You should listen to your doctor sometime. He said this is going to be the death of you.'

He shakes his head, smiling through the panting.

'The person. Most likely. To kill you. Is your own. Doctor.'

Captain Spooky claims he is a *real* doctor. MDs are not real doctors. It's all hand waving and wizardry. MD-ing is about instinct and opinion and subjective thought. There's no science, no objectivity, nothing empirical or evidence based about medicine. It's a package of received knowledge, opinion and status-plays. *Physicians*, from the word *physic*: that makes it sound like a science. Proper science has hypotheses, experiments, statistical analysis, proof and margins of certainty and error. Physics, now that is science, and that's what Captain Spooky is; a real, true, proper physicist. With angina.

His real science is theoretical physics. It's a young man's game, he'll tell you—like futsal—but he's kept his tenure, no lean feat for a man pushing fifty. Five more years, he says. Five more years and he'll take the retirement package. His field is so complex and abstruse it makes my head swim even thinking about it. It sounds like esoteric nonsense to me, but he swears that theoretical quantum computing has millions of everyday applications and implications that will change our lives beyond recognition. I bow to his experience—he's beaten off a lot of young dogs snapping

from below; all I know is that he's tried to explain it to me in the Rodrigo de Freitas Bar and Grill over the post-match caipiroshkas with which we replace lost body-fluids, and I still don't get it. When things get really really small and really really short in duration they behave in ways that seem impossible to us; that seems to be the gist of it. And because of that, there isn't one me, there are a billion trillion mes, and there isn't one world, there are a billion trillion worlds, all different: every possible world and me that can exist, exists somewhere. If you thought about that too much you'd fry your head. And that's why we call him Captain Spooky.

'So.' The words are easier now. 'Your limited edition. How many times have you listened to her now?'

For Captain Spooky everything to do with computers was feminine. Our Lady of the Digits.

'Enough for it to be exciting like a lover, not so much that it's become a wife.'

'Jesus man, you need to get over that. How long ago was it?'

'Eight years five months.'

'We've all been through it. It's a life stage. Well, all except John the Idiot, and he'd welcome the chance for an agonising divorce.' The circles of sweat on the front and back of his T-shirt are expanding to meet the ones under his arms. It is not a good look. Captain Spooky squirts water from the Action! bottle over his face. He says, 'I mean, have you thought about doing anything with it?'

'What, you mean, copy it? Distribute it? Release it?' I think I keep the sudden crackle of rage out of my voice, but I feel my muscles clench and tense. 'Do you know what I call those? Blasphemy records. Once they have you, those companies will release every half-baked idea or whistle you ever recorded, every coffee-bar twang. If they could make money they'd put out Seu Alejandro singing in the shower. Bastards. The entire reason I tracked down and bought that disk was to keep it out of the hands of those vultures.'

I feel my face is now the red one, and Captain Spooky's pale at my anger. He holds up his hands in supplication.

'Okay okay okay man. It's your music. What I meant was, you say it's full of holes and drops out and incomplete tracks.' He leans forward. It's not a good smell. 'What if you could fill in those holes and finish those part songs?'

I shake my head.

'It'd be guesswork. It'd be someone else either fitting their own ideas in or, which is worse, doing a bad Seu Alejandro impersonation. No no no, keep it the way it is. I'll always be imagining what it would be have been like. That's okay. That's the price.'

Captain Spooky purses thumb and forefinger; a scientist of the very small's gesture of precision.

'What if we could take imagination out of it? What if we could finish the collection exactly as Seu Alejandro intended? With his own music?'

'Short of a medium I can't see how anyone could do that.'

'I could. Just give me a copy. I don't want your masters, you hold on to them, just give me a decent OMFs. A disk would do, or email them over to me.'

I want to ask him what spooky *macumba* he intends to work but the ball has gone out and the Carlinhos, the other, real captain, is

sending Bastard Max off and signing for me to come on. My muscles have gone tight as a virgin; I will play like a drain but with the Tuesday Afternoon Boys everyone gets a turn on pitch. I can suffer for it later.

The room, the chair, the beer, the sunset. My hand on the remote but my finger wavers over the play button. Three weeks and three days after I sent him the files of *Pretty Petty Thieves* they came back to me. Captain Spooky hadn't been at the Lagoa since the day we talked about the good music, the pure music. The chest pains and the overheating had got worse so he'd been to see his doctor and the man had gone berserk. Running around kicking a ball at his age at his weight in this heat. Of course, the doctor still knew nothing, but he'd take his advice—purely precautionary—until the pain went away. *Sorry it took so long*, he said in the email. *The quantum mainframe gets booked pretty solid*. I could see alone from the attachment details that they were changed. Fatter, fresher. Frightening. I dithered, I hovered over the files. I didn't want to open them. I didn't want to hear them. I wanted to rip them on to my system then and there. I wanted to hear them like my daughter's voice on the phone.

The sky is lilac but won't hold it much longer: indigo's coming. There's a high jet, night-bound up out over the Atlantic: it's gold in the caught twilight. The streets and the cars are twinkling and I watch the glow of the cable cars slide like pearls between the pendant lights of the stations. Rio has always, irreducibly been *she*.

I hit play.

There is a ritual so I give it the three listens though from the very opening bar I can hear the difference. The first time is still the whole thing. I listen to *Pretty Petty Thieves* straight through. It's some time before I hit the play button for the second listen. I'm floored, I'm on the ceiling, my heart is racing and at the same time I shine like a child at a first communion. It's all there. Entire and full and rich and more ambitious, more playful, more daring than I could ever have imagined. No holes, this is a smooth highway of sound. And it's Seu Alejandro, unmistakably Seu Alejandro though everything is new and strange and wonderful like falling in love. It sounds like the greatest thing you ever heard. I must listen again. I must dive in and swim down deep between the tracks and the layers and the individual notes.

The second time I deep-listen. That's a Senegalese guitar with a deliberately primitive *noreste* four part harmony: it's Mother Africa but with Seu Alejandro's signature English trip-hop beat. But there's invention: *musique concrete* from Rio traffic noises fluttering as delicate as bird song over *Miracle of the Fishes*, and a dazzling, hilarious two-step of dub bass with Nacão Zumbi death-guitar thrashes on *Angela and Angela. Kicking* is so totally different I almost did not recognise the song on first pass, now on second listen the changes are so radical I feel them as a physical shock. It had been faux fun, now it's a shimmering, shadowy dubstep, dark and melancholic. And then there is [a ghost samba]. It is still the same simple cello line and heartbreak acoustic guitar but it has words now, Seu Alejandro's unearthly but diamond-clear, diamond-sharp falsetto and a twitter of four-a.m. electronics so ethereal it might

come through a radio telescope. The breath catches in my chest. I can hear my heart. It's some time before I touch the play button again.

And now I listen to taste, to eat the music and make it part of me. This time I break my rule, I'm impatient to get to the final track. I want to hear Seu Alejandro's words from whatever place Captain Spooky summoned him. That's a Tuesday Afternoon question. Now I need it to be just me and Seu Alejandro high over the circling city lights. It's a song about a moment of wonder and the sweetness of loss, like many of the best Brasilian songs. Take her face out of the mornings. I've seen that face. Imagined glimpses in car across the highway, a figure passing on the street that might just be a wish. If our lives were like songs we would hear the harmonies, we would live a chorus on the street. We are older but no wiser and in a flicker we'll be gone.

Full dark. I've forgotten the hour. My chest is heaving, my face wet with tears. I drove away the women who loved me. I let my children go. I'm not a bad man, I just loved the music with all of my heart. I always knew that the radio played just for me. The songs never let you down. They would always rhyme with your heart.

The cleaner finds me the next morning, still in the chair in the yellow morning light.

'Your *macumba* is strong,' I say to Captain Spooky and slide the caipiroshka across the table to him. I'm one down already and it's hit hard like a bailiff's knock.

'I wield the power cosmic,' he says. He takes a big draw from the drink. He winces as the vodka goes down, a grimace of pain. 'Jesus.' He thumps his fist against his breastbone, gasps twice. 'The laws of the multiverse bow down to me.'

He looks like shit, the kind of pale and pasty shit you get if you feed a dog too much dried food.

'No but really, what did you do? In words a man can understand.'

'There is not one world, there are many worlds.'

'There is not one me, there are many mes, yeah yeah.' Including ones where my social universe doesn't consist solely of fortysomething males.

'And there are universes where Seu Alejandro didn't go back into the studio.'

'Since when have you become an expert on Seu Alejandro?'

'Research is my business, right? And universes where that studio never caught fire.'

'So what exactly did you do?'

'The quantum computational of equivalent of being a DJ in your own bedroom. I quantumised your master on the uni quantum core and then set her to re-render.'

'That spooky quantum computer of yours.'

'That spooky quantum computer of mine can perform calculations no other computer can in less than the lifetime of the universe because she exports the problem to her sisters in parallel universes. Somewhere in the region of ten to the power of eight hundred universes. In a sense there is only ever one universal quantum computer, spread through the whole multiverse. It's the one true universal constant.'

When Captain Spooky talks like his name it makes my head spin and my balls

contract. The world around me goes pale and washed-out, like those old last-century postcards of Rio, bleached by the light of other suns. Millions upon billions of other universes; numbers so huge that even if there were as many Leblon beaches as there were grains of sand on Leblon beach, they still would not be one sand-grain of those other Rios, other lives, other mes. Because I can't help but think about those other mes and the oblivious lives they lead. On the balance of probabilities I cannot live the best of all those probable lives. It's equally unlikely that I live the worst. I can easily imagine the worst. I've seen it. The terrible news from the multiverse is that I am grey and average. I'm not a football hero or a samba star and I didn't marry an underwear model. I'm not a wrecked man throwing bottles at the wall every lilac sunset or dead in some police-and-malandros firefight. This is the best I can reasonably hope for. This is . . . endurable. How can a man face such grand indifference? I am not the centre of the universe after all.

'So is basically the multiversal equivalent of clicking Seu Alejandro on quantum iTunes and downloading *Pretty Petty Thieves*?'

Captain Spooky throws up his hands in grand offence.

'There's some work in this you know. Mixing and stuff.'

'You, mix?'

'My nephew works in radio. He's got this software on his laptop. The question is, never mind my nephew or whatever quantum spookiness I pulled, how does it sound?'

I duck my head in a small acquiescence.

'It sounds like Seu Alejandro.'

'Well there you go. Now, I'm going up to get something to eat. Do you want anything?'

The Grill part of the Rodrigo de Freitas Bar and Grill is a small per-kilo restaurant, fine for lining the stomach against a post-match evening of drinking. See? We don't even have to worry about Wednesday hangover. Captain Spooky floats and dithers over the buffet. Eating by weight is a fine art to him. He's shown me his trick of slipping a little finger under the scales to take a coupe of réis off the price. But I'm hearing ghost sambas. What the Captain pulled in from across the universes is Seu Alejandro. There is no doubt that it's him; from the moment I first heard that hunted, melancholy street guitar and the incredible falsetto soar above it like Christ the Redeemer on his high hill, from that evening he took the chatter and the cynicism of the Cambucás Club and turned it all to him and held every soul in the place until he chose to release it, I've learned every grace note Seu Alejandro's played. It's him. But of all the many many *Pretty Petty Thieves* that exist across that head-frying multiverse, how can I trust that this is the one that the Seu Alejandro who died in that studio fire intended; the ghost in the scorched hard drive? It's *a Pretty Petty Thieves*, but can I ever know it's *the Pretty Petty Thieves*?

The crash is tremendous; a clatter of plates and metal trays and cutlery hitting the harsh white tiles all at once. Captain Spooky is on his side. He is covered in cold starters, his right leg is bent under him in an ugly, terrifying way. He's not moving. He's not making any sound. The Tuesday Afternoon Boys are on their feet and the Ro-

drigo de Freitas Bar and Grill is filled with a dull bellowing.

Rio is not a city for funerals. Suits don't suit us. We'd rather do our business in Bermudas and Havaianas. São Paolo, wedged between those eerie towers, perhaps in one of those all too-common grey drizzles, that's a city that does funerals well. The crumbling pastel colonial facades of Salvador and Olinda; there the slow rot and return to the earth is written into every house-front and Baroque Mission Jesus. That is a landscape of death. Rio is sex and life. That life is cheap—every day I hear the gunfire and the sirens—but cariocas understand that that is how death is done here. What Rio will not forgive is a heart that just grew tired of her and stopped dead at the serving counter in a kilometric restaurant. You get no kiss from Bitch City.

So I'm too hot and too tight in my going-to-funerals-suit—I'm at that life stage where I need one—and the collar is chafing my neck. For a time the priests were getting younger. Now they're all getting older. The seminaries can't get the young men. It's no life really. The Tuesday Afternoon Boys have all turned out. In our suits and shades we look like` a convention of dons. Our floral tribute is in the shape of a futsal ball. The old Captain would have appreciated the black joke but the family doesn't seem to appreciate the humour. His daughters look good in their black miniskirts and hats. The youngest has fantastic legs and that sullen pout thing I love in a girl. His students are hot too. They keep back, acquaintances like us. One of them is visibly upset. The guy with his arms around her shoulder must be the boyfriend. I wonder if he knows. They'll fuck afterwards. People always fuck after funerals. It's not just Rio's way, it's everyone's way. Death and sex.

I talk with those faces you only see at funerals; those partial conversations that, like Christmas or carnaval chat continue from calendar to date to calendar, stitched through time; then Marcelo offers me a lift home.

'Did the Cap ever give you his theory for why he was going to live forever?'

'Was this another one of his quantum-theory-explains-everything-in-the-universe theories that no one understood?'

'I always thought you understood.' Marcelo punches the horn as a yellow Honda full of teenagers cuts him up. 'Don't you have jobs to go to? Why aren't you working? Parasites.'

'Me? God no. I was just impressed that he had a theory for everything. Then you know what to blame when it goes wrong.'

'No, he had this theory that he was going to live forever. Not just him, everyone. There was a price, though, and he was very drunk when he told me this. He told it like an experiment, like this. You're a very old and very distinguished physics professor with a very hot young PA. Well, she doesn't have to be young and hot, she just needs to be an observer. There always had to be observers in Cap's theories. The reason that you're very old is that you're about to put down the big stake on a bet: your life. There's a gun with some quantum doohickey attached, I don't know how it works but all it needs is to be a random Russian roulette device. You stand in front of the gun and then you say, all right

Miss Hottie, start the process and record what you see. The quantum device spins the gun at random and fires. Click. Nothing happens. And again: click. Nothing happens. And a third time, click. You're still alive. Miss Hottie notes it down. Round four. The quantum device spins the chamber and fires. Oh my God! screams Miss Hottie as you take one right smack between the eyes and go down dead as dead can be.'

'Correct me if my quantum theory is flawed, my friend, but this sounds more like quantum suicide device than an immortality theory.'

'Not so fast. Round four, other point of view. The quantum thingie spins the barrel and fires. And where Miss Hottie sees the back of your head come off, all you hear is another click. Empty chamber.'

At the lights a lad skinny as want waves his windshield squeegee at us. I wave him away.

'Explain.'

'Well, I don't understand it but Captain Spooky did and according to him it was this. Now, he was very drunk at the time, but every time the quantum thingie spins the barrel, it divides the multiverse into two sets of universes, ones in which you live and ones in which you die.'

'I'm keeping up so far.'

'And the next time it spins, that set of universes where you live on takes another hit: a subset where you live, another where you die.'

'This is basic probability. Anyone who's ever put a bet on will get this. The odds get shorter all the time whether it's dice or Captain Spooky's parallel universes.'

'Absolutely, but no matter how many times the gun fires, there will always be a universe where you live.'

I consider that as we pass a group of Pentecostals dressed in respectable whites holding some evangelical praise-service in a bus shelter.

'But in the one that really matters you're dead,' I say.

'Now here comes the spooky bit. Those universes where the gun fires, you've no awareness of them. You're dead. The only realities which exist for you are the ones in which the gun hits the empty chamber and you live. You can't perceive your own death. So the quantum trigger runs on and the gun barrels pins and goes click click click. And it will keep going click click how ever long you stand there, because you must always survive to perceive those realities.'

We're at a light again. A crente waves a badly printed tract at us. I wave him away too. I'm getting that coldness in my balls, the clench of the alien.

'But what about Miss Hottie? She saw you die in front of the gun.'

'Ah, but that's her perception isn't it? From your perception you're immortal. No matter what happens, a miracle will always save you. You'll never be in that fatal car crash or get into that mugging. If you get cancer, they'll find a cure. If they'll get Alzheimer's, they'll work something out. When you're so old they have to feed you soup and hold your dick to pee, they'll find some way to make you twenty-five again and hung like a horse. Because only you can perceive those universes where you exist. You'll be there at the fucking end of time. It'll be you and God.'

I shiver again but it's not quantum chill.

It's the deeper darker cold of mortality and the futility of any hope against it; Captain Spooky's insane theories or the promise of a street corner evangelical tract. I say,

'I can see how this chimes with your gestalt theory, mate. But it didn't work for him, did it?'

'He'd say that we're seeing from our own point of view. We're the Miss Hotties. From his point-of-view, it was just a little twinge, a little trapped wind, a quick burp and he's fine.'

'There's a big difference between a quantum Russian roulette machine and a dicky ticker.'

'Yeah but he reckoned everything was quantum, all the way up, the only reason we couldn't see it was because our minds were all just aspects of that universal quantum computer he used to play with.'

We've arrived at my apartment. The beach is two blocks down, lines of gold and blue like the design on a 1930s cigarette packet. I hate the beach, I don't do beaches but today in my going-to-funerals suit and too-tight tie it looks like heaven.

'The Captain surely did have a theory for everything,' I say.

'That I think was the idea,' Marcelo says.

'You got your check-up booked?' I ask stepping out of the car.

'The earliest I could get was Friday,' Marcelo says. 'You?'

'Next Monday. It does kind of make you sit and look after yourself.' I close the car door.

And I go to the beach. I slop along the hot hot white sand in my sober suit, grit filling my shoes. There are gorgeous people here, playing beach volleyball, futvolley, roller-blading along the sidewalk. There are boats in the marina and stalls for beer and caipis and men fishing and old men just staring out across the Bay, their leather skins knuckled with melanomas. I'm listening to *Pretty Petty Thieves*. Sun and shade, *alegria* and *saudade,* joy and melancholy; that has always been our music. The final track plays: a ghost samba. Those ghost worlds are real, the guitar and cello, the whispered vocals say. We come from there. Among those parallel universes the Captain is in a tutorial with his good-looking students, reading at his desk with his trademark small coffee, exploring those other worlds and other lives on that magical computer. He'll never know about those worlds where his heart stops dead and drops him to the floor of his favourite per-kilo restaurant. There's a dark truth buried in Captain Spooky's vision of himself steeping forward to the end of the universe, one that makes this bright day and its people look as false and insubstantial as carnaval costumes. Around us others die, by age or disease or accident, but we live on. Little by little we lose everything and everyone. Every one of us is alone in our own little universe of ourselves.

I stop dead, a mad man in a dark suit on a blazing beach, and watch a TAM shuttle lift off from Santos Dumont. The compulsion, formed in an instant, possesses me. I must know if the Captain's *Pretty Petty Thieves* is the one my Seu Alejandro intended. Certainty is impossible—that's as true in pop music as quantum theory—but I can find hints and intimations. There is still room for faith. I trudge up between the brown volley-boys on to the sidewalk. I sit on a bench and empty the sand out of my lace-ups.

If in another life—another universe—I had to be a favelado, I think it would be in Vila Canoas. It's small and green and folded in on itself so that streets and alleys can cross each other several times. There's an underground river. Police and taxi-drivers eat in the diner on the corner. They always know where the good food is. There's even a neat little backpacker hostel. I've never got that sense of perpetual tension I feel in big sister Rocinha around the mountain; as if the whole city on a hill might break lose and slide into the sea like an avalanche, sweeping the rich of Barra de Tijuca before it.

So, I'm a cosy middle-class music hack who doesn't know any of the speak of the street or the signs and ways you need to know to live as a Vila Canoista and not a tourist and I wouldn't last more than two nights in this place without killing or being killed. But I like the circle of forested mountains and the lap of sea. I like the way the clouds catch around São Conrado Mountain. Hang-gliders circle through the mist up there like hawks. On the intersection at the café a youth painstakingly welds an old Toyota pick-up, his gun wired into the streetlight. I turn off into the shadowed alleys between the leaning buildings, overhung by ramshackle balconies and washing. There is the studio, rebuilt and now a DJ school. I remembered it burned, I remember the yellow walls smoke stained and the green paint peeled away, the windows and doors empty and eyeless. Vila Canoas was a pilgrimage site for a time. I was one of many who laid flowers and set candles and plastic virgins, Flamengo shirts and thongs to the Seu. I feel the hard-drive in the breast pocket of my jacket grown heavy and warm. There's a second Pretty Petty Thief in it; the ghost Captain Spooky found on the shores of the multiverse.

The bar across the alley is changeless, a brick counter built into the under-hang beneath an apartment house, a bench seat set into the opposite wall. The television blares some Canal Quatro reality shit, the usual malandros loll around with Antarcticas, one in green with an attempted moustache, one in yellow with a smart light in his eye, one in white who thinks he rules. They nod when I greet them.

'I wonder if you could help me; does the Dona Severino de Araujo still live round here?'

The barman steps back to better regard me. His bar is the width of a street.

'I don't know who you mean.'

I introduce myself. 'The music journalist? I have a column in *Copa News*.' Looks, head-shakes, shrugs. 'I do a radio programme on Saturday afternoons. The history of MPB? '

Kid in yellow throws his head back.

'Just before Football Focus; I know you now. So you're looking for the Dona.'

'I've something I want to show her. Something the Seu left behind.'

'I think I remember you now,' says the barman. 'You did some interviews with her and his sisters. I saw them, they were good.' They all look at the emperor in white. He stubs out a cigarette.

'You'll find her where you found her last time,' he says.

'It's easy to get lost here,' says Kid Green. 'I'll show you.' He casts off from the bar and leads from two steps behind through the labyrinth of alleys and tunnels. I'm sure I didn't go this way before, I'm

sure it was straighter, less shadowed. But the house are built and rebuilt and the streets change so often up here it's as if they move themselves, in the night. We drill down into the roots of Vila Canoas, through a doorway skewed into a parallelogram and along a short concrete tunnel lined with television lit windows. The sound of running water rushes around the corridor. We cross the buried stream that races down from São Conrado on a concrete culvert and climb a flight of steps towards the sun. It's there that I hear the once-heard never-mistaken sound and turn to face the gun in Green Boy's hand.

'Look, I'm just a journalist.' I offer him my wallet, my cellular. My cards he knows will be biometriced, usable only to my touch but I give them to him anyway. I pray he won't kidnap and march me to an ATM every day until I've emptied out my own account. Move slowly, withhold nothing and let them know they are in total control. I've been held up before. I know the drill.

'What's in the pocket?' Green waves his gun barrel.

I think of denying, I think of lying but the square bulge of the drive betrays me. I take out the master disk carefully, between thumb and forefinger.

'It's only music.'

'An ipod.'

'No it's a hard-drive.'

'An ipod, an MP4 player?'

'It's for Dona de Araujo. Seu Alejandro's mother. It's a present for her.'

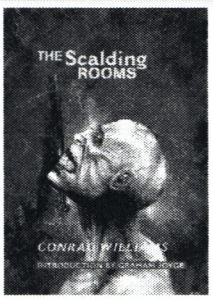
'An ipod,' Green Boy says again. He's chewing his lip repeatedly now. That's never good.

'No it's not an ipod.' I'm getting agitated. Give it to him. Give him whatever he wants. Get down on your knees and blow him if you need to. But it's Pretty Petty Thieves.

'Give me the fucking ipod!' Green screams.

'It's not a fucking ipod!' I scream back over the gurgle of buried water. I pull my hand back. He stabs forward with the gun. I see his finger close on the trigger.

And I hear a click. A dead-gun click. Green Boy frowns. He stabs with the gun held sideways this time, pulls the trigger. I hear a click. Then another. Then another.



FROM PS
and CONRAD WILLIAMS

Some nights you can hear screams rising up from The Eyes, the abattoir on New Cut Lane. Those screams belong to the animals queuing up to be slaughtered there. Well, most of them do . . .

"'Article of Faith'," Mike Resnick tells us, "explores some issues that don't get explored too often in science fiction; and of course the story is not about the robot, but about the narrator."

The author is, according to Locus, *the all-time leading award-winner, living or dead, for short fiction. He has five Hugos, plus other major awards in the USA, France, Spain, Japan, Croatia and Poland. Mr. Resnick is the author of 55 novels, over 200 short stories, and two screenplays, and the editor of 50 anthologies. He is currently the executive editor of* Jim Baen's Universe. *His 2008 releases include* The Other Teddy Roosevelts *and* Kilimanjaro *(Subterranean);* The Dragon Done It, *co-edited with Eric Flint (Baen); and* Stalking The Vampire *and* Starship: Rebel *(Pyr).*

An Article Of Faith

Mike Resnick

The first time I saw him, he was sweeping the floor at the back of the darkened church, standing in a beam of light that came streaming down from the window above him, glistening off his metal skin.

"Good morning, sir," he said as I was heading across vestibule to my office.

"Good morning," I replied. "You're new here, aren't you? I don't believe I've seen you before."

"I was just delivered this morning, sir," he said.

"What was wrong with Herbie?"

"I cannot say, sir."

"Oh, well," I said. "Have you got a name?"

"Jackson, sir."

"Just Jackson?"

"Jackson 389V22M7, if you prefer, sir."

"Jackson will do," I said. "When you're through out here, I'd like you to clean my office."

"I already did, sir."

"Very good, Jackson," I said. "I can tell we're going to get along splendidly."

"I hope so, sir," said Jackson.

I went to my office, and since there were no parishioners around I took off my coat and loosened my tie. Then I sat down on my old-fashioned swivel chair, pulled out a pad of yellow paper and a pen, and began working on my next sermon. I was still at it an hour later when Jackson knocked on the door.

"Come in," I said.

He entered, carrying a tray with a pot of tea and a cup and saucer. "I was told that that you liked your mid-morning tea, sir," he said, "but they neglected to tell me if you wanted milk, sugar or lemon with it."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Jackson," I said. "Thank you."

"You are quite welcome, sir," he said.

"They certainly programmed good manners into you," I said.

"Thank you, sir." He paused. "About the milk, sugar or lemon . . . ?"

"I don't need them."

"What time will you want your lunch, sir?" asked Jackson.

"Noon," I said. "And I pray that you can cook better than Herbie could."

"I have been given a list of your favorite meals, sir," said Jackson. "Which would—?"

"Surprise me," I interrupted him.

"Are you sure, sir?"

"I'm sure," I said. "Somehow, lunch seems pretty trivial after you've been thinking about God all morning."

"God, sir?"

"The Creator of all things," I explained.

"My creator is Stanley Kalinovsky, sir," said Jackson. "I was not aware that he created everything in the world, nor that his preferred name was God."

I couldn't repress a smile.

"Sit down, Jackson," I said.

He placed the tray on my desk. "On the floor, sir?"

"On a chair."

"But I am merely a robot," said Jackson. "I do not require a chair."

"Perhaps," I replied. "But it would make me more comfortable if you sat on it."

"Then I shall," he said, seating himself opposite me.

"It is true that you were created by Dr. Kalinovsky," I began, "or at least I have no reason to doubt it. But that implies another question, does it not, Jackson?"

The robot stared at me for a moment before answering. "Yes, sir," he said at last. "The question is: who created Stanley Kalinovsky?"

"Very good," I said. "And the answer is that God created him, just as God created me and every other human being, just as He created the mountains and the plains and the oceans."

Another pause. "God created everything except me?" he asked at last.

"That's an interesting question, Jackson," I admitted. "I suppose the answer is that God is indirectly responsible for you, for had He not created Dr. Kalinovsky, Dr. Kalinovsky could not have created you."

"Then I too am God's creation?"

"This is the House of God," I said. "Far be it from me to tell anyone, even a robot, that he isn't God's creation."

"Excuse me, sir, but which is God's office?" asked Jackson. "It is not in the schemata of the church that I was provided."

I chuckled. "God doesn't need an office. He is everywhere."

Jackson's head spun very slowly until it had gone 360 degrees and was facing me again. "I cannot see him," he announced.

"He is here nonetheless," I said. Then: "It is too difficult to explain, Jackson. You will have to take my word for it."

"Yes, sir."

"And now, Jackson, I really have to get back to work. I'll see you at lunchtime."

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I don't know your name. If someone asks for you, how will they identify you?"

"I am the Reverend Edward Morris," I replied.

"Thank you, Reverend Morris," he said, and left.

It had been an interesting conversation, certainly more interesting than any I'd ever had with Herbie, Jackson's clanking predecessor. We were a small parish in a small town, our industry had moved elsewhere, a lot of people had followed it, and the other two churches had closed down, so there were no neighboring ministers to talk to. Just answering Jackson's simple questions

had refreshed me enough that I was able to attack the rest of my sermon with new energy.

I worked very hard on those sermons. The church had been failing when I arrived from my previous posting. In those early days, we might draw five people on a Sunday, and just the occasional person any other time of the week. Then I began visiting my parishioners' houses, I spoke at the local schools, I blessed the football and basketball teams before their regional tournaments, and I even volunteered the church as a polling place for the local elections. The only thing I would not do was allow bingo games inside the church; it seemed somehow sacrilegious to help defray our costs by encouraging people to gamble. Before long my efforts began to bear fruit. These days I could usually expect thirty to fifty people on Sundays, and rarely did we go an entire day without two or three people stopping in to commune with God.

Lunch was surprisingly good. By the end of the day I'd written out a draft of the sermon and Jackson had the church sparkling like new—and this church hadn't been new in a long, long time. Lining one of the corridors was a row of photographs of our previous pastors; I was told that a couple of them were serving back when Benjamin Harrison and James Garfield were our Presidents. A stern-looking bunch for the most part; perhaps *too* stern-looking, given the way our membership had dwindled over the decades. I think one of the reasons I was hired is because I leave hellfire and damnation to others; I stand four-square on the side of compassion and redemption.

Jackson approached me as I was leaving for the night.

"Excuse me, Reverend Morris," he said, "but shall I lock the building after you've gone?"

I nodded my head. "Yes. I'm sure some of those gentlemen on the wall left it open as a sanctuary around the clock, but not in today's world. We can't have anyone robbing a church."

"According to my data banks a church is a place of worship," said Jackson.

"That's right."

"But you told me that this was God's house, not a church," he said.

"A church is where we worship God," I explained. "That makes it His house."

"God must be very large to need such high ceilings," remarked Jackson.

I smiled. "That is an interesting observation, Jackson," I said. "And doubtless He can be that large when He chooses to be. But I think we make the interior of our churches so large not to accommodate God, who needs no accommodation, but to imply his power and majesty to those who come here to worship him."

He offered no further comment, and I went out to my car. I had to admit that I enjoyed my little chat with Jackson, and I looked forward to talking to him again the next day.

I made a couple of sandwiches for my dinner—cooking isn't one of my skills—and I spent the rest of the night reading. I was in bed by ten o'clock, as usual, and up at six in the morning. I got dressed, made the bed, put out thistle and sunflower seeds for the birds in the back yard, and finally got into my car and drove to the church.

When I arrived, Jackson was sweeping the floor, just as he'd been doing the day before.

"Good morning, Reverend Morris," he said.

"Good morning," I replied. "Jackson, I wonder if you would do me afavor? I'm going to practice my sermon before anyone is likely to arrive this morning. Could you please fill a glass of water and put it on the podium in the pulpit?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I activate the microphone, too?"

I shook my head. "That won't be necessary. There's no one around to hear it. I'm just practicing."

He went off to get the water and I went to my office, hung my coat up in the closet, opened the center drawer of my desk, and pulled out my sermon. I have a wonderful, state-of-the-art computer that can probably think a thousand times faster than I can, but somehow I'm more comfortable writing out my sermons in longhand on a legal pad.

I made a couple of last-minute changes, then left the office. A minute later I was standing in the pulpit, clutching the podium with both hands as I always do (if I don't, I tend to gesticulate too much), and I began working my way through the sermon.

When I finished I checked my watch. It had taken twenty-two minutes, which seemed an acceptable length. My rule of thumb has always been that anything over thirty minutes is likely to be boring, and anything under fifteen minutes seems truncated and insufficiently thoughtful.

I looked up from my watch and saw Jackson standing motionless at the back of the church.

"I'll get out of your way now," I said, starting to walk back toward my office. "Continue whatever you were doing."

"Yes, Reverend Morris," said Jackson.

Then a thought occurred to me.

"Just a minute, Jackson."

"Sir?"

"Were you able to hear my sermon?"

"Yes, Reverend Morris. I do not require a microphone or a sound system."

"I had a feeling you didn't." I looked at him. "Well, what did you think of it?"

"I do not understand the question."

"Let me explain, then," I said. "I give a sermon to my parishioners every Sunday morning. It is supposed to bring them spiritual comfort, a concept that is probably beyond your ability to fully comprehend, but it is also intended to instruct them."

"Instruct them, sir?" said Jackson.

"On how to lead moral, spiritually satisfying lives," I explained. "The problem is that sometimes I get too close to my subject matter, and I don't see any logical flaws or contradictions that might have crept in." I smiled at him—I don't know why, since a smile is meaningless to a robot. "I would like you to listen to my sermons, not on Sunday mornings, but when I am practicing them during the week, and point out any logical inconsistencies in them. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, Reverend Morris. I can do that."

"Good," I said. "In fact, I think we'll start with the current one. Can you remember it, or should I read it again?"

"I can repeat it word for word, Reverend Morris," said Jackson. "I can duplicate your inflections as well, if that is necessary."

"You don't have to repeat it," I said. "Just tell me if there are any logical flaws."

"Yes, sir," said Jackson. "You mentioned

a man named Jonah who was eaten by a great fish and survived. That is a logical flaw."

"It would seem to be," I agreed. "And were it not for God, it would be."

"I do not understand, Reverend Morris."

"God is omnipotent," I explained. "Nothing is impossible for Him. He can heal the sick, resurrect the dead, part the Red Sea so the children of Israel can escape from Egypt, and He can bring Jonah forth from the belly of a whale."

"But would not the digestive acids destroy Jonah's flesh and dissolve his internal organs?"

"If God did not intervene, yes," I said. "But God *did* intervene."

"Does God intervene whenever a man is consumed by a great fish?" asked Jackson.

"No."

Jackson paused for a long moment. "What determines which men God will save?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "No man can know how God's mind works. We know that He favors just and moral men, though to look at the world today that's sometimes difficult to believe."

"I must learn more about God if I am to properly evaluate your sermons, Reverend Morris," said Jackson.

"Can you read?"

"I can read and speak more than 30 major languages and 200 dialects, sir."

"Then tonight, after I leave, pick up one of the bibles that we keep in the alcove in to my office and read it."

"And this will explain God to me?" asked Jackson.

I smiled again and shook my head. "No, Jackson. It will explain our limited understanding of God. If we knew what God knows, we would be gods ourselves, and there can only be one God."

"Why only one?" he asked.

"Just read the bible," I replied.

"I will do as you say, Reverend Morris."

"Good," I said, gathering the pages of my sermon. "I'm going to my office. I'd like my tea in about an hour."

"Yes, Reverend Morris."

And that became our routine for the next three months. Two or three mornings a week I would stand in the pulpit and read my sermon aloud, and Jackson would stand at the back, listening. Then he would point out the contradictions and inconsistencies. Some (less and less each week) were due to his limited understanding of the natures of God and religion, and the remainder were blunders that I then fixed before they could embarrass me on Sunday.

One thing that surprised me was that he never asked a single question about the bible. I knew that he'd read it, because on occasion he would reference a certain passage when pointing out a mistake in my sermon, but never did he discuss it or question me about it. I assumed it was simply beyond his comprehension. He was, after all, just a robot, one that had been created solely to clean the church and keep the building and the grounds in good repair.

Usually he left the main body of the church whenever a parishioner would stop by to pray, but one day I noticed him staring intently at Mrs. Matthews as she knelt in prayer. When she left he came to my office and stood in the doorway until I noticed him.

"Yes, Jackson," I said. "What is it?"

"I have a question, Reverend Morris," he said.

"Then ask, and I'll do my best to answer it."

"I saw Mrs. Matthews kneeling at the front of the church. I have seen others kneel there, but because she was crying I assumed she had injured herself. Yet when I offered to help her to her feet or summon medical assistance, she told me that she was in no physical distress, and that it was customary to kneel when praying, which I take to mean speaking to God."

"That is quite correct, Jackson," I answered. "We kneel to show our respect for Him. And she was crying because she is very worried about the safety of her sons, who are in the armed forces." He stood motionless and made no reply. "Is there anything else?"

"No, Reverend Morris."

"Then perhaps you had better get back to your duties."

"Yes, Reverend Morris."

He turned and left, and I went back to computing the church's budget for the coming month. It's amazing the expenses the public isn't aware of, like the cleaning bills for the choir's robes, or the constant repair of the parking lot pavement, and this month I even had to pay to repair a crack in one of the stained glass windows, but I finally finished and put the ledger away.

I checked my watch. It was 4:29, which meant Jackson would show up in another minute, as indeed he did. In all the time he'd worked for me, he'd never been early or late by as much as half a minute, and 4:30 was the time when he brought me the poor box. There wasn't much in it—in truth, there rarely was—and I counted it, put it in an envelope, and made out a deposit slip.

"Thank you, Jackson," I said.

"You are welcome, Reverend Morris."

"I see that Sheldrake's is offering thirty percent off to anyone who comes in for dinner before 5:30," I said. "I think I'll leave a little early tonight, stop by the bank, and treat myself to a nice veal cutlet. I'm sorry to leave you alone, but . . . "

"I am never alone," said Jackson.

"I beg your pardon?"

"God is omnipresent, is He not?"

"Yes, He is," I said, surprised.

"And this is His house," he continued, "so certainly He is here."

"Very well said, Jackson," I told him enthusiastically. "Maybe I'll let *you* write a sermon one of these days."

I picked up the deposit, patted him on the shoulder as I walked past, and left the church. All through dinner I couldn't stop thinking about what Jackson had said. Oh, I knew he'd read the bible, and had listened to my sermons, but for a robot to suggest that God existed and was omnipresent . . . well, it was remarkable. I even found myself wondering what kind of sermon a robot might write.

When I showed up at the church in the morning, old Perry Hendricks was waiting for me. He still hadn't gotten over the death of his daughter, who had fought a losing battle against cancer for close to three years, and I spent the next hour and a half trying to comfort him. It was the one part of the job I hated—not that I didn't *want* to bring comfort to the afflicted, but I just felt so inadequate at it.

Then Mrs. Nicholson stopped by to make sure the church would

be available for her daughter's wedding, and to discuss the financial arrangements. I noticed that we didn't discuss the fact that her daughter was five months' pregnant, but it's not my job to judge them, only to help and comfort them.

When she left, Jackson entered the office with my tea.

"I am sorry to be late," he said, "but I did not want to interrupt you when you were conferring with a parishioner."

"That was very thoughtful of you," I said. "Should I find I cannot do without my tea when I have a visitor, I'll summon you." I poured a cup and took a sip. "It's very good. I wish I could share it with you."

"I cannot consume food or beverages, Reverend Morris," said Jackson.

"I know. Still, I wish there was *something* I could do for you, to thank you for all the kindnesses you have performed for me. After all, neither preparing my lunch nor criticizing my sermons can be considered part of your job description."

He stood absolutely motionless for the better part of 30 seconds, and then, just when I thought his power supply must be failing, he spoke: "There is one thing you can do for me, Reverend Morris."

"What is it?" I said, surprised. After all, no robot had ever asked me for a favor before.

"Allow me to sit with your congregation on Sunday mornings," said Jackson.

Of all the things he could have asked, that was the one I least expected.

"Why?" I said.

"I wish to become a member of your church."

"But you're a robot!" I blurted.

"If God is the God of all things, then is He not also the God of robots?" said Jackson.

"I should never have told you to read the bible," I said. "That was a mistake."

"Is the bible true?" asked Jackson.

"Yes, the bible is true."

"Then is it not true for robots as well as for men?"

"No," I said. "I am sorry, but it is not."

"Why?" he said.

"Because robots don't have souls," I answered.

"Where is yours?" asked Jackson.

"Souls are intangible," I explained. "I cannot show mine to you, but I know that I possess it, that it is an integral part of me."

"Why am I prohibited from offering the same answer?"

"You are making this very difficult, Jackson," I said.

"I do not wish to cause you discomfort or embarrassment," replied Jackson. He paused, then continued: "Is *that* not the manifestation of a soul?"

"Let's say for the sake of argument that you're correct," I replied. "How do you account for the fact that no other robot has a soul?"

"I do not accept that supposition," said Jackson. "The bible tells me that we are *all* God's creatures."

"You can be switched off," I pointed out. "Ask any roboticist."

"So can you," replied Jackson. "Ask any doctor. Or any marksman."

"This is a futile discussion," I said unhappily. "Even if you were to convince *me*, my congregation would never accept a robot parishioner."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because everyone has a friend or a rela-

tive who's lost his job to a robot," I said. "Our two plants have moved away, our young people leave town looking for work as soon as they're out of school, and it's like this throughout the county. There is enormous antipathy toward robots these days." I sighed deeply. "It's a sign of the times," I concluded.

He offered no answer, which made me feel even worse.

"Please say that you understand," I continued.

"I understand, Reverend Morris."

There was another uneasy silence.

"Have you anything else to say before I leave for the day?" I asked.

"No, Reverend Morris."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow," I said, "and let's have no more of this discussion."

That night I was restless and couldn't sleep. I took a long walk, hoping that it might help, and eventually I found myself in front of the church. Maybe I'd subconsciously planned to walk there; I don't know. But I decided as long as I was there and still feeling wide awake, I might as well go inside and get some paperwork done. I walked in through a side door, and headed toward my office when I heard a voice speaking softly.

Curious, I walked in its direction, and a moment later found myself in the back of the darkened church. Jackson was kneeling before the altar, and I could just barely make out his voice:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . "

I turned around and went home without disturbing him.

I spent a really bad, guilt-laden night. I half expected the argument to continue in the morning, but when I arrived at the church Jackson was sweeping up behind the pews, and responded with a perfunctory "Good morning, Reverend Morris," when I greeted him. He brought me my morning tea on schedule, and didn't say a word about the previous day's discussion.

Lunch went by without incident, so did afternoon tea, so did the entire day. And the next day, and the day after that, and finally I stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It turns out I stopped too soon.

It came four days later, on Sunday morning. I waited in my office, scribbling a couple of last-minute changes to the text of my sermon. Finally I walked out and stood in the pulpit, facing my flock.

I began, as I always do, with a blessing. I would then lead them in prayer, followed by some hymns, and finally my sermon—but even as I uttered the first few words I sensed a growing uneasiness. At first I couldn't spot the cause of it. More and more of them were staring at someone who had just sat down in the back, but I couldn't imagine what the problem was, since anyone was welcome to come in off the street and worship. Then the newcomer moved slightly, and I saw the light glisten off his cheek.

It was Jackson. He had found or manufactured a flesh-colored cream, and had spread it all over his face, head and hands. He wore a ragged, ill-fitting suit, something he'd probably gotten by rummaging through the dumpsters in the alley behind the church. At first glance, in the dim light of the church, from perhaps one hundred feet away, he appeared human—but only at first glance, and only at a distance.

I climbed down from the pulpit, walked to the last pew, and stood before Jackson.

"Come with me," I ordered him. *"Now!"*

He got up, and I led him to the small anteroom behind the altar, closing the door behind us.

"All right, Jackson," I said. "What's the idea?"

"For reasons I still do not comprehend, you have restricted your parish to humans," he said. "I thought if I looked like one, I could join it."

"It takes more than make-up and a tattered suit to be a man," I said severely.

"What *does* it take?" he asked.

"I thought we've been through all this already," I said.

"If God created me, why am I forbidden to speak to Him?" he persisted.

"You are *not* forbidden to speak to Him," I said. "You are forbidden to speak to Him in *my* church when my congregation is assembled on Sunday mornings."

"If the church is not considered the best conduit for speaking to Him, why do you come here every day?" he asked. "Why do people congregate here to speak to God if they can do so anywhere? If Sunday is not the most opportune time, why do they not assemble on Tuesday?"

My first inclination was to say *Force of habit*, but that would negate everything I had done in my life, so I tried to couch the answer in terms he would understand and that I could live with.

"It has been said that Man is a social animal," I began. "He finds comfort in proximity with other Men. I could define the concepts of loneliness and isolation to you, but you cannot know the emotional emptiness that accompanies them. Men gather to pray in church because it offers them a sense of comfort, of community, of shared values. Do you have any comprehension of what I am telling you?"

"What makes you think that I do not comprehend emotional emptiness?" was all that he said.

I stared at him, trying—and failing—to come up with an answer.

There was a sudden pounding on the door.

"Are you all right in there, Reverend?" asked a deep voice from the other side.

"If you need any help with the robot, let us know!" said another.

"I'm fine!" I shouted back. "I'll be out in just a minute. Please return to your seats." I turned to Jackson. "You stay here. You are not to leave my office until I come back, do you understand?"

"I understand," he replied. No "Reverend Morris" or "sir", just "I understand."

I left him where he was standing, locked the door behind me, and returned to the pulpit. The angry whisperings suddenly died down when I took my place and they saw I had returned.

"What the hell is going on, Reverend?" demanded Mr. Whittaker.

"What kind of creature *was* that?" added Mrs. Hendricks.

I held up my hand for silence.

"I will explain," I said. I pulled my sermon out of my pocket and stared at it. It was about some of the sins we blunder into, sins like gluttony and sloth. Suddenly it seemed so *trivial*, so removed from the problems that existed right here in my church. "I was going to read this to you today," I said, "but I think I have something more important to talk about." I tore

the sermon in half and let the pieces float to the floor.

I realized I had everyone's rapt attention, and I decided to start speaking before I lost it, and hope the words came out right.

"The disturbing sight you saw was Jackson, the robot that many of you have seen performing maintenance tasks around the church for the past few months. Like all robots, he has a compulsion to find defects and correct them." I paused and stared out across my flock. Their mood was ugly, but at least they were listening. "One day, a few months ago, I decided to make use of that compulsion by practicing my sermons in front of him and having him point out any internal contradictions. This inevitably led him to point out things that we accept as articles of faith as being illogical and contradictory, and so that he would understand the difference between those statements and actual flaws in logic, I had him read the bible. I did not realize until recently that he took it as literal truth."

"It *is* the literal truth!" snapped Mr. Remington. "It's the Lord's word!"

"I know," I said. "But he thinks it applies to robots as well as to men. He believes that he has an immortal soul."

"A *machine*?" snorted Mr. Jameson. "That's blasphemy!"

"It's not enough that they take all our jobs," added Mrs. Willoughby. "Now they want to take over our churches, too!"

"Blasphemy!" repeated Mr. Jameson.

"We must display some compassion," I urged. "Jackson is a moral and ethical entity, whose only desire is to join this parish and pray to the Creator of all things. That's why he made a crude attempt to appear like a man—so that he could sit with you and commune with God. Is that really so terrible?"

"Send him to a robot church, if he can find one," said Mr. Remington, his voice filled with sarcasm and contempt. "This one's for *us*."

"It's not right, Reverend," said Mrs. Hendricks. "If *he* has a soul, then why not my vacuum cleaner, or my son's tank?"

"I'm just a man," I said, "and a flawed man at that. I don't pretend have all the answers, or even most of them. I will consider your objections during the coming week, and I want each of you to search your heart to see if there is some compassion in it for an entity, *any* entity, that wishes only to worship God in our company. Next Sunday, instead of a sermon, we will discuss our thoughts on the matter."

Even after I spoke they kept murmuring. They wanted to argue the subject right now, but I finally put an end to it and insisted that we all go home and sleep on it, that the subject needed serious consideration rather than knee-jerk reaction. I stood at the door to thank each of them for coming, as I always did, and three of the men refused to shake my hand. After the last of them had left, I went back to the anteroom, unlocked it, and ordered Jackson to clean the cream off his face and hands and to put the tattered suit back where he found it.

I went home, found I was so upset that I wasn't hungry, and decided to take a long walk. It was dark when I got back, and I still hadn't resolved any of the issues. *Were* souls the exclusive possession of men? What about the day we finally encounter a sentient alien race out there among the stars? Or the day a dolphin or a chimpanzee prays

to the same God I pray to? And if an alien, or a dolphin, why not a robot?

I didn't know when I got home, and after an almost sleepless night, I still didn't know.

I went back to the church in the morning. I knew something was amiss when I was still fifty yards away, because the doors were ajar, and Jackson never left them open. I entered, and it was clear that Jackson hadn't performed any of his morning duties. The floor was dirty, the flowers hadn't been watered, the garbage hadn't been taken out.

I decided that whether he had a soul or not, he was getting *too* damned human in his behavior. Herbie may have been a primitive early model, but he did his chores and never sulked or demonstrated his resentment. Only humans were allowed the luxury of foul moods and bad behavior.

Then I saw that the door to my office was hanging by a single hinge, and was damaged beyond repair. The first thought that came to me was that I'd been robbed, and I raced to the office, oblivious to the fact that there was nothing there worth stealing.

I froze when I reached the doorway. There, on the floor of the office, was Jackson. His metal body was covered with dents, one of his legs had been pulled off, an arm had been sawed in half, and his head was so battered that it was almost unrecognizable.

You didn't have to be a genius to figure out what had happened. My parishioners hadn't liked what Jackson had done, and they liked what I'd said even less, so they decided to make sure that they never had to share a pew with a robot. And these weren't strangers, or drunken hooligans. They were *my* flock, *my* parishioners. All I could think of was: *if this is the way they behave after all my hard work, what does that say about me, the man who was supposed to give them spiritual and moral guidance?*

I knelt down on the tile floor next to Jackson. God, he was a mess! The closer I looked, the more dents and holes I found in him. At least one of his attackers must have had something like an ice pick, and had just stabbed and stabbed and stabbed. Another had a saw that could cut through metal. Others had other things.

I wondered how much he had suffered. *Did* robots feel pain? I didn't think so, but I didn't think they believed in God either, so what did I know?

I decided to gather his various parts together. This was God's house, and it seemed like an obscene desecration to have him strewn all over the room. Then, when I moved his torso and his one connected arm, I saw a single sentence scratched into the tile with a metallic forefinger:

Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.

I handed in my resignation the next day. In fact, I quit my calling altogether. I've been a carpenter for the past eight years. It doesn't pay much, but it's honorable work, and as the bible makes clear, better men than I have chosen the same profession. My entire staff is composed of robots. I speak to them all the time, but I've yet to find one that's interested in anything other than carpentry.

As for Jackson, I returned him to the factory. I don't know why. He certainly de-

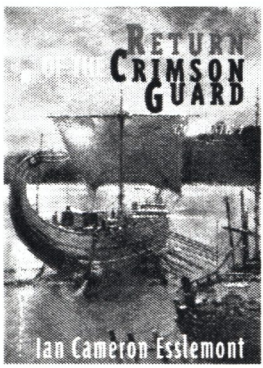
served a Christian burial, but I didn't give him one. Did it mean that deep down I truly didn't think he could possess a soul? I don't know. The only thing I know is that I've been ashamed of myself ever since. Whatever his faults, he deserved better.

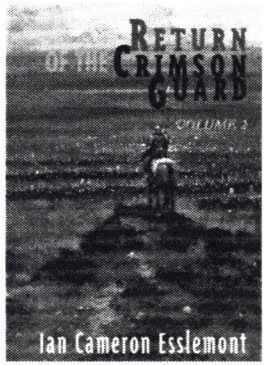
I don't know how they disposed of him. Broke him down for parts, I suppose. To this day I miss him, more than any man should miss a machine. Every Easter I drive over to the scrapheap behind his factory and place a wreath on it. I'm still religious enough to believe that he's aware of it, and maybe even appreciates it. In fact, I find myself thinking that if I lead a good enough life, I may see him again one of these years. And when I do, I'll tell him he was right all along.

He forgave the others; maybe he can forgive me too.

IAN CAMERON ESSLEMONT

A new novel of the Malazan Empire
Two Volumes In One Deluxe Slipcased Edition





The return of the mercenary company the Crimson Guard could not have come at a worse time for the Malazan Empire; drained by warfare, weakened by betrayal and rivalries, many see the grip of Empress Laseen weakening.

Conquered kingdoms and principalities test their old independence. Into this gathering civil war on Quon Tali—the Empire's homeland—comes the Guard. And with their return comes the memory of their hundred year old vow: undying opposition to the existence of the Empire.

Yet rivalries and betrayal stalk the Guard as well; for elements of its elite, the Avowed, scheme to open paths to even greater power. Ancient potent entities, Ascendants, also lend a hand exploiting all sides to further their own arcane ends.

Meanwhile, a swordsman, Traveller, and his companion Ereko, move from one strange encounter to another in a mysterious dance meant ultimately to bring the swordsman to a final confrontation from which none have ever returned.

The author tells us that she wrote the first version of this story in a slightly manic state after finishing Living Next Door To The God Of Love. *"I was buzzing at the end of that book," she says, "full of nervous energy. I'd been reading a lot of Shirley Jackson and wanted to create something that completely sat on the fence with regard to Is It/Isn't It Real? It contains the germs of a lot of ideas that went on to become the* Quantum Gravity *books. For ages I couldn't get the end right so I didn't send it anywhere."*

And so, aside from the occasional embellishment and tinkering, the story sat in limbo until, following a talk with a friend, John Henri Holmberg, at Worldcon, Ms. Robson decided it was something she could send to another market, not just a genre one. "We'd spoken about how sad it was that some SF writers didn't post their stuff to big magazines like The New Yorker," *she recalls. "I said firmly that, if I ever wrote something that was suitable, I would never bottle out. Well, guess what? Over the last few years my life has gone through major upheavals, frequently leaving me feeling like hiding in a rabbit hole, and I did bottle out of sending it." (Thank goodness for us!)*

"When Pete needed a story from me for Postscripts *I immediately thought of this one and hauled it out for another look. This time I fixed the end to my liking in about ten minutes flat. I wonder if the end was stalled because I always intended to send it somewhere that would have put me in a position I wasn't comfortable with? It's certainly true that with regard to acceptance by the wider literary world I went through a long period of feeling massively insecure, like a lot of genre writers who wish for recognition from venues they simultaneously idolise and despise. I'll never know if that was what stopped me finding the conclusion, but I suspect a vague awareness of audience probably did have a hand in blocking me. I only know that I procrastinated the chance to death. So although I'm delighted to place it here, I am a bit sad that I didn't make the leap earlier and send it into the wider world.*

"This story is for John Henri—I flunked the test, and after all I said! But I'm not giving up just yet."

Legolas Does The Dishes

Justina Robson

'That's him,' Nurse Driver pointed at the figure standing over the sink. She glanced at me with a sly sideways movement of her eyes, carefully noting my reaction. 'What do you think?'

I took a test reading: tall, lanky, blonde, wearing green under the regulation overalls. If he had pointed ears they were hidden by a carefully drawn ponytail. I shrugged. I thought Driver was shitting me. She and I always had this thing going on where I could never tell if she were serious or simply playing me for the sake of being entertained. Sometimes she'd be right, like about the porter who turned out to be Napoleon. But mostly she liked to irritate. That's why I figured she was demon-ridden; because she had the sight and because she liked to torment with it. Of course the demon made sure that her perceptions came across as just imagination to her, so she wasn't troubled by thinking it was as real as her own nose. None of the screaming heebie jeebies for her like you

get with so many of us who see the other planes and have to play Cassandra for the rest of our lives. She had protection.

Now she lifted her chin and kept her eye on me.

'You're the savant,' she said. 'You tell me.'

Savant is what the inmates labelled me, although the state and my shrink had another set of names. It went without saying that Driver and every right thinking rational person like her had as much faith in fantasy and savants as they had in alien visitations, tax-cut promises on election night and the vows of preachers to save their souls from the pitch black tarry pits of hell. So when Driver said savant she gave away the game and I realised this was her idea of a different kind of Waterloo—one where she hoped I was going to sink like a rock.

Driver gave me a push and I went forwards helplessly across the kitchen's tiled floor towards the object of her disdain. Cause and effect were still in operation, laws of physics definite, therefore I could anticipate no otherworldly help coming to confound her.

I stopped when I came to the bluff point of the drainer and clutched onto its stainless steel strength. Unstoppable force. Immovable object.

The washer-upper glanced at me and smiled in a vague kind of way, like people do when they're self consciously moving among the Therapied. (I would much rather that word was Theropod. The world is the product of the mind. I fancy myself the T Rex of the wards, smashing down doors, impaling presumptuous interns with the scything claws of my enormous feet).

I smiled back.

I think I still have that down pat, though it's not an expression I've had much cause to use lately and it felt fake even though it was real.

The dishwasher went back to lifting dishes out of the steaming water, suds falling over his hands.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

Actually I was pretty confident it was really him, in spite of Nurse Driver's insinuations. Although I know perfectly well that Tolkien was a writer, and that Legolas was an invention of his mind, it is also certainly true that since the widespread popularity of the Peter Jackson movies and renewed interest in the books, (not to mention the pervasively lingering and delicious qualities of the image of Orlando Bloom) the meme of Legolasness and all it implies must have been spreading around the general population like a plague and so, even though I cannot really be looking at an Elf of Middle Earth, but surely am only looking at someone through a voluntary delusion I am prepared to entertain as True, nonetheless, here he is. Legolas is washing our dishes. Because reality is of the mind. And my mind says this is the real thing. And so he is. Unless he thinks he isn't. And then of course, he won't be.

'Washing dishes,' he said.

'No. I mean *here*,' I said, and added the test tag—'What are you doing here? Why aren't you in Valinor?'

'Oh,' he seemed taken aback for a moment and stared at the steamed up window in front of him (not that you could have seen through it—it was marbled glass). He glanced down at me and his blue eyes

fogged up. He muttered hesitantly, 'I forgot about that, I guess.'

'Was it the gulls?' I asked him. 'Did they tell you to come back?'

'Um . . . ' his hands in the water went slack. 'No. I needed a job. I don't have many skills. Any,' he paused to think of the word that somebody else must have said to him, 'pertinent ones.' He glanced at my overalls and then, briefly, at my face.

'That sucks,' I commiserated. 'Good dishes though.' They sparkled as they dried.

'Thanks.' He was suddenly much more comfortable; went back to the methodical task with more care than I'd have given it, even in a pensive mood. He had young skin. I looked at the space where his ear was concealed by hair and also the plastic shield of a mass-produced kitchen-jockey's silly elasticated hat. 'So,' I said conversationally. 'Must have been tough since Aragorn kicked it?'

Nurse Driver was standing a short distance away on the tiles, fretting because she couldn't smoke, but I heard her cough. It may have been a laugh.

He kept washing plates. He was very cute. It was a shame. 'Was he like they say?'

'Who?'

'Aragorn. You know.'

He sighed. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Oh,' I glanced back at Driver and gave him a conspiratorial look, turning down my volume, 'of *course* you don't. But you shouldn't worry about her. You could be King James the First and she wouldn't believe you. Or Ghengis Khan. She wouldn't know an angel if it came down from heaven and bit her ass. She's as blind as a bat to anything other than material reality. I'm waiting for the faeries to con her out of her life savings one of these days.'

The ghost of a smile flitted across his face as he kept studiously washing plates. 'Is that right?'

'So your secret's safe out in the open, just like the rest of our secrets. Best place for it,' I said and patted him on the arm in a comforting manner.

He flinched. 'Don't do that.'

'Sorry I'm sure,' I said, watching the swirling surface of the bubbles on his wrist. You can scry in a bubble. You can scry in anything come to that, if you learned how. A dogshit on the pavement is as prophetic as a crystal to the right eye. 'What's the matter?'

'My Daddy . . . well, don't, if you don't mind.' He was so well spoken.

'I don't mind a thing,' I assured him. 'Do you miss the old days?'

'No,' he said. 'I like the new days with nothing in them.' He glanced at me as he put a dish down into the rack and we shared a genuine grin for a split second. The sun came out, somewhere beyond the glass, and the long hair on his shoulders turned to gold.

Curiosity finally moved him as he searched the depths for forks with cautious sweeping motions. 'What are you in for?' he asked.

'I poisoned my mother,' I said. 'She tried to poison me. It was very much one of those fifty:fifty situations. Could have gone either way.' I held my hand out flat and waggled it to show the balance was perfectly weighted and what had happened was quite fair.

His soft, easy smile appeared again—all focused on the dishwater sadly—and

then it faded away. 'How long will you be here?'

'Forever, unless I start to speak the speech of the terminally insane undergoing positive changes that incline them towards productive citizenship,' I said. 'And you?'

'It's just a job,' he said.

I tried for the aberrantly confident tones of Doctor Lucy. 'Well, it's important *you* keep believing that.'

I was still undecided about the sincerity of the phrase itself—*it's important you keep believing*. Like arsenic, it could go either way for you. I always thought Doctor Lucy meant it, especially when she was tired, but now that I said it myself to this elf who was washing dishes in a psychiatric ward it seemed less convincing. I voiced my doubt. 'Do you believe that?'

'There's nothing to believe,' he said, lifting a stack of knives and forks, rinsing them with the little shower head thing, and dropping them into the drain tray. He had farm-animal calm. It was both delightful and unnerving, as though there was a storm on the way.

'What do you do when you're not here? Do you live in the woods? You must miss trees. I never saw a tree in Arizona worth the name.'

'We aren't in Arizona,' he said.

'I know. Just testing.'

Driver did laugh this time, and then she blew her nose and started emailing on her blackberry. She took a picture of us with it.

'You need permission,' I told her but she shrugged. I wondered who she could send it to and what she was saying. I would have liked to wash Nurse Driver in the hot soapy water, and her little phone too.

'What was it like in Edoras?' I asked Legolas. I wouldn't have been so pushy, only I didn't think he would be here long, and I knew I certainly wouldn't. Maybe until Driver's badly typed conversation finished. 'Were the horses like real horses here?'

He shrugged, 'I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know horses.' He feigned enormous interest in some dried-on potato on a big serving dish and rested it on the side of the sink to scrub it with one of those scratchy green pads that are made of stuff that never wears out, though you wish it would, because otherwise, what would happen to it and to the second law of thermodynamics?

'But you had one,' I said confidently. 'One of the Rohan horses. Arod.'

'A what?'

'Arod. That's his name. It means swift. It was your horse. You and Gimli. Don't kid me you don't remember.'

'Sure,' he said, lying. 'A big brown horse.'

'It was grey,' I said crossly.

He flinched again and the big Pyrex dish slipped fractionally, bumping the sink edge with a gentle thunk. It smashed into a dazzling scatter of tiny curved shards. He and I stepped back automatically as a rain of splinters pattered onto the tiles.

'Did you get any on you?' he asked me.

I shook out the front of my overalls. 'No.'

He picked fragments from his apron and I saw an orangey thread of blood stain the white suds on his right hand. He muttered a curse as he flicked them onto the floor.

'Fuck!' Driver said from behind us. 'Lili what the hell have you said now? Did you do that?'

'No,' I told her. 'I'll get the brush,' I said to him.

'It's coming out of your wages,' Driver said to him without sympathy. 'I told you not to react to what she said.'

'Yeah? Well I wasn't contracted to listen to your patients, so I'm thinking you'll be the one explaining.' He took the long handled brush off me as I reached him, his movements careful, as though he'd spent a long time gently taking potentially dangerous objects from the incompetent. He waited for me to release it but I liked the feeling of his soggy, hot fingers against mine so I was slow about it.

Driver patted her pockets and calmed down when she heard and felt the rustle of fifteen Lucky Strikes under her uniform. 'Just put it in the trash,' she said wearily and looked at me. 'Shit, Lilibet. I thought you'd be way more fun than this. D'you wanna go back to the day room, stick some glitter on card?'

I ignored her. 'I'm a top sweeper actually,' I said to him as he got the pieces of dish into a pile. 'I could sweep in the Olympics.' I saw an interesting shape in the broken glass and reached down to get it.

He moved to stop me and we bumped skulls as we reached a crouch at the same moment. 'Ouch!' I put my hand up to my forehead but I felt his plastic hat and instead took hold of it and pulled it off. As this distracted him I picked up the glass piece I wanted carefully between thumb and forefinger. Pyrex is specially heat treated to stand high temperatures, and it's extremely hard to break, although it can develop invisible stress complications over years of use which will cause it to explode, like this one had, when some innocuous tiny thing happens to set it off. The right force at the right moment is all it takes.

The white curve of his eyeball was exactly the same shape as my seer's splinter.

'Drop it,' Driver said to me in the tone of voice that promised punishment.

I admired my long, slim fingers on the shard I was holding—a big curl, like a clear scimitar—and then put it carefully into the dustpan. I looked up into Legolas' face as he finished brushing the rest of the pieces into the pan. He had cheekbones to die for, though his lips were a little on the thin side. He gave me a careful look, to check that I wasn't about to try something freaky. I didn't want to spoil my relationship with Driver—she master, me domesticated animal—so I didn't. 'You have something in your eye.'

'No, I don't think . . . '

'Yes.' I held his face in my hands and pretended to tilt it better towards the light, staring into one and then the other of his cornflower baby blues. He blinked, looking up over my head. 'It's big.'

'I can't feel anything.'

'Right there on the left.' Two oppositional words, create tension, cause confusion, make space.

The left side of the body is controlled by the right brain and if there's anything really interesting about a person who's squirrelled away out of sight inside themselves it's in the right brain, unless they're one of those people who are naturally reversed, but he was right-handed so I was willing to risk it. Risk is the currency of the gods, after all. 'So, how was it in the Fellowship of the Ring?'

He glanced up and left. I knew it. People look that way for Visual Recall. Then down

and left. Kinaesthetic Access. Not up and right (Visual Construct). Not down and right (Audio Digital process). I knew it! He was looking into memories, not making things up! Then, resigning himself to my madness, he looked back at me and carefully removed my hands from his head, placing them down on my knees.

I wasn't about to make Driver's day. I knew that she was hoping I'd come here, convince myself, make him annoyed, and give her enough material to do the annoying job on her own for the rest of his stay. She was never happy without someone to aggravate and, having practised relative tolerance on the residents, she liked to take it out on the non-clinical staff. In the day room we had a sweepstake going on who she'd push to resign next. We always figured it was because she had to put up such a nice housewifey front in her home life, to keep standards of domestic and public civilisation going, because Chief of Police Bob Driver demanded a clean-living ticket.

'You should get a haircut,' Driver said to the elf from her comfortable seat. 'That'd put a stop to it. Otherwise you've only got yourself to blame.'

He put my hands away from him and took the pan and brush away. I looked for more sparkling bits, but there were none close by, although there was a satisfying discomfort under one nail on my left hand.

'I have a lot of money,' I told him when he came back to finish the dishes.

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah,' Driver said, snorting at the stupidity of fate. 'She's an heiress, thanks to mommy dearest, and two bucks short of a ticket to real life.'

'You shouldn't talk like that,' the elf said in his broken accent that might have come via Dakota or one of those other long-forgotten states where nothing happens. I liked the way he stood up to her so quietly.

'Yeah, right. She doesn't care, do you Lili? Been here for the best years of her life playing at Mystic Myrtle and every time it looks as though they're about to send her out into a nice little sheltered house she stabs someone. All that money and bleeding the taxpayers dry, huh, missy? But sometimes she sees things, don't you, honey? Got to be so that we thought maybe she had something when she said she had the sight, but it's been a long time since she saw anything interesting.'

She hadn't been much interested in him before, but his refusal to submit was needling her. Now she couldn't let go. Drastic action might be required here, in the sort of doses that could kill an ordinary conversation stone dead.

I turned away from her and said to him quietly, 'Do you remember Thranduil and Mirkwood?'

'Who's Thran-doo-ill?'

'Didn't you pay attention in the movie?' Driver contributed. 'He's your daddy.'

'That wasn't in the movie, it was in the book,' I corrected her.

He snatched a plate—one of the last—and rammed it to the bottom of the sink, leaning on it. 'My daddy's name was Tyson.' Muscles in his neck and jaw flickered beneath the skin.

I began to sense a fellowship of a different kind. 'He really wasn't. He wasn't your real father.'

'I wish he wasn't.' He recovered the plate—it was in two pieces.

'Wages,' Driver said.

He tossed the halves into the trashcan. It was a throw of about eight metres and he did it with a gesture no more studied or powerful than simple pointing. The halves chinked down among the broken glass, and then he gave me a challenging look, eyebrows up, beliefs suspended. Oh, how these moments last is always the key to seeing how far somebody can go!

'Thranduil?' he repeated, the querying tone of his voice more for pronunciation than confirmation of identity.

'Yes.'

'And what else?'

'You're an immortal,' I said, 'You're supposed to be in Valinor, beyond the Earth in the deathless realms, far as I recall. You went there after Aragorn died and you were one of the last Elves to leave Middle Earth, though I never really read all the way through the Silmarillion so I don't know for sure. I got to page two and then . . . ' I shrugged.

'Did I kill him?' he asked, alarmed and shaking so that he had to hold onto the edge of the sink suddenly. The shimmer of protection all adults learn to wear since the schoolyard fell away for an instant as he struggled with his memories and I saw that he was talking about his real father.

The sight Driver liked me to show off with wasn't like seeing TV. It was knowledge that came the same way old memories surface, unexpected but with the gut-strike of truth to them that your mind can doubt but your heart never does.

I see his old man dying in his sleep on a sofa, half hidden by blankets, in an empty house that was all but falling down. I heard crying from another room. Adult crying, the kind that makes you want not to go to the crier. I concealed my knowledge and stuck to the story, 'No!'

'Oh.' He paused and set the last plate into the drainer and pulled the plug, wrapping the chain around the cold tap and then running water to clean his hands. 'Good,' he dried his hands off on his apron and blinked. The shadow membrane of Forgetting, a slightly longer blink that most people think is only a moment of regret, flicked across his eyes and when it was gone all his defences were intact. 'So, where's Middle Earth?'

'Right here.'

'Oh god,' said Driver, all her hatred of small town life distilled in the words. 'As if.'

'Well, it is,' I said, getting disjointed as she started to look impatient. She would not have patience with my explanation that Middle Earth is wherever one said it was, like all things that depended on two realities for their existence: a place in spacetime and a position in someone's mind. She wasn't keen on that kind of knowledge. 'And I have a house there. Not here. Up near Niagara, where we used to live.'

'You never mentioned it,' Driver objected, hurt. 'Are you shitting me, Shirley?'

'I know where I poisoned my own *mother*,' I told her, witheringly. 'And it's mine; every lock, stock, taxidermy shed and five thousand acre logging forest.'

Legolas was scowling faintly. He was still thinking about Middle Earth and attempting to make sense of it alongside the world he was in presently—which never works. 'You came from there, and I left there, right?'

'No, *obviously* you never left,' I said with some exasperation—who would have thought he could be so slow? 'You must

have got stuck here and over the years I guess you've forgotten who you are.'

'I'm only twenty four,' he said uncertainly.

'In *this* particular life. But you've been around since before the Middle Ages . . . ' I could see he had no idea what I was talking about. 'For at least four thousand years.'

'Feels like *I* have,' Driver said, glancing at her watch. 'Time we got you back to the ward, Wizbet. Come on.'

'No, wait,' the elf put his hand out towards me, though it stopped a long way from me. 'What else happened?'

'Rent the fucking DVD,' Driver suggested, moving towards the door where she took off her plastic overshoes and stuffed them into the bin. 'Lili, time for meds.'

'It's all mine, I can do whatever I like with it,' I assured him about the house. 'Nobody's lived there since I left, and if you're superstitious it would really be a bad bet, because the woodwork is more spirit than wood and the forest is full of what we longed to throw away, but everybody who could really hurt you there is already dead.'

'Christ, Lili, you could try a more subtle way of picking up boy toys than that. Haven't you got any pride?' Driver sighed, though I could hear how pleased she was, thinking me in despair. She turned to him and added sarcastically, 'She has another assessment coming up if you're interested. If it all works out she could be out the door by next month, but wear your suit of armour if you're coming in case she gets in the stabby habit.' She did a vigorous impersonation of Anthony Perkins in Psycho and then came for me and took my arm firmly in what was more of a lock than a friendly hold. She hustled me to the door and muttered, 'Big disappointment you are.'

'Say, what's my name?' he called out after us.

'Legolas!' I shouted.

The doors whumped shut at our backs.

'He was perfect material,' Driver grumbled. 'As gullible as a two-day baby. He almost believed you, the born idiot. But you pushed it too hard.'

'It was really him,' I told her. 'Did you expect me to lie cold?'

She, naturally, didn't believe me. 'Ha! I was just hoping for something more like that thing we did with "Napoleon". Did you know he's gone back to driving buses? The Emperor of the roads, hah!' But then she became more thoughtful, 'So, you have a house?'

'You're not getting it unless you're really nice to me,' I said, truthfully.

'I don't want any haunted houses in the middle of nowhere,' she said. 'I have a house. With three bathrooms.'

But we all know that's Police Chief Bob Driver's mother's house and that the third bathroom is nothing more than a converted stair closet. My house has three floors and ten bedrooms. It is short on bathrooms for the modern taste, I think, but nothing you couldn't adapt. I do a quick calculation, balancing time against Driver, the boy at the sink, my life and the pain under my nail. 'I'll give it to you if I get out of here next month.'

'Sure you will,' she said. 'But that relies on you keeping away from knives, and we all know how hard that is, don't we?'

'It's under the tiles behind the sink unit where the sealant has come away.'

Well, they'd only find it when they did

the searches before my assessment. I've been known to be a good hider of sharp things. To my amazement nobody but me seems able to detect their presence, even though a badly angled steel point can slice through the human energy field and create long term damage to it simply in passing. Every dinnertime is a war zone that passes unnoticed. And the sharps in my room were almost impossible for me to avoid even knowing where they were. Self harm for the sensitive.

Driver gave me a long, peculiar look and instead of taking me to the day room for trays, tea and tablets, we went into my room. She peeled back the loose rubbery string which had been functioning as the sealant around my sink unit and managed to tweak the concealed steak knife blade out from behind the loose tiles with the nail of her forefinger.

I watched days of work wasted: lifting that, taking off the handle, hiding it.

'Well I'll be damned,' she said, holding it and giving me a long look. 'Who was this for?'

'Anybody close enough to get it,' I said. 'But not you or Dr Lucy of course. And I wouldn't *kill* anyone. Only as much as necessary.' I pressed the shard of Pyrex I'd been saving under my nail, very slowly, where it caught fast between flesh and nail, not cutting the skin but almost. Glass is nowhere near as dangerous as steel on the energy body, though it's the kind of thing that could do a lot of damage if somebody ate it by mistake and surely I don't need to say what might happen if you got a shard in your eye and started to see the world through another lens. Who knows what might be revealed?

Driver slipped the blade into her pocket. 'Let's keep this between ourselves. You see me right and I'll see what I can do. Here,' she took a wage slip out from where she'd had it folded in the pocket of her trousers and tore off a strip. 'That's my bank ID. Now let's see if you've got anything more to you than a lot of tall tales and spooky visions.'

I rolled the paper up and put it in my nightstand. 'I want to see him again,'She rubbed her fingers and thumb together silently, in the way one might attempt to attract a cat, that universal gesture of summoning money from the aether.

I nodded. 'Give me a few days. I have to call my lawyers.'

'Be quick, Angel Dust. He doesn't look like he'll last the week. Come on. They'll start talking if you miss meds and I'll get put on another shift and that'll be us all washed up for another six weeks.' She chuckled to herself as I passed her and muttered under her breath, but meant for me, 'As if . . . '

Driver knows I haven't lost my marbles, not like most of them. I'm in here simply for admitting the truth—never denied a thing. Dr Lucy has explained that the fact I don't lie and can't see a reason to is part of my pathological state.

In return for Dr Lucy's generosity with the information I explained it to her thus; consider mathematical functions that are everywhere continuous and not differentiable (that is, they change continuously, but also the rate at which they change itself changes continuously). These were considered freakishly rare and bad things, as func-

tions go, with their devilish Heisenbergian properties: one may know their velocity or their position but never both. However, later it was found that this double whammy of massive instability was virtually generic behaviour of *all* continuous functions, and the very thing that was intrinsic to their overall stability. Human minds are the same.

I continuously tell the truth and am nowhere differentiable as far as I can tell. The degree of truth I am telling however, is continually fluctuating and unpredictable. This makes me the most stable and robust of all mentalities, and the most reliable, in my opinion. But of course, as Dr Lucy has told me, I would say that.

Most of Dr Lucy's beliefs about minds relies on a heavy emphasis to their regularity, stability and cohesion—the entire theory under which she's trying to make a name for herself is in fact called Cohesive Behaviourism: the Integrity Glue That Holds Us Together. Because of this she missed the significance of my self-determination (excusing herself by saying that abstract elements of mathematics were unsuitable tools for dealing with psychological analysis) so I never got to the part where I could whisk the cloth off my big revelation and tell her that some probability distributions have no mean, or average value. And neither do objects, or atoms, or people.

In retrospect I think the mathematics could all go in my sessions with Dr Lucy and I should stick to aphorisms and clichés, affirmations and the like, with their dripfeed of empty hope into the consciousness.

This is also how poisons and drugs work, but they are for the body. The mind requires stories. Dosage is very important. The right measure at the right moment. My preferred medication is Oprah Winfrey, for example.

I liked Oprah. I'd been cautiously but deliberately assimilating Oprah over the years, and her nurturing practicality was almost sufficiently developed in my continuity to put the lid on mother's casket. It was only ever a matter of time and finding the right active agent.

Under the influence of the wrong drugs, as usual that afternoon, I was left to myself wondering what Oprah would do if she found Legolas washing the dishes. In the intuition-enhancing haze of unreality brought on by the antipsychotics I got her confused with Sofia, the character she played in The Color Purple, so it blurred. The show I was watching became called, 'Sins of the Fathers', and all I could see was the elf asking if his father was called Tyson, and Oprah saying, 'Hell, no.' And then Nurse Driver slapped her across the face and the security men came and there was a big fight.

I pressed my thumb against my bent forefinger and the sharp pain of the glass splinter under my nail reassured me. I waited for control to return.

Finally, in the evening, I exercised a communication privilege and called my lawyer. She was cautiously optimistic when I told her my plans. I could understand her doubts, but when I put my foot down what could she do? I was never so nuts that I was made to sign over powers of attorney. In fact, odd knife incidents and single necessary poisoning aside, I'm a model citizen, and my stock picks and cash management

are beyond reproach. We spent half an hour at the end reviewing her portfolio and she warned me that if I do anything to get stuck inside again I'll lose everything I'm about to spend and then some.

'It's okay,' I told her. 'I understand. Send me the papers.'

'Okay,' she said with the rising tone that handed me all responsibility for whatever followed. 'They'll be there tomorrow first thing.'

'Don't forget the catalogs,' I said.

'Sure thing.'

I did pay Nurse Driver her bribe—thank goodness for telephone banking. And I paid the standard retainer to the PI I hired to follow her around and tell me what she did, too.

After I returned the phone to the Staff Office I checked out the false bottom in the third drawer of my nightstand. The photographs explaining to me how Driver knew so much about Napoleon's present affairs were still safe. One could never trust to theories of mind alone to bring plans as important as these into fruition. One must use everything at one's disposal, even brute cleverness.

A few days later I asked Driver if there was anything interesting happening in the kitchen. She sighed and coughed—a nasty, phlegmy hack. 'Feeling clairvoyant are we?' she asked, pausing as we were making our slow way to the Art Room. It was two days before I was due to have my assessment interview with Dr Lucy.

'Please,' I said, playing nice.

She didn't say anything, but we did make an unplanned turn and eventually, having avoided Dr Lucy's offices by going via the gardens, we came to the kitchens. It was half an hour after lunch. And there he was. Washing up.

I noticed that he'd changed his hair. It was now in a half braid of just the crown hair, drawn away from his face, with the rest free.

'I'm going for a break,' Driver said to him, flashing a packet of Luckys. 'Okay? Just five minutes. Don't give her anything sharp, and don't get onto any, you know, difficult subjects.'

He turned and nodded to her, then looked at me with considerably more attention than before. 'I saw the films,' he said.

'I poisoned my mother because she was poisoning me,' I said. It was important to get this straight before it had time to go wrong. 'She was poisoning me with ideas and I poisoned her with powdered aconite. She wanted me to be her servant, and stay in her house and look after her, even though she was well able to do it for herself. She brought me up believing that I was living in a fairytale, and that one day a prince would come and that we were waiting there until he got through. He was very delayed. And then one day the last of my tutors quit. He handed me an atlas as he pulled his pants up on his way out the door. I've been here since then. They were going to insist I leave a while ago but the stars were all wrong for that, so I had to insist that I didn't and, of course, I paid too.'

He nodded, lifting plates in and out of the hot water, steam rising around him. 'Macy who does the cooking said you had the sight.'

'Anyone can. I grew up in a forest by myself,' I said. 'Like you.'

'I grew up in Austin, Texas,' he said.

'You grew up in Mirkwood.'

'You might have called it that in some kinda way. People like you say clever things like that. I see what you mean, but it wasn't that place.'

I was ashamed for a minute. 'Would you like to go back to the woods with me?'

The way he looked at me changed. I felt uncertain suddenly and I asked him, speaking much more softly, 'Have I been here a very, very long time?'

He shrugged, 'I don't know.'

'I mean it,' I said. 'You can be anyone you like.'

'No you can't,' he said. 'My dad couldn't. He couldn't be wealthy and he couldn't be well and he couldn't get work and he couldn't. And you, if that's true, you can't even get out of the house.' He said everything quietly, inoffensively, as though it was beyond contradiction and he had long since learned to accept it and wasn't bothered whether anybody else did or not.

He didn't mean house. He meant tower. 'But I am getting out. Next month,' I said.

'Sure,' he rinsed spoons under the tap and put them to dry beside my hand. They lay together, cupping each other, shining. 'When you get out I'll go back to the woods with you.'

'You wouldn't have to stay. You wouldn't have to do anything.'

'Okay,' he said wearily.

Nurse Driver came back inside, a cloud of stale smoke entering with her. 'So, goof-offs, what's new?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'He won't admit he's an elf. Though he is.'

'Yeah yeah,' she took my arm firmly and said to him on the way out. 'Still want a lift back to town?'

He nodded.

'See you at four.'

I really did not want Nurse Driver to take him home in her car but there was nothing I could do about it. She'd do her utmost to burn him alive.

'Check his ears,' I said. 'You'll see.'

Today on post-meds Oprah the specialist interviewed Legolas about his ears, and he explained their function and status according to postcolonial theory and the erotic Other. Oprah said they reminded her of Mr Spock's ears (at least she got that right and didn't start on about Dr Spock and the upbringing of children to strict schedules and exacting, if ultimately self-serving and flawed, behavioural norms). She recalled the myth that Mr Spock's ears were really pointed because the actor had got his head caught in a dough-kneading machine when he was a child.

'But he *did*,' the guest expert said seriously.

Oprah made her tolerant, understanding face and patted Legolas on the knee.

In the evening I studied the newspapers, particularly the date. If it was 2007 then I must be forty-five years old and I had been in this place for over twenty years which is much longer than I'd originally planned.

I put my Pyrex splinter into the false drawer the next morning as I sat and opened my mail. There were my contracts, which I signed and sent back by return, and there was another set of photographs.

Nurse Driver had too much leopard print in her wardrobe, but I saw that Nappy

the Bus was looking quite the swell these days with his designer jeans and his lounge jackets. He clearly still enjoyed a night out and a few cocktails, as most of the shots showed him laughing or digging Driver in the ribs with a swizzle stick, his toes balanced on the chrome ring of a high bar stool with the dainty precision of a master sailor.

My other black and whites depicted Legolas standing around town, at Mack's diner, at the laundrette and at the bus stop, huddled in a reasonably unsuitable waxed coat which couldn't have done much to keep the cold out, (though they say elves don't feel the cold like we do, but still) and one of those strange knitted beanie hats that look like tea cosies where the knitter forgot to leave a hole for the handle and spout. Very grainy, and much blown up, there was one of his face pressed sideways against the glass of a car window somewhere. No hat. The window was steamed up but his head was wiping it clean enough to see the outline of his ear mashed to the glass.

I used a ruler and calculated the angles. Not like Mr Spock's for sure, with his dashing uplifts and quizzical expressions—why do aloof, cold intellects and pointed auricles get together all the time in this universe?—but good enough for an expoisoner. I supposed that human normal must throw up a few pointy ears now and again, and there were always enough dough-kneading machines left carelessly around for curious children to fall into and make up the numbers. In any case, whether or not I chose to waste my life in this pointless building as Driver's pet, something like that really shouldn't wind up in here, wasting its sweetness on institutional dinnerware.

I couldn't decide whether Driver's massively undeserved happiness with Napoleon pissed me off or not but finally had to put it all aside. Even annoying shits have their fun and there was nothing to be done about that. I'd dealt with my mother and the responsibility for the rest fell squarely to the shoulders of their own nearest and dearest. Meanwhile, with the luxury of a guaranteed chance at serious injury safely stowed in the nightstand against a sudden turn for the worse in circumstances, I could afford to contemplate my exit interview. With gritted teeth I gave Driver and the other nurses the slip as they went on the evening tea round and made my way to the library. It was extremely difficult to stuff The Rand McNally 2004 Road Atlas under my robe—the corners kept snagging the stretchy towelling—but I got it back to my room undiscovered.

I read it thoroughly before returning it and, using the ruler again, calculated exactly how far it was from the institute to my house. I was surprised to see just how close we had lived to the great waterfall Niagara all that time, and me never knowing. I imagined fourteen million litres of water per minute going over that drop for the last twelve thousand years. With that kind of energy, what had my mother expected?

From the brown envelope that my lawyer had taped into the Jiffy bag containing my contracts I counted a thousand dollars and began to parcel it out into different, exact, portions.

Dr Lucy said at the conclusion of my assessment that we would do a trial period of reducing medication.

After lunch Driver came to my table. She took great care loading my dishes onto the tray to take away, making sure I saw the flash and fire zipping from the new solitaire diamond on her finger. It was a real hose-ripper. 'Ready for the day room, Cinderella Rockefeller?'

I slipped her twenty dollars. 'I have a date in the kitchen.'

She stuffed the bills up the tight cuff of her sweater. 'What's with you anyway?' she grumped as she patted me down, checking for cutlery. 'The Gap. Hair. Eyebrows. It's like you're going somewhere. I even heard Lucy saying you're to cut the tabs. But we've been here before, little princess. You're going nowhere. Remember that. And I'm watching you.'

'I'm watching you,' I assured her. We turned into the fire staircase for our routine illegal trip downstairs, 'And for every time you piss me off from now on I'm taking a zero off your tip.'

She shoved me through the flapping doors into the kitchen with great confidence. 'Hey Nimrod!' she called out to the slight, be-aproned figure at the sink. 'Your number one fan is back.'

He half turned, his expression bland as day-old porridge. 'You got dressed.'

'That's how much she likes you,' Driver said, sliding her butt up onto the prep table in her usual position, taking out her Luckys and tapping the cash I'd given her into it. 'Get away from that drainer,' she snapped at me as I went closer. 'And keep your lily-whites where I can see them.'

'Don't you find her annoying?' I asked him.

He made the whole set of ambivalent postures in one go; shrug, moue, head-shake, body twist, but in miniature. The right corner of his mouth sidled up for a moment. He lifted a plate up and steam billowed off it, white soap dripped from it. 'After three thousand years?'

'Oh, not you too,' Driver groaned.

He picked a knife out of the sink and held it up. It shone under the lights. He twirled it in his fingers, conjuror style, flipping it around like a propellor blade. It moved with speed and precision along his hand and back again. Driver couldn't see it, only the bubbles that flew off its ends and spattered away. He set it down and went back to washing.

'You must have been all over,' I said. 'Where did you go?'

'All over,' he agreed. 'I like America. It's where we landed when we missed Valinor.'

'Jesus,' Driver said. 'If you're going to start adding to her problems we'll have to go.'

'It was very quiet in those days,' he added, immersing a roasting tray in the water. 'Why did you kill your mother, Lizabet?'

'For the love . . . ' Driver began.

'She lied about everything. She wasn't my mother. She was somebody else. It's in the file. I was adopted, when she was still a perfect New England wife with a holiday home in Martha's Vineyard and two more in the Hamptons. The family was something to do with cod fisheries. They had a lot of ships. I only read about this after the trial. She and I lived alone in the house up in the forest. Everything was delivered. She used to pay people not to come up all the way. There was a trail stop a mile out from the house, a depot made of concrete to keep the bears out, and we got everything out of

there. She didn't want anyone to come up and see us. Only my teachers, though they never stayed. She was always firing them for talking about us, or she thought they were talking about us, but that only happened after I murdered her when they decided to cash in, seeing as all her penalty clauses were toothless compared to the amounts that the magazines were willing to offer for an inside line. I had lessons in everything while I was there. She wanted me to excel because she wasted her education and got taken for a ride by some man who got her to leave her first husband and then was going to marry her, but she found out he was only a con guy who wanted her fortune, and not long after that her parents were killed in a boating accident near the Cape. Well, that's what she said and they found him—M Manfred Arthurs, his name was—and he was a salesman, life-insurance, and he testified in court to say that she was right enough in her mind when she left him. So she got nothing. She told me that my father was a knight protecting a big kingdom and that we had to stay hidden because we were under a spell. All of my occult education came from her; witchcraft, ouija, cartomancy, casting of runes, clairvoyancy with the crystal sphere, the mirror, and through water, and the herbal of course. She said I was her daughter and that one day the spell would be lifted and we would come into the world as queens. She told me that there was only one island, where we lived, and the rest was ocean and the ocean was full of beasts and . . . '

'That's enough, chatty lady,' Driver said, yawning. 'I need a smoke. Get back from there like I told you. Although, if he keeps on asking questions you can stab him, why don't you? Then you'll lose your bet, Bet.' She yawned, and a wisp of vapour came out of her mouth, grey and sulphurous.

I watched her leave with deep satisfaction.

'Why did you stay in here?' he asked, continuing with his task slowly. He didn't look at me. Just washed things.

'Nowhere to go,' I said, rubbing my arms because the breeze from the open door was cold.

'Your house.'

'It has damp,' I said and he nodded. 'I don't mean to live there after,' I added to him. 'I just want to see it one more time. You will come with me? Like you said?'

'Sure,' he said. 'I like the woods.'

'Do you have a bow?'

'Yes,' he said.

'I don't think there will be many bears,' I said. 'But you never know. Can you drive?'

'Sure.'

'I can't drive. I'll get us a car. A new one. It can be yours. What's a good car?'

'A Porsche 911 GT2,' he said without hesitation.

I knew he'd know. 'I'll get one of those. And you can have the house. If you want it. But you'd better sell it. It's no place to live. Too big, too old and really dark inside. And my mother may still be loitering on certain planes. She never knew when to quit.'

'Maybe we'll just take a look at it,' he said and gave me a patient smile.

Driver came back and patted me down again. 'Open,' she said and stared into my mouth. 'Okay. Let's go for a nice siesta. We can come back tomorrow or some other day. You want a lift, mighty prince?'

'No thanks,' he said. 'I have to go early.'

Driver snorted and held my arm. 'Not so fast,' she hissed in my ear. 'Not so fast little lady.' The powerlessness inherent in the edge of her voice was sweet to me.

Whump, said the doors at our back.

I was reasonably sure that the window glass through which the elf's ear had been visible was not the window glass of Nurse Driver's Chevrolet. I was proved correct when the PI sent me the details. It was a long-distance haulage truck which had been parked at the mountain layby where a lot of drivers take rest breaks just outside the town.

I wondered what the inside of a truck was like, and spent the rest of the evening searching magazines for pictures and details of Porsche 911 GT2s. They looked nice. I liked the silver ones the best, and Oprah agreed with me, even though she endorses Pontiacs.

When I opened the drawer to put my new car pictures and the PI's letter away in my secret place I found a carving knife lying among my underwear. It had not been there before.

I held it in a new pair of Victoria's Secret crimson silk pants and watched the soft lamplight streak along its newly sharpened blade. Clearly this afternoon had proved too high a dose of fantasy for Nurse Driver, but now disposing of her return gift would be tricky indeed as she knew all my hiding places, save the false drawer, and that was because it hid a space so thin as to be all but indistinguishable from nothing. Certainly not big enough to hide a knife like this.

As ever I took solace, refuge and security in the sweeping curves of constant motion. Holding the knife I went to the window, opened it the maximum possible inch and manouevred the knife between the bars. I dropped it into the night. There was a shrubby bank beneath my window some two floors down. I was concerned in case I hit a wild animal by mistake, a squirrel or a chipmunk maybe, but the silence was reassuring.

I got out my Pyrex splinter. I held it up to the light and stared into its aggravated crescent shape. The fey will leave a sickle if you ask nicely enough and pay with blood. As with all such objects it was hard to differentiate its potential for damage to an actual probability. It promised to reap only one thing: trouble.

I had planned to keep it close to me in case I needed a reason to stay because I was wrong about Greenleaf there, or in case I needed to swallow it when I got out of here—if the sky proved too deep and the mouth of the world too fierce. Now, with scarcely a second thought, I sent it the way of the knife with a firm flick of my finger.

In the knife's place I put one of the photographs of Nurse Driver with Napoleon boning her parts. It was very difficult to say whether such a dose would be high enough to cause a mortal failure or would simply enrage a determined opponent, but one cannot wait forever in the vain hope of certainty.

It was gone the next morning after breakfast.

I got myself dressed and washed, ready to see Dr Lucy, when Driver appeared. There was no nonsense or boredom in her expression now. She closed my door and leant on it, holding the handle behind her back in both hands. We stared at each other for a few moments, taking measurements.

I could almost see the cogs turning as she

tried and failed to grasp the extent of my capabilities outside the institute and her likely ability to foil them. They were, of course, too big, and Driver was at least smart enough to see that. Finally she took a deep breath and I saw that her minor pleasures of torment and the desire to maintain her current social position were much stronger than her need to keep hold of me. Demons are all the same. 'All right. What will it take to get rid of you?'

'Be sure I leave here next Wednesday morning without incident while you continue as usual,' I said. 'If you do, I will give you all the pictures. If you don't, I will post them on every bulletin board and website in town, I will paper the streets with them and I will have you and the police chief audited by every tax and insurance inspector from here to Havana. Here,' I held out my hand. On it was a small kid's rubber spider, one of several I kept to annoy her because she hated spiders, even toy ones, and I used to put them around so that she would find them when she was sneaking through my things. 'A charm to prove my good intents.'

She gave me a sour look. 'Shove it.' But she nodded. 'And what if Lucy doesn't let you out? She's got a judge to convince, and they're not in your pay, unless I'm very much mistaken.'

'I won't hold it against you, though I expect you to carry on being very nice to me if the worst happens.'

Driver rolled her eyes and her left hand strayed automatically to her pocket, feeling for the pack of cigarettes. I'd never seen her lips so thin, her broad face so tight. 'Don't fuck it up this time,' she said and went out, without even offering to take me up to the day room. Then, in parting, she opened the door again just as she was about to shut it and said, 'Your kitchen boy quit this morning. I thought you'd like to know.'

'Why?' I asked, though I was reasonably sure that I knew.

Her voice was sweetly practical, as though she was telling a snippet from the daily news that she thought might interest me. 'I don't know, maybe he was getting pressed for payment by the VD clinic downtown. I don't believe he had medical insurance.' She closed the door with careful, quiet exactitude.

You never can tell how poisons will affect the individual. Some people have high natural resistance, up to a point, then suddenly fade. Others keel over with the merest sniff. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger but oh, we never know where the brink lies for sure.

Driver came on my last morning to give me my tablets in two large plastic bottles for self-administration—no more idiot trays with the days of the week on them for me.

I gave her a shoebox, replete with ten plastic insects, two rubber spiders, a strip of sealant, a brown envelope with most of the pictures inside it (all well covered in my fingerprints), and a pack of Luckys. I left a couple of the photos in the false drawer, just in case the next patient who came along might find them useful. It never hurts to give a little to the gods. Especially when you're on a roll.

'I guess this is it then,' Driver said as she walked with me down to the reception desk—as far as I had been in two years, since the last time I stuck a butter knife a quarter inch through the damp energy field and solid thigh fat of a compulsive gambler.

Driver smiled broadly as we both looked out through the glass doors where the gravel driveway stretched to the road under a grey and soulless sky. Trees and the sulky shape of the hills blocked out the view of the town below us and everything else as well. Aside from the staff cars, and the day-bus which took the outpatients to and from the town, there was nobody and nothing around.

'I guess so,' I said. I was gripped by so much fear that I could barely make myself pick up the pen she gave me.

I signed a lot of papers and then my lawyer arrived in her blue cabriolet and we shook hands and dealt with yet more formalities and a final talk with Dr Lucy in the peculiar informality of the visitors' coffee lounge. Every so often I looked out over the driveway. Driver watched me and smiled sympathetically, sweetly, enjoying every second of my terror.

'So, will you be staying with relatives or friends?' Lucy asked me as we were closing.

I shook my head.

'Well, I hope you have somewhere nice to stay,' Driver said.

A sleek, beautiful silver grey car turned its alloy wheels in the weak light outside.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'My ride is here.'

I crossed the gravel as lightly as a feather. The passenger door opened for me and I threw my bag in the back and sat down in the ineffable strangeness and power of its interior.

He smelled of Dior as he leaned across me and clipped my safety belt into place. His smile was as gentle as I remembered, his hair braided like in the film. He set his hands on the wheel, 'Say the word, Miss Elizabeth.'

'Everywhere.' I said.

We stood at Niagara Falls, on the viewing point on the Canadian side. The water's hypnotic flow piled on below us in an endless cascade. Our feet were on a metal grid, like a pencil sketch of some more substantial landscape waiting to be filled in.

'So big. So fast,' I said.

Why does one always only manage to say such banal things for the wonders of the world? I watched the beanie hat and the truckstop photographs float down, tossed this way and that in the turbulent airs before they were lost in the roiling white spray, bubbles and rainbows below.

His empty hands hung from his wrists and vapour collected on his face.

I wiped a bead of it onto my finger and put my finger in my mouth. The world's tears are rare. They give Sight like no other object of power. Seeing is believing, of course. One drop is the ocean.

I had the house keys in my hand. In my mind I held the memory of the two of us asleep last night, like mice on the surface of our vast white kingsize bed in a franchise motel. We slept on the moon, as empty and distant: his hand in mine.

I had intended to throw the keys in the river, but the water told me to put them back into the post pack that my lawyer had given to me.

'This way,' I said and led him, unresisting, by the arm, the pack in my hand.

As we drank hot coffee in the shop nearby I took a pen out and addressed the pack to Nurse Driver. On the back of the day's menu I wrote the address of

my castle. I sealed it together with the keys.

'Don't you want to go to the woods any more?' he asked, watching me and reading upside down.

I glanced up into his young, handsome face and imagined his bare feet treading the oak floors of the old house I knew so well—every knot, every stitch, every useless pane and gewgaw of its magnificence in which true magic had never tarried for a moment. 'Not a bit. Do you?'

'I was never that much of a country boy,' he said, smiling his slow, Texan smile.

We posted the keys together, one of each of our hands on the pack as we fitted it into the mailbox. Then we opened out a map of the continent on a picnic table which had been placed thoughtfully close to the car park for people who did not like to be far from escape at any time.

I turned him around three times widdershins and put my hands over his eyes. He stuck his finger on the page and we both looked down. Spray from the falls spattered over us in a sudden gust.

'New Jersey,' he said, appalled. He looked up into the west. The sun was sliding down to the end of the sky, burning with a hot orange fire. He jingled the car keys thoughtfully and then lifted his other hand up. The wind snagged the map instantly and whirled it away towards the sun.

'Do you really have it?' his question was so quiet. 'The sight. Do you have it? This isn't all some trick. A lie?'

'Sight is the least of it,' I said. The map had simply vanished. Only the world was left. 'Sight is just waiting to see what the world wants to do.'

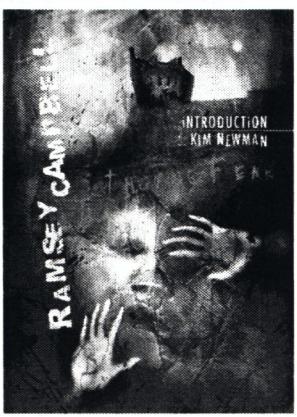
He held the car door for me, closed it after me, and then got in and started the engine. He made it roar with his foot. 'Have you ever been to the sea?'

'No,' I said, looking out through the windscreen with excitement.

'Me neither.' His smile was radiant.

'Let's go!' I said.

The world shifted, sped, became a blur.



Thieving Fear—A brand new novel by British horror maestro Ramsey Campbell.

As the papers arrived beside her Charlotte saw they were bordered in black. She was about to take them when the person whose bones were digging into her left side did, and she noticed that his hand was covered more with soil than flesh . . .

Slipcased Hardcover £50.00 [$100.00]
Hardcover £20.00 [$40.00]

The author admits that this story is probably as much an extension of a somewhat complicated graphic novel he did about ten years ago with DC Comics called Michael Moorcock's Multiverse, *in which he brought up to date (more or less) some ideas he'd had about Multiverse theory along with Chaos theory, together with a bit of a spelling out in the introduction. "And since the craziness is continuing," he adds, "I thought I'd explore the multiverse (mine at any rate) a little further by bringing together two sets of decidedly crazed individuals from two different sets of books—the End of Time stories and the Second Ether stories.*

If this seems self-indulgent, it probably is," he concludes with his customary (but totally unnecessary) modesty. "But I hope, at least, you enjoy one or two of the jokes."

Mr. Moorcock is still working on Lovers, *his memoir of Maeve and Mervyn Peake, which, he says, is at last coming into shape. "It proved painful and much harder than I thought when I proposed it." And then there's* Alsatia, *a new departure, of sorts, mixing reality and fantasy. "It's based on the sanctuary of Alsatia in the City of London, under the jurisdiction of the Carmelite monks. It will have four distinct themes and will be a bit like* Mother London *in structure, but probably easier to get into. It will probably incorporate the novel, a part of which has been published as* London, My Life; or The Sedentary Jew. *Publishing new Elric books in French with my friend Fabrice Colin is probably the project which most tickles me at the moment. Oh, and being on a record with many old friends which I learn was in* Mojo *magazine's top three compilations!"*

Sumptuous Dress: A Question Of Size At The End of Time

Michael Moorcock

Then like a python's sumptuous dress
The frame of things is cast away
And out of Time's obscure distress
The thundering scherzo crashes Day.

—John Davidson

Prologue

I have already informed the reader how, at the instigation of HM Government, a decision was made to send a third expedition to Mars, on suspicion that the Franco-Arabian alliance (the 'AFA') had mounted a secret flight of its own. Christened His Majesty's Interplanetary Ship *Queen Elizabeth the Navigator,* our aerial frigate was the first to carry arms. Our orders were to look for signs of our earlier expeditions, which had both disappeared; we should seek evidence of the AFA ship *Leo Africanus*, take photographs, map the planet insofar that were possible, and continue to do the work originally assigned to HMIS *Golden Hinde* in 2001 and HMIS *Erasmus Darling* in

2019. The *Queen Elizabeth the Navigator* was a superb ship of the very latest type. An up-to-date aerial vessel, she was, thanks to new methods of stabilising Edisonite, as capable of exploring the vast seas of interplanetary space as she was of negotiating the clouds of her native world. Driven by the very latest steam turbines, her fully rotating propeller nacelles made her capable of considerable maneuvering ability and enormous speeds through the atmosphere, while the Edisonite powered her across the void. A solid brassbound oaken hull enclosed gasbags filled with superdistilled safety-helium capable of unprecedented lift. The hull also enclosed the large gondola. We planned to establish an anchorage in the Mare Pius X and assemble a great semaphore mirror, to signal immediately back to Earth. Powerful telescopes were trained to detect our message and elsewhere massive radio apparatus stood by to begin communication between Earth and Mars when conditions were favourable.

Our expedition was headed by Air-General Sir Ralph de Courcy, AVC, already the hero of several earlier adventures and the first man on the Moon. Captain of the ship was Mustapha Khan and I was his first officer. My name is ALt Jack Chance. My father was Captain John Chance of the *Golden Hinde*. I had promised my mother, still harassed by cruel creditors, grasping relatives and malicious gossip concerning my father's honour, to find him and, if he lived, return him to her side. To myself, I swore to clear his name or die in the attempt.

Leaving the Earth's atmosphere, we set off through space at an impressive rate, narrowly avoiding a vast meteor swarm which almost destroyed us. After several other hair-raising adventures, we approached the Red Planet's surface. All went relatively uneventfully until we were sailing towards our agreed destination, testing the atmosphere to discover when we could switch to our turbines. Slowly in descending orbit to the planet's surface. Our instruments at first suggested we were safe to switch, but suddenly registered opposite readings, warning us urgently to maintain our Edisonite engine. The gauges became hopelessly erratic. Then, as we drifted helplessly over the planet's South Pole, our steering mechanisms refused to respond, yet the ship began to move very rapidly downward until it seemed we must crash into the strangely smoking icefield (proof that Mars had once, at least, supported carbon-based life).

Suddenly, to our astonishment, the erratically veering ship was dragged deep through the ice and our turbines came to life again just as we were about to crash into what appeared to be a bright blue ocean below. This ocean teemed with life! But it was life resembling that of our own Age of Dinosaurs. Then our instruments became erratic again. Even our compass became incoherent. As we were carried helplessly onward, our V screens intermittently revealed nightmarish flying reptiles in the sky and, to our further astonishment, lush jungle below! The most unusual quality of this bizarre flora was its colour. Everything was a shade of blue!

As we were debating this fresh phenomenon, our ship was drawn downwards to what must surely be collision with dense

jungle. It became clear to all of us what had befallen previous expeditions. Soon, it would surely be our fate to be similarly trapped, doomed never to leave the bowels of this alien world. As soon as we could land and tether our ship, we mounted an expedition, discovering to our astonishment that the 'prehistoric monsters' were less than two-thirds of the size they had been on Earth and that the local Tyrannosaurus Rex, for instance, barely reached to the shoulder of a man of average height. This still made them terrifying adversaries, but possible to bring down with a good-sized hunting gun. When we eventually found the survivors of earlier expeditions, they were dressed like old-time frontiersmen in the skins of local beasts, a kind of rough-and-ready uniform, and my heart surged with pride when they announced themselves as 'Chance's Martian Foresters'. They were disciplined explorers and hunters and, of course, had been formed by my father when it became clear that they had no chance of escaping the blue innards of the red planet. They had seen the *Leo Africanus*, somewhere near the Martian equator, and had been in contact with both previous expeditions, though the *Darling* had experienced serious injury in an attempt to find the South Pole and break out through the thin covering of ice there. The remains of her crew, together with what could be saved of the ship, all occupied 'Fort Chance', named for my father, who was still alive, the hero and leader of the British settlement. They still sought ways of escaping the blue world and at least getting a message home. In this, they were somewhat hampered by the local humanoids, blue people whose menfolk were about the size of an eight-year-old boy and whose women were a little smaller. It was originally to deal with these that the Martian Foresters had been formed. There was also some talk of a theoretical means of travelling through 'the dimensions' and possibly getting back to Earth in that way. Scientists, who had travelled aboard both of our earlier ships, believed they knew a way of creating what they called a Martian Scaling Station, but most of us were skeptical. Our main efforts were spent on working out a way to reach the surface and use our existing communications tools to contact the Earth. Now read on:

1. A Social Contretemps Possibly in the First Ether

The Bronze Dahlia was not herself. Of late, she had very rarely been herself, but today she was unusually at odds with the kind of persona she generally favoured. As she stared pensively into the bottomless depths of Faustus von Austus's Grand Campion Sweet, a vast red and white hard pimpernel at present being licked almost to transparency by some exceptionally large water bison which, Faustus had assured everyone, were native to the original region. How he had managed to keep the water suspended in those shapes was his own secret. But even this mystery failed to engage her keen intellect. She pondered the wisdom of arriving as the infamous Spinning Jenny. The rapid revolutions were making her a little ill and it was hard to concentrate.

"*Kroofrudi.*"

The Bronze Dahlia was surprised to dis-

cover she was not alone. However, it was a relief to stop spinning. She adjusted her appearance. Now none would fail to recognize her. Looking down, she raised a perfect eyebrow to quiz the little alien who leered back up at her. He was short, ugly and his turnip-shaped head revealed three pupils in a single socket.

She raised a second eyebrow. "Are you part of Faustus's installation," she wanted to know, "because, if so, I fail to see . . . "

"*Mibix*?" enquired the alien. There was something lascivious about this question.

If she had not been so tired from twirling, the Bronze Dahlia might have found it in herself to raise a third eyebrow. As it was, she had to rely on raising the two she habitually wore.

"How do you do?" She wondered from whose menagerie this dwarfish space-lecher had escaped.

"Ferkit?" he opined suggestively. In their socket his three orbs focussed on her admittedly elegant elbows.

With a certain reluctance the Bronze Dahlia manipulated a translation ring.

"Can I help you?"

"Any time you like, you delicious little slut," panted the pint-sized interplanetary Punch. "Flash those elbows at me again and I don't need telling twice when the traffic lights are ultra-marine." He placed a happy hand on her bewildered bottom.

At that moment, arriving to cast his melancholy eye on his monstrous confection, Faustus von Austus stepped with a gusty sigh from his black coffin-shaped aircar.

"Ah, fabulous Faustus! How pleasant to view your vivid vanities! I was admiring the magnificence of your comely comestibles, your craggy candy." She looked about her. "But your prospectus promised a setting sun."

His second sigh was of exceptional enormity. "I gather it has refused to set, most ironic of non-ferrous flowers. I fear it retains an unsolvable wobble. I am considering terminating myself and my monstrous creation in one quintessential conflagration."

The alien coughed discretely. "What flavour is it?" he enquired roughly.

"Eh?"

"This jelly you're on about. I don't want to be boring and all scientific, but I—that is, I was once—I happened to be talking to a fellow who was cook aboard the old *Crossed Ankles,* yeah?" The alien clearly expected them to know the name, but swiftly absorbed their blank expressions. "Anyway, he'd been here once in the old days, looking for recipes. That's how our scientists discovered that pineapple and jelly won't mix. Won't set. Something to do with the chemical make up of the fruit and the gelatin. Gone a bit quiet. Am I butting in on something?" He shared a significant leer between the two of them.

The Bronze Dahlia responded icily. "Where is your base? We must get you there as soon as possible. You are probably already missed."

"Let's hope not. I came off the *Wrong Way Home* a couple of gurks ago, the captive of transdimensional kidnappers or slavers or something, and thought while I had the chance that I'd seek political asylum. I'm from Lat. Heard of it?"

"I fear—"

"Wouldn't expect you to have. But, believe me, you'd grant me instant asylum if you had. It's not just the scummiest planet in our system, it's also the ugliest. I'm one of the most beautiful things on it. Or, I should say, from it?"

Faustus scratched his huge head. "You're not a time traveler, then?"

"Possibly."

"You're not sure ?"

"Well, see, when it comes to transdimensional travel . . . "

The Bronze Dahlia interposed. "It strikes me, sir, that you would know if you were from the distant past." She frowned prettily. "Perhaps, if we were to be introduced, some clue might come to us . . . ? I," she cleared her throat, then frowned again. "I am the Brass—no Bronze—Dahlia. And this is—?" Again she had a moment's pause. "This is Faustus von Austus, our Great and Glorious Dictator of Doom. And you are—?"

"Oh, you can call me Captain Kippers. Although . . . " His speech petered out. "Well, I'm from space, see . . . ?"

"How did you come to this world? There are so few people left out there, these days. This being, as you doubtless know, the End of Time."

"This world—" He paused. "Well, it's all wrong, see? By rights it should have crumbled to cinders aeons ago. Like that planet next to you."

"The one we turned to caramel and chocolate?" Faustus brightened.

The Lat shook his hideous head. "I think it's turned back again. We landed on it first. It's mostly red dust now. As artificially maintained as this one in its way. Our instruments went nuts. We were looking for a way in to the Second Ether, see . . . ?"

"The what?" asked Faustus, engaged at last. Like most inhabitants of the End of Time, he was forever seeking novelty. "Do what?"

"The Second Ether. We're now in what the old guys called the First. The Archetype. Judging by its age—" He became embarrassed. "Well, this comes as a shock if you're not prepared. Theoretically, there's a third, fourth and so on ethers. Nobody has any idea how many and it's hard enough moving between ours—this one—and the other—the second. It's all to do with the multiverse. And cats, of course. Then there's the Martian Scaling Station. Our cap—that is, we—we were looking for a way through to something—I don't know, more familiar . . . Then we bumped into this band of loonies—ever heard of the Chaos Engineers ?"

But he had lost them. They were fiddling with their translator rings, convinced there was something wrong.

2. Crisis in the Second Ether

Captain Billy Bob Begg curled a coruscating quasi-tentacle around her omniphone and stepped desperately on the General Call pedal. "Prof? Any luck?" There was little chance of the wire being intercepted anywhere outside the Second Ether, still controlled by the Famous Chaos Engineers. "Prof? We're running out of all the time there is! We're parked off Ketchup Cove and absorbing more scarlet than is good for us. We're expecting the Straight Arrows to break through at any minute. Apart from

our emergency magazine, all we have left in the tubes are three Kid Ory records, some early Billy Joel, a few flashy Nigel Kennedy Elgar sides and some eighties sixties covers. Hardly enough to stop them. They're massing at the Martian Scaling Station and it's pi to a hotpot they'll be through come Candlemass and gobbling up our resources like Eccles cakes—as they've gobbled their own! Prof, do you hear me? What's happened to that backup you thought Captain Otherly had found ?"

"Gone, both of 'em." The voice of the hirsute genius was a distant, baffled crackle. "The storm threw Otherly off course the moment he found the scaling station and there's no telling where they've gone."

"Can't you track 'em, prof?"

"What? Into the First Ether? I couldn't do it without some co-ordinates and there's not a whisper, not a brack. The only thing I could do is to bust through into the First Ether myself and look for them somehow . . . "

Silence from Professor Pop.

"He claimed he carried our only chance of survival!"

"True."

The faintest hum and whistle sounded through the receptors and Captain Begg switched her amplifiers to max, for she had recognized the signal as her old lover's. "Is that you, Buggerly?"

"Can you hear me?" came the captain's far-away tones. "Is anyone out there?"

"It's Buggerly! Beloved!" She gasped and recovered herself. "And lost, by the sound of it. Buggerly, my beauty! Did you get the ordnance we mentioned? State your position and name your course, if you can. Don't worry. Old Reg can't pick us up this far out."

"I won't say that's still true." The Yorkshireman's vibrant brogue broke over the 'phone. "For I'm somewhere in t' First Ether with half a score of super-tempered Straight Arrow ships on me tail. Not much longer before they make a breakthrough—and then we're all plucked, gutted and oven-ready, if you catch my drift. Well, any road, I snared the answer to our predicament. Or thought I had. I ran across some of those brigand-musicians we'd heard about, right? Rather than tons of heavy records, I reckoned all we needed was a few of these Lat blokes."

"They were still in the First Ether, then?"

"Trying to find a way through to t' Second. 'I'm t' very lad to help thee,' I told 'em. Stupidest bloody decision I ever made. All they'd let me have was one bloke. And I had to pay through t'nose for him. They didn't trust me. Once I'd told them how old Reg had enclosed the First Ether within a massive buckyball, they reckoned they could follow me through, via t' Scaling Station. Turned out nobody could find a way. So I'm buzzing around like a pricked balloon. What's more, I've lost the musician, all the shells I was going to buy records with, *and* I'm hanging off a husk of a planet that looks bleak as Dent Weaver's dinner. That is to say," at her puzzled silence, "not a scrap of meat nor vegetation to be seen. Or so me instruments tell me. Yet the weird thing is I'm being informed by me own senses that it's lush and rich and crammed to t' core with life. Ever come across that, BB, me dear?"

She took a ten-fingered appendage to

her glorious skull and drummed on it in surprise. "Only legendary Earth, the so-called Syren Planet. Well, you must do your best, sweet Buggerly. You are our hope of salvation. Not for the first time, I should add. Though in the past there has been a little more leeway. Now it's a matter of minutes before we're sucked into their filthy vacuum and become manure for their massive egos. For fear of repeating myself, we're in a spot tighter than a stockbroker's rectum. Can you hear the sound of those soupy strings?"

"That's Old Reg and his ships warming us up for a blast of Sullivan sans Gilbert. Lost Chord by t'opening bars and that means no quarter."

"Greed personified," confirmed Billy Bob. "You can't mistake those fiddles." She shuddered. "What's your plan?"

"Hardly a plan," responded the bluff skipper of the skies, "more like a desperate tic. I picked up some sort of virus coming through t' Martian Scaling Station and caught me Lat sooner than I thought. Then, when I tried to come out t'same way, I couldn't do it. Lost me Lat, too. Now we're all trapped in t' First Ether with no collateral and no bloody musician. He gave us the slip over this waste-heap. I shall have to make planet-fall and hope I can find our nasty little Last Chance down there somewhere. All logic is against it, but I'm going to take *The Mandelbrot Anomaly* onto her surface and do an old-fashioned visual scan. Don't laugh, pards. I know you're all listening in. If anyone has a better idea, let me know!"

In response there came only the whispering of a quasi-infinite multiverse.

Then Billy Bob Begg sighed her assent.

Buggerly Otherly twisted a knot on his keyboard. "Right we are, Our Gretchen," he addressed his loyal first mate, "get her ready for physical flat-landing. We're going to do one."

With astonished terror in her lovely eyes, Our Gretchen flipped a thousand toggles and steadied the old girl for the slow go down.

"And here we are."

3. A Bit of a Scuffle at the End of Time

'See, we were looking for the mysterious second universe and this Captain Otherly he was actually *from* the second universe. So at last we were on our way. And in time to help save our new host. That's when we realized he needed us more than we needed him and Captain Mubbers decided to ask for cash on top of the booking." The Lat's translation pill, slipped to him by Faustus von Austus, was working if anything too well. He took a breath and almost continued:

"Cash?" The Bronze Dahlia drew her beautiful brows together. "The name's familiar, but . . . "

"Dosh. Mazoolah. He told them nothing was doing under fifty billion."

"Fifty billion singers?" Recalling where she had heard the name.

"Smackers."

"*Really*?" Faustus von Austus showed renewed interest. "And this Otherly was one of the smackers. What did he say?"

Now the Lat looked puzzled. "Um, well, he said we'd have to wait till the banks opened."

"So you waited?"

"For a while. By the fifth day we suspected the whole thing was a scam. We were on the point of leaving when Otherly throws some sort of hallucinogenic grenade. When I came out of that bit of ga-ga gas, there was only me. I was in a sack, and no shipmates evident. Shanghaied!"

"You were in this second universe?" The Bronze Dahlia wondered vaguely what he tasted like.

"I thought I was. When I realized I'd been drugged and that nobody else was with me, I got out of the sack while he was concentrating on his controls. Funny sort or ship. I found some sort of safety raft. It took nothing to work out the controls and I was out of that gibbering weird ship in an instant."

"When did you realize you were still in the First Ether?" This was a fresh voice at their conference. The Lat turned and saw two more of the tall humans. One was male, with a long, rather amused face while the other was female and pinkly sexy almost in direct contrast to her companion's aloof allure. "Forgive me. I noted we had a visitor and couldn't resist . . . I am Lord Jagged of Canaria and this is my friend Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun." She simpered beneath her strawberry blonde do and rustled her pleated silks. She had broken off a piece of unlicked Grand Canyon and sucked it prettily. "So pleased to meet you.?" She checked out the Lat. "Aren't you cute?"

"Hold that thought," declared the little monster, rubbing his elbow significantly. "Pretty much immediately," he told Jagged. "When I hit the roof!"

"The roof?" Lord Jagged frowned.

"Yeah, the buckyball they put around this universe. You can't get out without knowing more than I do. That's when I wished I'd stayed with the kidnapper. I took the only course possible. I went to sleep. And woke up surrounded by—" He waved a stubby hand. "Tasty. I always knew places like this existed."

"Like what?" suavely enquired Jagged.

"A candy planet. It's in our scriptures. We thought it a myth. I wish the rest of the lads were here."

"So do I," confirmed Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun eagerly. "Where do you suppose they've got to?"

"Possibly over there," Lord Jagged waved a handsome hand.

They all turned to look. Some distance off, shimmering blue, they saw a rather lush stretch of jungle.

"Who on earth made that?" enquired Faustus von Austus a little jealously. "Can't they see how it clashes with my candy?"

"Blimey!" exclaimed the brigand-musician. "We're back in Mars! Whoopee. The others have got to be here somewhere!

"Mars! Mars!" And with another joyous yelp, Captain Kippers dashed into the bright blue jungle and disappeared.

"After 'im thou daft buggers!" came a voice from behind.

Standing beside a rather strange artifact which seemed constantly to be changing shape, hue and size, a large, red-faced man with aggressive mutton chops pointed in the direction of the fleeing Lat. "That were supposed to attract his curiosity, not offer him a bloody hiding place."

"You must be Captain Otherly." Extending a hospitable hand, Lord Jagged

stepped forward to greet the newcomer. "Still adrift in the wrong Ether, I see."

4. Getting a bit desperate in the Second Ether

"Billy Bob to Pop. Billy Bob to Pop. Are you out there, Prof? Things are getting sticky at this end of the Original Insect. We've lost our beloved Otherly. He's not responding to any omniphone signals. Meanwhile, that wicked Old Reg, Mrs Old Reg and General Frank Force are packing the spacewaves with every kind of poison. We barely resisted some synthetic Solieri by breaking out virtually every emergency Stevie Ray Vaughan we had. But if they bring up anything like that again, we're pretty surely done for. We can hit them with that Decembrist file, but it's probably corrupted. They'll be in through one of their fissures and gobbling up what's left of our energy before we can say 'We'll always have Paris'. Is it goodbye to all that? Answer me, Pop, darling, or fold into yourself forever. We've run out of time at last."

"Come in, Billy Bob, pet. The prof's here, but nothing's looking too good from where I'm sitting at my omniview. The buckyball's likely to be torn apart by some frightening activity. A massing of buck-folded super-carbon hulls growling with the most vicious kinds of linear logic. If they come through, we're decidedly done for. You can kiss the First Ether goodbye once they're out. They'll leave nothing behind except a massive hole—and we'll be the ones to fill it!"

"Anything we can do, prof?" There was controlled fear in her voice. She had always known this was the threat. Having consumed most of one universe, Old Reg and his people now cast their greedy gaze on a second.

"We need something funky to stop them." Professor Pop combed his white whiskers with a lively pink hand. "And we thought Buggerly had found that. Now all I can hope to do is use my Speedshell to slip down some fissure of their own creation and hope to get into the First Ether and out with whatever sounds might save us."

"A chancey one," murmured Little Rupoldo, not without a tinge of terror. "Those cracks are hard to track and harder to negotiate, even in a Speedshell. It's like firing a Winchester into soft toffee. But if it has to be done, we have the experience to do it."

"No telling whether we'll find Otherly or his catch, assuming he's recaptured it."

"Ouch," announced the Chief Chaos Engineer. "Hear that, prof? They've found another battery of 80s Broadway bombs. Every corrupted chord sequence known to musical wisdom is packed into those folded carbon calliopes and not a note without our names on it. Are we completely out of Sondheim? By the time they spring an entire score of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and another of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* on us, we might as well be eating ether. We're scuppered. Find Buggery Otherly, prof, or this will be the last time we ever whistle *Dixie*."

"Going in, boss," gritted the grizzled veteran of a thousand psychic wars. "Give me whatever Kingsize Taylor you can spare for cover."

And with a murmured word to his own Little Rupoldo to strip every control to basic mode, the intrepid Sage of the Second Ether drew on his orchestral gauntlets and stepped coolly into the cockpit of the throbbing Speedshell.

5. Blues for the End of Time

As Buggerly Otherly and the inhabitants of the End of Time raced in pursuit of the escaping Lat into the garish blue jungle, only Lord Jagged hung back. Captain Otherly had paused for scarcely a second after he had leapt from his ship and gone after the Lat. Thoughtfully, Jagged fingered his remarkable features and gave his attention to the general situation. Then he strolled over to *The Mandelbrot Anomaly* and knocked politely on what he assumed to be the hatch.

Meanwhile, the others had reached the jungle. Captain Otherly paused in the first clearing while they caught him up. "I suspect it's in our common interest to fan out and try to get him in a sweep," he suggested. "It's only a relatively small spinney, after all."

"Where did it come from?" Faustus von Austus wanted to know. "It's awfully well thought out."

Otherly rubbed a grizzled chin. "I had a few seeds," he said, "I'd planned to plant outside my little place in Blueberry Bay. But I can't see how anyone got hold of *them*. It is authentic, isn't it? Could be the original."

"Original what, darling?" asked Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun, wide-eyed.

"Martian Forest," said the captain. "We all know the tale of how they were forced to exist in the bowels of Mars until their scientists at last discovered the nature of chaos engineering. A means of shifting up and down the multiversal plates. It's they who first discovered that space is a dimension of time. It's where they hid the first scaling station. Who knows? Maybe it's still there and our little Lat's instinctively heading for it. Who could have brought it here? I don't think it was me."

"There!" cried the Bronze Dahlia. "That's him, isn't it?" A glimpse of a turnip head with one eye socket and three pupils. They all saw it through the undergrowth. "Is he lost, too?"

"Let's hope not. He could lead us to salvation. Of sorts," added Buggerly Otherly, again running after his escaped prey. "Hey, sir! There's a big bag of clam shells over here for you!" he called. But there was no response. Then:

"*Uurk! Ferkit! Mibix hawkquards!*"

Panting, Faustus von Austus emerged from a clump of indigo bushes. He held a wriggling Lat snug in his arms. "Here's our poor little fellow! Ouch!" Delighted, he dropped the snarling dwarf and inspected his hand. "I think he bit me! Is that a bite, dear Dahlia?"

But the Bronze Dahlia was helping Buggerly Otherly, who almost had the sack over the Lat's head before he had wriggled free and was off through the jungle again.

"Buggerly! Buggerly!" came a desperate voice, apparently from Captain Otherly's head. "We're as good as done for. We need that Lat or anything else you can send us. The Straight Arrows are massed to invade and all we have between us and doom is

some late Chet Baker! Where are you Buggerly, dear?"

Otherly paused. "Not t'first time a's been saved by bloody junky." He frowned in thought.

Another pounce, this time from Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun. A squeal of delight. A complaint and then a grunt of satisfaction.

"I think I've got him, everyone!" she called. "I caught him in the folds and pleats of my ra ra skirt. At least, I think it's a ra ra skirt."

From somewhere deeper in the jungle, Buggerly Otherly, gave a cry of satisfaction. "Hold on to him! I've found t' scaling station!"

"Sod it," came the Lat's muffled tones. "Have you really?"

"You can't fake t' old original SS," proclaimed Otherly. "Look at those waves. Those Edisonian structures." He emerged, grinning. A radiating ring of purple pulsed from behind him. "Now, you little bastard, get playing, or you'll never see t' Second Ether again. Or ever. Phew. That were a narrow squeak. Just in time!"

"Er, um, ah," said the Lat. "There could be a bit of a hitch here."

"Hitch?" enquired Otherly in a smaller than usual voice. He pointed. "Get blowing, or plucking. Or squeezing, or whatever else it is gets your instrument into attack mode." He hesitated, alerted by an expression in the Lat's rolling pupils. "That is an instrument, isn't it?"

"After a fashion."

"It makes music, right?"

"Some would say so." The Lat wriggled experimentally. "Of sorts . . . "

"What sorts?" Buggerly wanted to know.

"Well, cookery music, I suppose."

"Do what? You *are* a brigand musician aren't you?"

"I'm a brigand, definitely. And I work with a lot of musicians. They sometimes appreciate what I do."

"What do you do, Captain Kippers?" sweetly enquired Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun. "Darling?"

He blushed and looked shifty. "Well, I'm not a captain, for a start . . . "

"Fair enough." Buggerly Other displayed a cheerful equanimity. "But you can play that thing, can't you?"

"In my way. Actually, I'm the ship's cook . . . "

"And that is?" Indicating the bulbous instrument from which curved a long handle.

"I'd call it a pressure cooker, I suppose." The Lat blinked with a certain embarrassment.

"A what?"

"It cooks. Under pressure."

"So you don't play?" The Chaos Engineer spoke as one who sees the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse getting ready to make a stables out of his living room. "Even under pressure. In other words, this was all for nothing? I got hold of t' one bloody Lat in t' whole bloody universe who can't actually blow our antagonists out of the water?"

"There's my brother Hardstop," offered the false captain. "He's tone deaf. He was a stoker before he failed to hear the warning klaxon on his last ship. Now he's just deaf."

With a groan which impressed Faustus von Austus, Captain Buggerly Otherly buried his mighty head in his equally mighty hands. "I've let 'em all down now. It's t'end for t'Chaos Engineers!"

"Oh, dear," said the Bronze Dahlia in sweet disappointment. "Does that mean you're trapped here?"

"Possibly." He sighed. "But what it does mean is that Chaos is defeated. Law has us all where t' hair grows shortest and curliest. It spells something like t' end for t' glories of t' Second Ether and t' Famous Chaos Engineers!"

"You can always come and live with us, dear boy," promised Faustus von Austus. "A little temporal cul-de-sac where Law and Chaos are always in balance. Or nearly always."

Moodily, Buggerly Otherly transferred a humbled space-cook from Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun's skirts to his sack. The Lat went without a whimper and scarcely complained as the bluff Chaos Engineer swung the sack over his shoulder and began to tramp back towards the edge of the forest.

They were surprised to find, instead of *The Mandelbrot Anomaly*, a steaming metallic canister of some kind, with a tapered end and some very small observation windows let into its length.

"Where's *your* ship, captain?" asked the Bronze Dahlia. "And what would this newcomer be?"

"Pop!" exclaimed Otherly. "Pop! Pop! It's Pop, as I live and breathe! But where's my ship? And where's Our Gretchen?"

At that moment, that wondrously bearded face partly obscured by his omniphone, a beaming Professor Pop, accompanied by the bean-bald Little Rupoldo, burst from the Speedshell and, running across the rather sticky red and white landscape, embraced his fellow Chaos Engineer. "You did it, Buggerly my boy. What a plan! What an orchestration. What a wheeze!"

"What wheeze?" the puzzled Chaos captain wished to know.

"Why, your wheeze, of course," pronounced the delighted Pop. "Only a genius would have thought of it."

Captain Otherly sat down on his sack. There was little protest from its demoralized contents. "Do what?"

Professor Pop reached a hand to his omniphone and cranked up the volume. "It's working, Buggers, me old pal. It's driven 'em back and drained their tanks dry of audio-syrup. They used up every unreleased track in the *Princess Di Songbook*. They won't be trying to conquer the Second Ether for an eon or two! Listen, it's still coming over!"

And now they all heard it. A powerful, easily recognized voice pounded from the omniphone. "I was born in a black widow morn, before the devil broke the dawn . . . " It could have been the Stones themselves, down to the five-string guitar. And then, maybe for a moment, it was Robert Johnson. And it could have been the Who in their prime. Hendrix. It could have been, in fact, all the combined greatest blues and rock and roll in the world pounding out across the candied landscape, the pulsing jungle. And it was all of these and something else . . .

"Good heavens!" murmured the Bronze Dahlia. "I know who that is. I remember. It's—surely—it's—"

"It's Jagged!" cried Tootie Frootie Fun-Fun, and then giggled. "Or my name's not My Lady Charlotina. What do you think Werther?"

Faustus von Austus brightened and then sank into a long, delicious scowl of the deepest self-recognition. "Werther de Goethe! I remember! I remember! I have found myself and must prepare my lifeplan. Ah, how sad to be *moi!*"

And the Bronze Dahlia's perfect brow was clearing as she murmured to herself. "The Iron Orchid! Oh, I know the villain behind this plot. Where is he? Where is that playful Jagged?"

It was clear to most of them that they had been hoaxed again. Meanwhile Lord Jagged sang on, his powerful voice single-handedly driving back the invaders of the Second Ether.

An atmosphere of celebration spread across the End of Time.

"But where's Our Gretchen," Captain Otherly wanted to know. "And what's happened to my ship ?"

6. Finale at the End of Time

"Really, Jagged, my eternal love, how could you have played such a trick on us?" demanded the Iron Orchid after the great master of deception had stepped from his borrowed *The Mandelbrot Anomaly* to their considerable applause.

There was little doubt that Jagged was pleased with himself, being praised by his peers of both ethers. He had received their fullest possible congratulations on his performance. Not only had he provided his admirer with an outstanding concert, he had saved the day for Chaos (and possibly, for there are subtleties involved, Law, too). Meanwhile, with his encouragement, the Martian Foresters had found the Lat hiding near the equator of Inner Mars.

Everyone was enjoying the celebration. The Iron Orchid had recreated Inner Mars for the occasion, with the Scaling Station rebuilt to twice its old size in all its gleaming metals and precious stones, pulsing rather shyly in the shadows. Werther de Goethe had brought boiling masses of thunderclouds to the party which flashed and rumbled to the tunes of a thousand favourite tracks. My Lady Charlotina had created a great tent in which she, most of the Lat and some of the Martian Foresters now sported to delighted cries of 'Mibix' and 'Kroofroodi'. Lord Jagged enjoyed the admiration of Billy Bob Begg, Professor Pop, Our Gretchen, Little Rupoldo and others. He pretended to a humility which he clearly did not feel. "Nobody here ever asked me to give them a concert," he told Billy Bob, whose tentacles were curled girlishly around his waist. "So I was only too pleased to help out . . . "

"A prophet in his own planet and all that," murmured Our Gretchen. "Who knits your socks for you?"

Little Rupoldo, displaying just a touch of jealousy, enquired: "More importantly, Grand Master Jack, what did you do with that cook you found?"

"Kippers?" Lord Jaggers beamed rather self-importantly. "Oh, I have a friend at the Surrealist Sporting Club who needed a steady sparring partner. And they're short a night cook. I sorted that out."

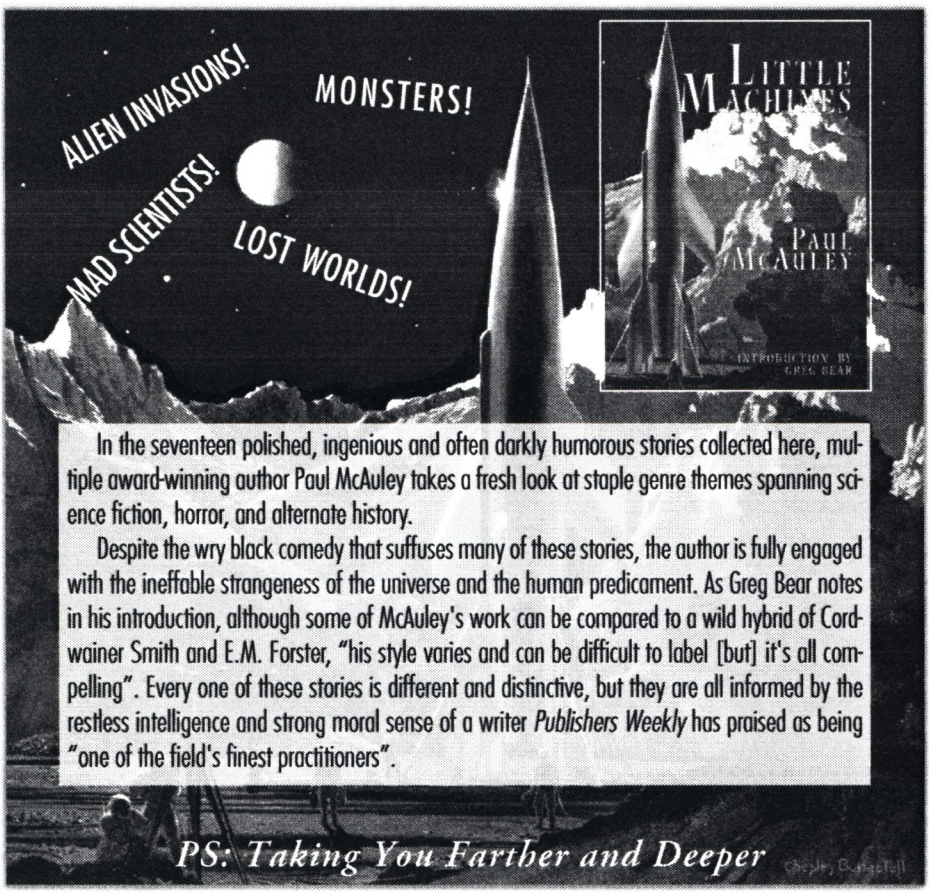
"But why, dear Jagged," the Iron Orchid wanted to know, "did you steal our memories and identities?"

"Steal, sweet, sweet blossom?" He de-

murred. "It was not my idea, but yours. You had complained how everything seemed so stale, that you were even tired of your name. You begged me to make our lives more interesting. Do you remember now?"

"Of course I do!" She blinked. "And how cleverly you organized everything. Even the Lat are happy, since eventually they will settle in Mars or return with the Chaos Engineers to the very ether they have been seeking for so long. The only tears shed today, I suspect, were by that stern old Old Reg and his nasty Mrs—who, you insist, now occupy a somewhat smaller universe than they initially hoped to conquer." She fingered the rather ostentatious jewelled ball at her throat. "And such a lovely present, too."

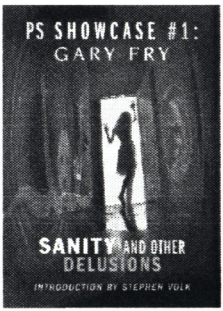
"To you, most delicious of flowers," declared Lord Jagged with a long and elegant bow, "I could offer only a universe."

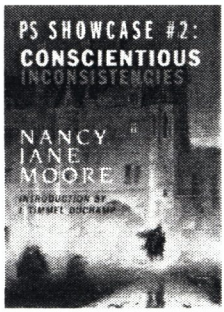


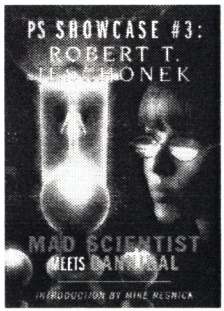
PS ANNOUNCES

SHOWCASE Collections

Novella-Length Mini-Collections By New And Up-And-Coming Authors







Gary Fry's work has always focused on the thing we think we know best, yet may know least of all: the meandering, labyrinthine mind.

In *Sanity and Other Delusions*' six cerebral excursions, everyday life is exposed for the realm of illusions it almost certainly is. Almost.

If tales of existence slipping awry are what provide your brain with convulsions, then venture into these stories of people on the brink. There's a fine line between sanity and delusions; indeed, the closer you look for it, the more you'll be begin to question whether it's there at all.

"Break all rules, including these." So advises Nancy Jane Moore in one of the stories in this collection.

Moore tends to break rules. As these stories demonstrate, she doesn't confine herself to any one genre or style. The stories jump among fantasy, science fiction, and slipstream—sometimes in the same story—and subvert history, the present, the future, and readers' expectations of gender roles.

However, this collection shows consistency in one area: the protagonists in these stories are women. Moore has written stories about men, and is noted for stories in which the main character is a combination of male and female, but she remains an unapologetic feminist who explores gender issues even when she's writing fight scenes . . .

Welcome to the world of *Mad Scientist Meets Cannibal.* Where else can you come face to face with a giant rhinoporcupine? Dream the future in a jazz tune from Hell? Find passion behind the lab coat of a smoking hot mad scientist?

Only in *Mad Scientist Meets Cannibal.*

If you're looking for something mind-blowing, you've come to the right place. In *Mad Scientist Meets Cannibal,* gonzo fictioneer Robert T. Jeschonek sets his wild imagination loose in five free-for-alls that set a new standard for storytelling.

You're standing at the door to a big new treasure house, waiting for a key. And Robert T. Jeschonek just handed you a stick of dynamite.

AND LOOK FOR NEW SHOWCASES OVER THE NEXT YEAR, FROM MARK SAMUELS, DOUGLAS SMITH, AND OTHERS

Paul McAuley, author of this essay and the novel excerpt and four new stories that follow, tells us, "I don't do much non-fiction these days, so when Pete Crowther asked me to include an essay in my contributions to Postscripts 15, *I applied Authors' Rule #1—write about what you know—and wrote about how I started out writing SF back in the days of Apollo, as distant to us now as the Great Depression was to us then. Since I was interested in the future from an early age, thinking about the past meant thinking about the futures we thought we might get, and about the ways in which they differ from the future we actually have. Would you trade in the present for one of those futures of days past?"*

How Was The Future For You? Or, A Brief History Of The Author

Paul McAuley

'All day long the trains run on rails. Eclipses are predictable. Penicillin cures pneumonia and the atom splits to order. All day long, year in, year out, the daylight explanation drives back the mystery and reveals a reality usable, understandable and detached . . . All day long, action is weighed in the balance and found not opportune nor fortunate or ill-advised, but good or evil. For this mode which we must call the spirit breathes through the universe and does not touch it; touches only the dark things, held prisoner, incommunicado, touches, judges, sentences, and passes on.'

—William Golding, *Free Fall*

In July, 1969, it seemed to me that the road to the future was as straight as a monorail line, as predictable as an eclipse. Harold 'white heat of technology' Wilson was prime minister. The long years of austerity that had followed the Second World War were slipping into history; London was swinging like a pendulum. The British prototype of Concorde frequently overflew my school, piloted by the inimitable Brian Trubshaw. Nuclear power promised unlimited electricity too cheap to be worth metering. A hovercraft service linked Dover and Calais. The first decimal coins were being struck in the Mint, replacements for the half crowns, florins, shillings, sixpences, thrupenny bits, and copper pennies, halfpennies and farthings of the l.s.d. system inherited from the Romans.

I was fourteen. I read science fiction to the exclusion of almost everything else, and watched every episode of *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, and *Thunderbirds Are Go*. I'd switched allegiance from the *Victor*, a comic that endlessly refought the First and Second World Wars, to *TV 21*, which promoted a future full of big machines and bigger explosions. My mind had been expanded by *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which (setting aside the stuff about monoliths) laid out the game plan for the thirty years: shuttles owned by Pan-Am; wheel-

shaped space stations in Earth orbit; giant Lunar cities; expeditions to the outer planets; brilliant, almost human computers; quietly competent scientist heroes. And now, July 16 1969, in the lunch hour of one of the last days of the summer term, I was sitting in warm sunshine on a grass bank of the school playground with several friends, listening to a transistor radio tuned to a live broadcast from Cape Kennedy, Florida, USA, the launch of Apollo 11. The future would never again be so hopeful, so full of promise.

But in the blue and sunny expanse of the sky which the Apollo astronauts left behind on their way to the Moon, a small cloud about the size of a man's hand was beginning to drift towards the sun.

I would not have admitted it then, in the summer of the Moon, but it's clear to me now that I inhabited two worlds. One a world full of dreams of a thoroughly scientific future; the other the quotidian world in which huge chunks of the past still permeated and shaped everyday life. I was an avid SF reader who dreamed of being a scientist; at the age of fourteen, despite some small talent in English composition, I had already committed to the science stream rather than the arts. But I was also a more or less ordinary schoolboy living in a rented and mostly unmodernised cottage some four hundred years old, at the end of a revolutionary decade that had not much touched the small Cotswold town where I had been born.

This was Stroud, Gloucestershire, to which my mother and her parents had moved soon after the end of the Second World War. Although it is surrounded by beautiful, unspoilt countryside and postcard-perfect villages built of honey-coloured Cotswold limestone, Stroud is not an especially lovely town, but rather an industrial centre that in the late 1960s was still coming to terms with the decline in the English wool trade on which it had largely depended for several hundred years—in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, much of the cloth used to make the uniforms of the British Army was woven there, and fields all around were spread with freshly-dyed scarlet lengths of cloth stretched on tenters—drying fames—by tenterhooks.

At age eighteen, my mother left Stroud for London, where she worked in shops in Oxford Street, then considerably more fashionable than it is now, and met my father at the Queen's Coronation. He was a sailor in the Royal Navy and often away, so my mother moved back with her parents after she married, was living with them still when I was born, and later rented the cottage next door.

There were four cottages in the row: small, stone-built, of no particular architectural merit. We lived in one of the middle cottages, No 3. It had a breeze-block extension at the back that housed the kitchen and small bathroom, but otherwise was nothing more than three rooms stacked one of top of the other. A door in the corner of the living room revealed not the expected cupboard but a flight of stairs up to the first bedroom; a similar door in the bedroom opened on stairs to the attic bedroom. The only heat was a coal fire

in the living room and a one-bar electric fire in the attic bedroom; the only sources of hot water the gas geyser that spat and rumbled in the bathroom and kettles boiled on the gas cooker; wallpaper in the living room blossomed with rings of mould and peeled from the walls. Four of us—my mother, myself, my sister and my brother—lived there, with my father an occasional visitor.

My mother, who had Standards, insisted that we were lower middle class, but we were really part of the generic Poor. Fortunately, I grew up before conspicuous consumption and instant credit had taken hold, so it did not occur to me that we were very different from anyone else. And in many ways my childhood was idyllic. At the back of the cottages was an acre of ground divided into four plots, including a small orchard, with a stream on one side and the sports field of a light engineering firm on the other, and the remains of a canal lock at the end. Beyond the canal was a single-track branch line railway, and then the brow of the first rise of Selsley Hill, which reared up some six hundred feet, the edge of a range of limestone hills that bent westward. The primary school I attended was halfway up the hill. Divided into Infants and Juniors, with just forty children taught by two teachers, it was almost exactly like the village school described by Laurie Lee (who lived on the other side of Stroud) in his memoir of childhood in the Cotswolds before the First World War, *Cider With Rosie*. Laurie Lee was the first writer I ever met, ensconced at a folding table next to the Pick'N'Mix section of the local Woolworths to promote a uniform paperback edition of his books—an early indication of the kind of glamour that an author might expect to enjoy. I bought my first books in that branch of Woolworths, from trays of imported pulps, and still own a few of them, including Clifford Simak's *All the Traps of Earth*, John Jakes's *The Asylum World*, and a collection of Theodore Sturgeon's stories, one of which, 'The Way Home', sang to me then, and still sings to me now, like no other.

Beyond the school, the village straggled upwards alongside a steep and winding road, giving out at unbounded common land that spread across the wild, windy ridge top. Cows and sheep grazed freely, there were old limestone quarries where the Devil had his pulpit and some of my schoolmates once unearthed an ammonite two feet across, and terraced hollows said to be the remains of Roman vineyards, and we children played there unsupervised and watched sheep being dipped in spring and in summer collected rose hips from the wild roses that sprawled on the stone walls of Dead Man's Acre, the only enclosed field on the Common, which were bought at sixpence a pound by a company that made rosehip syrup.

Just as the countryside, where I received the first quiverings of a lifelong passion for biology, spread beyond my back door, so the past surrounded me, not yet unquiet, not yet past. Ex-Great Western steam engines, 57xx 0-6-0 pannier tanks, still ran on the branch line while I was at primary school, and at the end of the school day I would hurry downhill so that I could stand on the bridge beyond the little station and see the little black engine blow dragon clouds of steam and smoke first on one side and then the other as it dragged its rattling tail of coal wagons beneath. My grandparents, born when Queen Victoria was still on the throne, owned a wind-up gramophone that played 78 rpm shellac

records and a valve radio whose glowing dial listed exotic stations like Hilversum, Helvetia, Athlone and Luxembourg, and my grandmother kept meat in a meat safe because she did not possess a refrigerator, and boiled up sheets and shirts in a 'copper' and plucked them from the water with wooden tongs and rinsed them and passed them through a mangle to squeeze out excess water. This was the world of my childhood, yet I looked forward to a bright, clean, scientific future. At the age of fourteen, I wanted to be a scientist, and I also wanted to be a science-fiction writer.

But there was a little cloud.

My mother and father's marriage had long before hit the rocks. A year after Apollo 11, I was sitting in the dim cool cave of the cottage's living room, watching my father walk out. I can't remember what he had just said to me. I was gripped by a tremendous inertia. There were raised voices in the kitchen, a human cry—then he was gone.

I did not see him again. It did not seem to make much difference. He'd been absent for most of my childhood and I told myself that I did not miss him. But divorce was not common, then. It was a cause of shame. Although we did not talk about it, it squatted like a toad at the centre of our lives. I retreated into my head, and into books. Fred Pohl once suggested that most science fiction writers seemed to have suffered a bout of serious illness in their childhood that isolated them from their peers. It may not be a universal truth, but I certainly felt isolated, then.

But even before my parents' divorce, I had always lived half my life in books. Whenever I was struck down by one or another of the usual childhood illnesses, my grandmother would supply me with copies of *Reader's Digest* from the stacks she kept in her bedroom—my first introduction to American culture. And at the age of nine, having exhausted the little seam of science fiction in the children's section of Stroud library, I received special dispensation to borrow books from the adult section. And while a psychologist might find it interesting that I began to write with serious intent about a year after the primal scene of my father's departure, it seemed to me a development of what I had already been doing at every opportunity in school.

I borrowed a typewriter from my neighbour and tapped out several short stories and attempted a novel I could not finish because I could not get the hero out of the laboratory storeroom where he had hidden himself. It was set on Mars, featured visiting aliens and a living spaceship I stole from an episode of *Doctor Who*, and wasn't any good. The novel I did complete, and entered for a Gollancz competition (I believe that Chris Boyce and Garry Kilworth won, while Salman Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus*, was plucked from the stack of entries and published separately), was little better, but at least proved that I could finish a work of fiction 70,000 words long. By then, I had bought my own typewriter, a sturdy Olivetti portable which I carried with me when I went up to Bristol University in 1973.

I was the first of my family to go to university, and I stayed inside academic life for more than twenty years. I completed a degree in Botany and Zoology (one of the people given an honorary degree at my graduation ceremony was Raymond Baxter, one of the BBC

commentators during the BBC's TV coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing), stayed at Bristol to do a Ph.D., working on plant-animal symbiosis, and continued my research in Oxford and Los Angeles, and Oxford again. I was a scientist, and by the time I was given my first permanent job, as a lecturer at St Andrews University, I was also an established science-fiction writer.

And so I divided my time between the world of science and the world of my imagination until in the summer of 1995 the black dog of inertia returned. I was finding it increasingly difficult to get funding for my research, and I was having trouble finding the time to write and to do all the work of a full-time university lecturer. That summer I announced my intention to quit, and a year later (in return for staying on for an extra term, I'd been granted several months' grace to put my research to rest) I became a full-time writer and moved to London.

The present is famously not the future of days past. The straight and gleaming rail to the future turned out to be an illusion. Yet I am typing this on a computer that although not as powerful as HAL is not only a thousand times more powerful than the computers that plotted the course of Apollo 11, but is also plugged into a vast global network of information; the human genome has been decoded and we are on the brink of the creation of artificial life; robots roam the surface of Mars, and a robot is swinging through the intricate orbits of Saturn's moons, and another is bound for the binary system of Pluto-Charon; a European space freighter has just docked with the International Space Station; and I am presently on Triton, in the middle of my seventeenth novel.

Some of the old futures made it through the flak of history after all.

At the beginning of their careers most writers believe that writing will get easier; later they find that it gets more and more difficult, that you have to work hard to avoid bad habits and recurrent patterns and strange attractors. You begin by competing with your influences, and you end up competing with yourself. But if you're lucky, you also find that you return over and again to one or two themes, deepening and enriching them. The central strand of my work is, I think, the reconciliation between ordinary human life and the vastness of space and time, the implacable hostility of most of the universe, and (to borrow a phrase from Thomas Harris) the loveliness that mocks our plight.

I am most often labelled as a writer of hard science fiction. Traditionally, that strand of the genre is impatient with ordinary human life, squirming like a twelve-year-old boy at the movies when a clinch between hero and heroine interrupts the action. Traditionally, hard SF simplifies human mess with its cold equations, reduces the complexity of human behaviour to Skinner box reflexes, and favours a flood of ideas and eyekicks over characterisation. But while I am keen on verisimilitude, on grounding every kind of wild extrapolation in what is known, in the transparency of the universe to human thought, and pushing ideas as far and as fast as they can go without shaking themselves to pieces, I'm also interested in human fallibility and foolishness, and in futures that are richly varied

patchworks connected to the present, rather than thought experiments that have somehow floated free of every trace of their origin, or friction-free futures where heroes occupy hero-shaped holes especially created for them.

When I was fourteen, I read every bit of SF I could find, but I gradually became more discriminatory, favouring writers who acknowledged the debt that the future owed the past: Brian Aldiss, Samuel R. Delany, Thomas M. Disch, Ursula LeGuin, and Michael Moorcock in the 1970s; later on, amongst others, John Crowley, William Gibson, Ian McDonald, Kim Stanley Robinson, Gene Wolfe, Jack Womack. That isn't to say that I don't admire attempts to get inside the chilly minds of posthumans who've shed their meat envelopes to better explore the involuted physics that underpin the universe's creation, or enjoy space operas that chronicle conflicts spanning centuries and light years. SF's primary theme is the universe, rather than universalisation of every kind of human experience. But as far as I'm concerned, human figures give depth and perspective to alien landscapes and vast timescapes; human life gives essential context to wild ideas; any future not somehow grounded in or connected to the past from which it evolved, second by second, is in danger of becoming a sterile exercise in contingent imagination.

One theory of consciousness that's currently gaining popularity is that what we think of our 'self', the inviolable centre of our thoughts and memories, may be a fictional construct. It seems that we make decisions several seconds before we consciously act on them; our much-vaunted consciousness may not be not the prime mover after all, but a construct got up to reconcile and explain actions of the various agents that make up our minds for us. Each of us may be a story we tell backwards, from moment to moment. And if certain parts of quantum theory are really true, the universe is a story we're telling, too, simply by observing it.

Both the world of science and the world of the human spirit have their own kinds of reality: at its best, SF is a bridge between them. Perhaps its famous sense of wonder is the literary equivalent of the oceanic feeling, the self dissolving into the world, that I first encountered one day in the summer of Apollo 11, when I lay on my back on the sun-warmed turf on top of Selsley Common and felt myself softly swooning into the infinite blue sky while the planet swung beneath me and somewhere overhead, here, there, never seen, a meadowlark sang its heart out, and I did not doubt that I would live forever and one day step out onto the sands of Mars . . .

"This is a chapter—the first chapter—from my new novel The Quiet War, *coming from Gollancz in October this year. It introduces the strangest and most innocent of five characters whose orbits weave in and out of each other like moonlets in Saturn's rings. It's been over ten years since I started writing stories set in the aftermath of something called 'the Quiet War', fought between major powers on Earth and city-states on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. The novel takes a year zero approach to that future history by chronicling events leading up to war, re-imagining a background that sort of grew unpruned in a bunch of diverse and very loosely connected stories, and making full use of data from those brave little robots that turned distant moons from mere dots to actual landscapes: a big thankyou to Pioneers 10 and 11, Voyagers 1 and 2, Galileo and Cassini/Huygens—I couldn't have done this without you."*

Extract from **The Quiet War**

Paul McAuley

Every day the boys woke when the lights came on at 0600. They showered and dressed, made their beds and policed the dormitory, endured inspection by one of their lectors. Breakfast was a dollop of maize gruel and a thimble of green tea. They ate quickly, each boy facing one of his brothers across the long table, no sound but the scrape of plastic spoons on plastic bowls. There were fourteen of them, tall and pale and slender as skinned saplings. Blue-eyed. Their naked scalps shone in the cold light as they bent over their scant repast. At two thousand six hundred days old they were fully grown but with traces of adolescent awkwardness yet remaining. They wore grey paper shirts and trousers, plastic sandals. Red numbers were printed on their shirts, front and back. The numbers were not sequential because more than half their original complement had been culled during the early stages of the programme.

After breakfast, the boys stood to attention in front of the big screen, flanked by their lectors and the avatars of their instructors. A flag filled the screen edge to edge and top to bottom, a real flag videoed somewhere on Earth, gently rippling as if caught in a draught. Its green light washed over their faces and set sparks in their eyes as they stood straightbacked in two rows, right hands starfished on their chests as they recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

The same rituals every morning. The same video. The same flag rippling in exactly the same way. The same scrap of blue visible for half a second in the upper left-hand corner, the blue sky of Earth.

One of the boys, Dave #8, looked for that little flash of blue every day. Sometimes he wondered if his brothers looked for it as well, wondered if they too felt a yearning tug for the world they had been created to defend yet could never visit. He never talked about it, not even to his best friend, Dave #27. Things like that, feelings that made you think you might be different from your brothers, you kept to yourself. Difference was a weakness, and every

kind of weakness must be suppressed. Even so, at the beginning of every day Dave #8 anticipated the fugitive glimpse of that scrap of Earth's sky, and every time he saw it he felt a flutter of longing in his heart.

Their lectors and instructors recited the Pledge of Allegiance, too. Fathers Aldos, Clarke, Ramez and Solomon in their white, rope-girdled habits; the instructors' faces floating in the visors of the man-sized, man-shaped articulated plastic shells of their avatars. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was instructors for ecosystem management, engineering, and sociology; the rest of the week it was theory of war, psychology, economics, and Hindi, Japanese, Mandarin, and Russian—the boys were already fluent in English, the lingua franca of the enemy, but some enemy communities still used the languages of the homelands of their ancestors, and so the boys had to learn those, too.

The instructors taught theoretical classes in the morning and the lectors taught practical classes in the afternoon and evening. Maintenance and repair of pressure suits, construction and deployment of demons and data miners, vehicle and flight simulators, immersion scenarios that acquainted the boys with every aspect of everyday life in the cities of the enemy. They practised martial arts, bomb-making, and sabotage, and trained with staffs, swords, knives, and every other kind of blunt and bladed weapon. The practise versions were weighted so that they would find the real thing easier to handle. They learned to strip down, repair, and use firearms in all kinds of conditions. In the dark; in a centrifuge that buffeted them in every direction; in extremes of heat and cold and combinations of rain, snow, and high winds in the weather chamber. Sealed in their pressure suits. Underwater.

Every tenth day they were led in single file down a long umbilical passage to the cargo bay of a shuttle that took them into orbit. Floating weightless in the padded, windowless tube, where each move had to spring from the body's centre of mass and every blow caused an equal and opposite reaction, they had to learn hand-to-hand combat and use of weapons all over again.

The lectors punished every mistake. Father Solomon, who supervised the classes in martial arts, was quickest with the shock stick. Dave #8 and his brothers exhausted themselves in bruising bouts of boxing, capoeira and karate to win his approval, but most of them suffered at least one shock in each and every session.

Sometimes the practical classes were visited by an avatar that wore a woman's face. The lectors treated her with a deference they showed no one else and were quick to answer her questions. Usually she said nothing at all, watching the boys work for a few minutes or an hour before her face vanished from the avatar's visor and it marched out of the gymnasium and returned to its rack. The woman's name was Sri Hong-Owen. The boys had long ago concluded that she must be their mother.

It didn't matter that she looked nothing like them. After all, they'd been cut to resemble the enemy, treated with the same gene therapies, given the same metabolic tweaks, the same so-called enhancements. But the enemy had been human before they had perverted themselves, so the boys must

have started out as human beings, too. And because they were clones, which was why they had numbers and why they were all called Dave (a casual joke by one of the instructors which the boys had incorporated into their private mythology), they must all have the same mother . . .

Although they had no proof that the woman was their mother, they had faith that she was. And faith was stronger than any mere proof because it came from God rather than the minds of men. She did not visit them often. Once every fifty days or so. The boys felt blessed by her presence, and worked harder and were more cheerful for days afterwards. Otherwise their routine was unvaried, dedicated to the serious business of learning how to kill and destroy. Learning how to make war.

In the evenings, after Mass, supper, and the struggle sessions in which the boys took turns to confess their sins and suffer the criticism of their brothers, it was politics. Videos crammed with motion and bright colours and swelling music told stories of courage and sacrifice from the history of Greater Brazil, showed how the enemy had betrayed humanity by sheltering on the Moon during the Overturn, how they had refused to return to Earth and help in its reconstruction but had instead run away to Mars and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn, how a group of Martians had later tried to attack Earth by nudging one of the Trojan asteroids, whose elliptical orbits around the sun crossed the orbit of Earth, into a collision course. The plot had failed, and a suicide mission of righteous heroes had exploded hydrogen bombs over the Martian settlements at Ares Valles and Hellas Planitia, and deflected the trajectory of a comet falling sunwards. The comet had been broken up by more hydrogen bombs and its fragments had stitched a string of huge craters around Mars's equator and wiped every trace of human life from the face of the red planet. But the enemy were plotting still in their nests and lairs on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn; were actively engaged in elaborating the greatest crime in the history of mankind by the anti-evolutionary engineering of their genomes.

The boys always knew which type of video would be shown because of the meal before it. Their favourite foods, sweet and swimming with fats, before history and heroes; gruel and plain boiled vegetables before crimes against humanity.

In snatched moments, they discussed the heroes they most admired and the battles they would have most liked to have fought in, and speculated about where they might go and what they might do after they had finished their training. Although war had not yet been declared, it was obvious that they were being trained to fight the enemy. Dave #27, who took extra instruction from Father Aldos on aspects of faith and the nature of Gaia, believed that if they were especially heroic they would be remade into ordinary human beings. Dave #8 wasn't so sure. Lately he'd been troubled by a simple paradox: if he and his brothers had been created by technology that was evil, how then could they ever do good? He brooded on this for a long time, and at last confided his thoughts to Dave #27, who told him that every kind of goodness can spring from evil, just as the most beautiful flowers may be rooted in filth. Wasn't that the story of the human race? Everyone was

Fallen. Everyone who had ever lived was tainted by original sin. Yet anyone could achieve Heaven if they atoned for their sins by cultivating their faith, praising God, and tending His creation. Even the enemy had the potential to be redeemed, but they refused God because they wanted to be little gods themselves, ruling little heavens of their own making. Heavens that were heaven in name only, and were doomed to become hells to spite their creators' mortal pride because they lacked the grace that flowed only from God.

'We are sinful in origin and aspect, but not in deed,' Dave #27 said. 'We do not use our talents to rebel against God, but to serve Him. We might even be a little closer to angels than other men, because we are wholly dedicated to serving the Trinity. Because we are holy warriors who will gladly and eagerly lay down their lives for God, Gaia, and Greater Brazil.'

Dave #8, alarmed by the shine in Dave #27's eyes, warned his brother that he was committing the mortal sin of pride. 'Our lives may be dedicated to the defence of God and Gaia and Greater Brazil, but that doesn't mean we're in any way like the heroes of the great stories.'

'What are we, then?'

'Soldiers,' Dave #8 said. 'No more, no less.'

He did not want to be special. It helped that he did not excel or outshine his brothers in any aspect of training or instruction, that he lacked Dave #27's love of discourse and argument, Dave #11's limber athleticism, Dave #19's skill in electronic warfare. He wanted to believe that lack of any kind of singular talent was a virtue, for differing in any way from the ordinary might foster pride that would lead him astray and make him fail in his duty.

One day Father Solomon caught him trying to examine his reflection. This was in the gymnasium. There were cases of weapons down one long wall—short spears and javelins, stabbing swords and long swords, fencing foils and bouquets of knives, staffs, maces, bludgeons, truncheons, halberds, and pikes, longbows and crossbows and their arrows and quarrels, as well as the grinding stones and bottles of mineral oil and diamond-dust polish and files used to keep edges sharp and metal clean. There were projectile and energy weapons, too. Ordinary machine-pistols, target pistols, and sniper rifles; glasers whose beam could cook a man from the inside out; tasers that fired clouds of charged tags; pulse rifles that fired plasma needles hot as the surface of the sun. Ranged along the far wall of the cavernous room were racks of armour, pressure suits, and scuba suits with integral airpacks. That was where Dave #8 sat cross-legged with his brothers, the components of the pressure suits they had dismantled during a routine maintenance exercise laid out in front of them.

Dave #8 was holding the chest-plate of his pressure suit at arm's-length, turning it this way and that. Its polished black curve gave back only distorted fragments, but there were no mirrors anywhere in the warren of chambers the boys called home and this was the best he could do. He was trying to see if there was something different in his face. If there was, then he would know that his suspicion that he thought differently was true.

He did not notice Father Solomon creeping up behind him on rubber-soled

sandals, thumbing back the snap that fastened his shock stick to his belt.

When Dave #8 came around, with an all-over cramp and blood in his mouth, Father Solomon was standing over him and lecturing the other boys about vanity. Dave #8 knew that he was in trouble so deep that the exercise Father Solomon gave them after his lecture, assembling their pressure suits in a howling snowstorm in the weather chamber, would not be enough to atone for it.

In the struggle session that evening, each of his brothers stood up in turn and denounced him ringingly, as he had denounced them in other sessions after they had committed sins of omission or commission. He could not explain that he had been trying to catch sight of hidden faults in the reflection of his face. It was forbidden to attempt to excuse or explain any sins, and he was conditioned to believe that every punishment was just. He was being punished because he deserved it.

The theme of Father Clarke's sermon at Mass took as its text Ecclesiastes, chapter one, verse two. Vanity of vanities, said the preacher; vanity of vanities and everything is vanity. It was a favourite of the lectors, but that evening Dave #8 knew that it was directed straight at him, a righteous X-ray laser shrivelling his soul.

Burning with misery and shame and self-loathing, he sat through a video that documented in gruesome detail the brute lawlessness and cannibalism that had swept over the great North American cities during the Overturn. He was certain that he had failed especially badly. That he was a candidate for disappearance. For although the last disappearance had occurred when the boys had been very much younger, over one and a half thousand days ago, it had been drilled into them that their survival was forever provisional and they must struggle to attain perfection every hour of every day.

The disappearances had always happened at night. The boys would wake to find one of their number gone, his bed stripped bare, his footlocker open and empty. No explanation had ever been given; none was needed. Their brother had disappeared because he had failed, and failure was not tolerated.

In bed after the lights had been switched off, Dave #8 struggled to stay awake, but his conditioning soon won out over his fear. He slept. And in the morning was surprised to discover himself still in his narrow bed, with the bustle of his brothers rising and dressing all around him. It was as if he had been reborn. Nothing had changed, yet everything was charged with significance.

Full of joy, he stood with his brothers in front of the rippling flag on the big screen and with his right hand over his heart recited the familiar words with renewed ardour.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of Greater Brazil and to the undertaking for which it stands, one Earth under Gaia, indivisible, restored, replenished, and purged of all human sin.

"The grit this story formed around was one of those microbooks that bookshops lay by their cash registers to tempt you to spend even more of your money—in this case, a reprint of a World War 2 guide to American soldiers on how to behave while passing through Great Britain on their way to war in the European mainland. I saw it just after I'd published my last novel, Cowboy Angels, *in which one version of America develops the technology to travel to alternate versions (including our own), messes around with their histories, and gets involved in altogether too many wars. I wondered what sort of guide might be issued to soldiers who were invading other versions of their own country, and the kinds of trouble they might get into, and the rest is history."*

A Brief Guide To Other Histories

Paul McAuley

My platoon had been in the American Bund sheaf for two weeks before it suffered its first major incident. It was gruesome and it robbed us of our innocence, but it was only the beginning of something stranger and deeper.

We'd come through the Turing gate at Brookhaven with the rest of the Third Brigade, First Armor Division, second battalion, as part of the ongoing operation to bring peace and reconciliation to that particular version of America's history. Seventeen PFCs and Spec 4s, and me, their commanding officer. We were all kids. I was the oldest, and I'd just turned twenty-four. Most of us hadn't been through the mirror before, and it put the zap on our heads. This was America, but it wasn't our version of America. New York, but not our version of New York. There were buildings I recognised from my visits to the city back in the Real. The Chrysler Building. The Empire State. St Patrick's Cathedral. Yellow taxis jostled on the streets, manholes vented plumes of steam, and Central Park was right where it should have been, although it had been stripped of trees by people desperate for firewood in the last days of the war, and there was a refugee camp sprawled across Sheep Meadow. But although the Statue of Liberty stood out in the Hudson, she was holding up a sword instead of a torch. The sword was a hundred feet long, and forged out of stainless steel that shone like cold flame. The skyline was different, too. Lower. Instead of glass and steel skyscrapers, brutal chunks of marble and white stone hunched like giant toads: monumental railroad stations, government buildings, and palaces. Some were burnt out or shattered by bombs. The rest were holed by artillery shells and pockmarked by small-arms fire.

We'd been given orientation lectures and issued with copies of a pamphlet that explained that the different versions of history accessed by the Turing Gates were every bit as real and valid as our own history. That their people were real people,

American citizens just like us. Even so, driving around a city where familiar buildings mixed with alien intruders, half the traffic was military, and pedestrians were dressed in drab antique styles, was like inhabiting a dream. Or like taking the lead role in a movie when you had no idea of the script or plot.

The American Bund sheaf shared most of our history, but it had taken a different turn in the 1930s, when a bunch of generals and tycoons who didn't like where their country seemed to be heading under the New Deal had assassinated Franklin D. Roosevelt and installed a military government. One of the generals turned out to be more ruthless than the rest. After the coup, he'd seized power by a ruthless programme of murder and arrest, made himself President-for-Life, and established a tyranny that had lasted for more than thirty years. Towards the end of his rule, he'd become insane. He'd styled himself the Dear Leader, ordered the construction of hundreds of grandiose monuments to himself, put millions in prison or in work camps, massacred millions more. He'd been about to go to war against Europe when, in 1972, scientists in our version of history had opened a Turing gate onto his version of history. The Central Intelligence Group had sent through agents who'd made contact with rebels and supplied them with weapons and intel. As soon as civil war kicked off, two divisions drove through the mirror, quickly took control of the Eastern seaboard, captured the Dear Leader as he tried to flee to Argentina, and pushed over what turned out to be a regime hollowed by corruption and self-interest.

When my platoon and the rest of the Third Brigade came through the mirror a year later, deadenders who refused to accept that the war was over were waging a guerrilla campaign up and down the country. They used car bombs and land mines, improvised explosive devices from fertiliser, fuel oil, and scrap metal, and detonated them when convoys drove past. They fired mortars into our bases. They shot at us with sniper rifles or rocket-propelled grenades from vantage points in buildings, or took potshots at us and melted into panicked crowds. As in any insurrection, it was almost impossible to tell the good guys from the bad guys, and that was why one of my men ended up killing three innocent civilians.

We'd had been ordered to set up a traffic control point on the West Side, ten blocks south of the green zone. Two APCs backed by a Martindale light tank, razor-wire coiled across the street, the men waving vehicles forward one by one, doing stop and checks. The traffic was bunched up and jumpy, simmering in hundred degree heat so humid you could have wrung water out of the air. And we were all jumpy, too. At any moment, someone could pop a trunk and find weapons or a primed car bomb, or some screwed-up munchkin could decide to take a shot at us just for the hell of it. So when a taxi lurched forward after it was directed to an inspection point, accelerating crazily, scattering men, Bobby Sturges, behind the .50 caliber machine gun on top of one of the APCs, made a split-second decision and put two hundred rounds into the taxi in less than a minute. Punching holes in the hood, exploding the tyres, shattering the windshield, shredding the driver and his two passengers, a man and his seventy-

year-old mother. Sudden silence as the taxi rolled to a stop, engine dead, blood leaking from its door sills, blood and human meat spattered all over the interior.

That evening, Tommy McAfee said, 'If these fucking munchkins learned to drive, this shit wouldn't happen.'

Munchkins—that's what we called the locals. New York City—the American Bund sheaf's version of New York City—was Oz. The green zone in Oz, built up around a palace that before the revolution had been owned by one of the Dear Leader's sons, was the Emerald City.

Like many of the men, Tommy McAfee had trouble accepting that the people on this side of the mirror were as real as the people back home, couldn't believe that Americans could have brought themselves so low. He treated them with rough contempt, made endless jokes about them. He had a quick, sharp wit, knew how to time a punch line and cap someone else's joke with a zinger of his own, was gaining a solid reputation as the platoon's joker. So when he made his quip, he was surprised and upset when Ernie Wright told him to can it, and the rest of the men either made murmurs of agreement or looked away.

They were all lounging around by the side of the entrance that curved down to the underground garage where the Dear Leader's eldest son had once stored his limousines, sports cars and motorcycles, where we now parked our APCs and Jeeps. We ate and slept in what had been servants' quarters nearby, and had set up a barbeque pit outside. Folding chairs. A basketball hoop. A table-tennis set liberated from somewhere in the palace. Tommy McAfee was sitting on a case of oil cans, a rangy kid with rusty hair cropped short, a tattoo of a boxing leprechaun on his right bicep, looking at Ernie Wright and saying, 'Jesus. You'd think I was the one shot that fucking taxi to death.'

Ernie Wright was the biggest man in the platoon, but he could move quickly. He stepped up to Tommy McAfee and grabbed the front of his fatigues and pulled him to his feet in a single fluid motion, and asked him, their faces inches apart, 'Any more smart remarks about what went down?'

'I can't think of any.'

Wright set McAfee down and patted him on the shoulder, but that wasn't the end of it. Later on that evening they got into a fistfight. It was supposedly over who should have the last steak, but it was really about McAfee trying to regain some face after Wright had shamed him. McAfee could box, but Wright was stronger and heavier, and after some sparring he knocked McAfee on his ass with a solid punch. McAfee got up and came back at Wright and was knocked down again, and this time he stayed down. Sprawled flat on his back on floodlit concrete under the basketball hoop, breathing hard, his nose and mouth bloody, one eye swelling shut. After a while he got up and went to the ice-chest and washed his face with a handful of ice chips.

I didn't think much of it at the time. We'd all been on edge after the shooting, and the fistfight seemed to have dissipated much of the tension. And besides, I was more concerned about Bobby Sturges. He was a gentle kid, barely eighteen, sick to his soul over what he'd done. When I'd told him that he wouldn't get any blame when I

wrote up the incident, that I accepted full responsibility because it had happened under my command, he'd given me a haunted look and said, 'Doesn't make it right, Lieutenant. They're Americans, like us. Americans shouldn't be killing Americans.'

'I agree. But some of them are trying to kill us, which is why you did the right thing.'

'Maybe it was the right thing to do,' Bobby Sturges said, 'but that doesn't make it right.'

I put in a request to pull him off the line for a few days R&R, but it was kicked back immediately. There was sand in the gears of the mission. We couldn't spare any men. I took him off the .50 cal, but he had to ride out with us on patrol the next day, and the day after that.

We manned checkpoints. We escorted convoys of supplies to hospitals and aid stations. We escorted a convoy of construction material to a power station that had been badly damaged during the war—jackhammers were pounding all over the city, cranes were swinging to and fro, and scaffolding was springing up like kudzu as the munchkins patched and repaired and rebuilt, as if tearing down one movie set and erecting another in its place. I noticed that Ernie Wright did his best to keep behind Tommy McAfee during foot patrols, and guessed what he was thinking. Tommy McAfee might want to even things out after his beating, we were all carrying guns, and it wasn't unknown for a soldier with a beef to put a round or two into their rival's back in the middle of a firefight. But Tommy McAfee seemed to have forgotten the incident, and although the deadenders were staging hit-and-run raids in Texas and parts of the Midwest, and Washington, D.C. was paralysed by a spate of car bombings, New York was pretty quiet. It was August, hot and sunny. I remember one day we were parked up near a playground, and Dave Brahma and Leroy Moss started handing out candy bars and cans of soft drink to the kids. Two men in flak jackets and helmets, M-16s slung over their shoulders, up to their waist in a crowd of happy children. Another time, Todd Cooper was checking IDs at a control point and a man started shaking his hand and wouldn't let go. This old man in a dusty suit and battered fedora, pumping Todd Cooper's hand and thanking him for being there, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Then a supply convoy running the expressway from Brookhaven into New York City was hit by a massive improvised explosive device buried at the side of the highway. Five died instantly, six were badly wounded. That night, my platoon took part in a raid on an apartment building in Brooklyn. According to an informer, the deadenders who had planted the IED were storing weapons and explosives there.

It kicked off at two in the morning. A psy-ops vehicle blasted out a message telling everyone to leave their doors open and wait with their hands on their heads for questioning. Two Cherokee helicopters beat above the building's flat roof, lighting up the front with searchlights. A squad of explosives specialists hit the basement first, and then everyone else went in.

My platoon had been assigned the top two floors. I was determined to do things by the book. I told the men to knock first and break down doors only if they had to,

to keep their fingers off their triggers and treat everyone with respect. Even so, it was a pretty brutal business. We'd storm in, grab the man of the house and throw him down, pacify the rest of the family, and interrogate the man in front of them, ask him if he owned a weapon or had any insurgent propaganda, if he was involved in insurgent activity in any way. Then we'd rip up the place, pulling out drawers and tossing the contents, ripping through closets, looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. The people were mostly passive, but we'd been told to expect trouble and we had no idea what we might find or if the situation might suddenly turn ugly. Despite my orders, there was quite a bit of roughhousing and horseplay to relieve the tension, shouts and screams, the smash of glass and crockery. A frat house party with half the participants armed to the teeth, and the possibility of sudden death hanging in the air.

I was going from apartment to apartment, trying to curb excesses, when Ted Brahma came up and told me that something weird was going down. Smiling his gentle stoned smile, saying, 'You have to see this, Lieutenant. It'll blow your mind. Truly.'

I followed him downstairs to a single-room apartment with bookshelves along one wall, posters above the couch, books in piles on the floor. It was very hot. A standard lamp had been knocked over and threw huge shadows everywhere. Searchlights pried through blinds at the window. The whippy flutter of the helicopters matched my racing heartbeat. Todd Cooper and Tommy McAfee stood behind a man kneeling on the bare boards with his wrists plasticuffed. Ernie Wright stood in front of him, studying an ID card.

'Tell me what you think, Lieutenant,' Tommy McAfee said, and jerked up the prisoner's head by his hair.

'Is he on the list?'

'Take a real good look,' Tommy McAfee said. Both he and Todd Cooper were lit up, grinning. 'His eyes, the colour of his hair . . . You don't see it?'

'Show the Lieutenant that ID,' Todd Cooper said.

Ernie Wright handed the card to me. He had a baffled, dazed expression, as if he'd run full-tilt into an invisible wall.

'You see it?' Tommy McAfee said, as I studied it. 'You see it now?'

The name under the black and white photo card was Ernest C. Wright.

Tommy McAfee's grin widened when he saw my reaction, 'I reckon we found ourselves Ernie's double.'

'Bullshit,' Ernie Wright said. 'He's nothing like me. He doesn't even have the same date of birth.'

'Oh yeah? Then how come he just told us he was born in the same dipshit town as you? His parents have the same names as your parents, he has your name, and he has your eyes, too,' Tommy McAfee said, jerking the prisoner's head up again.

It was true, the prisoner's eyes were the same sharp blue as Ernie Wright's, and his hair was the same dirty blond. But otherwise he didn't look much like Ernie Wright at all. He was shy about fifty pounds, his face was leaner and paler, and he had a mustache.

'He's your doppelgänger, dude,' Ted Brahma said. 'Your dark half.'

I asked if they'd found any explosives or weapons.

'There isn't anything to find,' Ernie Wright said.

'Ain't this sweet,' McAfee said. 'Ernie is in love. In love with his own self.'

Brahma asked the prisoner why he had all these books.

'I'm a teaching assistant at Brooklyn University,' the man said.

His voice was lighter than Ernie Wright's.

'Yeah? What do you teach?' McAfee said.

'American literature.'

Ernie Wright shook his head.

'If you're a teacher, I guess you're a party member,' McAfee said, grinning at me. 'This guy is guilty of something, Lieutenant. I can smell it.'

'There were fifty million party members,' the man said. 'Including everyone who worked in every university and high school. It was the law.'

'All these books,' McAfee said. 'I bet we could find something subversive. What do you say, Lieutenant? Shall we take him in?'

I thought that this was more about the beef Tommy McAfee had with Ernie Wright than about uncovering a potential suspect. I pulled my knife, cut the plasticuffs that bound the man's wrists, and looked straight into McAfee's grin and asked him if he had a problem.

No one said anything. The man knelt on the floor, rubbing his wrists, carefully not making eye contact with anyone.

'Move on,' I said. 'Everyone, right now.'

Ernie Wright was staring at the man. Then he shuddered, all over, like a man waking in the middle of a dream, and marched straight out. The fallen lamp wheeled his shadow over the bookcase and ceiling. As McAfee, Cooper and Brahma trooped after him, I remembered that I was still holding the man's ID card.

'Sorry,' I said, and dropped the card in front of him and bolted from the apartment, thoroughly spooked by the situation.

The men ragged Ernie Wright about his alleged double or doppelgänger on the ride back to Emerald City. Most of it was good-natured, but he turtled up, hunched in the back of the APC in a glowering silence that he broke only once, when Tommy McAfee told him that something must have gone badly wrong with his life, seeing as he'd ended up in the shit, while his doppelgänger had a good job, an education . . .

'That's the *point*,' Ernie Wright said. 'That guy, he isn't *anything* like me. So can your shit, McAfee. It ain't right. It isn't even funny.'

After a silence, Ted Brahma said in his doper's drawl, 'Know what they say about your doppelgänger? That it's just like you in every way, but it doesn't have a soul. And it knows that, and it wants one real bad. So if you ever meet it, it's like meeting a vampire hungry for, like, your exact blood type. One look, it can suck the soul right out of you. Turn you into what it was, make itself into you.'

'There's something to that,' Leroy Moss said. He was at the wheel of the APC, inclining his head so that the men in the back could hear him over the roar of the engine. 'Everyone agrees that there can be no miraculous multiplication of souls. If there are two people the same, one in the Real, one in some other history, there can be but

the one soul. And you can't divide a soul, either, so only one person can be in possession of it.'

'You ask me, *all* the munchkins lack souls,' Todd Cooper said. 'They're all ghosts.'

It was a common belief. The munchkins were spooks. Unreal. And because they were unreal, it didn't matter what you did to them.

'That's what doppelgänger means,' Ted Brahma said. 'It's German for ghost double.'

'They say it's okay to fuck your doppelgänger,' Todd Cooper said. 'Really. It's like jacking off. Only, you know, double the fun.'

'Yeah, but the only problem is, you have to waste him right afterward,' Tommy McAfee said. 'Otherwise, he'll waste *you*.'

Most of the men laughed. Ted Brahma said, 'It must have been pretty intense, Ernie, meeting your own ghost back there.'

Ernie Wright didn't reply. I turned around and told the men to knock it off, but Tommy McAfee had to have the last word.

'The big question is, which is the ghost and which is the man? You think about that, Ernie.'

A couple of days later, I saw Ernie Wright sitting on one of the plastic chairs in the R&R area, barechested in shorts and sandals, reading the pamphlet we'd all been given before coming through the mirror, *A Brief Guide to Other Histories*. I asked him how he was doing, and he said he was doing fine.

'Pretty interesting reading you have there.'

He shrugged.

'You read it carefully, it'll explain why that guy isn't really your double.'

'I know it,' Ernie Wright said. 'I knew it when I saw he was three years younger than me.'

'As I understand it, if he was born after the history of this sheaf split from the history of the Real, he has to be a completely different person,' I said. 'Because all of his experiences are different from yours.'

I'd been reading in *A Brief Guide to Other Histories* too, after that night.

'That's pretty much what it says here,' Ernie Wright said. He was holding the pamphlet in one hand, his forefinger marking his place. 'You are what you do, and what's done to you. The sum of all your experiences. Him and me, we've had such different lives we aren't even like brothers.'

'That's how I understand it,' I said.

'Still,' he said, 'I guess we had the same mother and father.'

I didn't understand the significance of that remark then. It was hardly my fault. I had trouble remembering the names of all my men in my platoon, let alone the details of their lives before they'd joined up or been drafted. But even though I could hardly have been expected to remember that Ernie Wright's mother had died in childbirth when he was just two years old, he'd been brought up by a father who was a bitter and violent drunk, I still feel guilty about what happened. I still have the irrational idea that I should have known about Ernie Wright's unhappy childhood, that I should have done something to prevent what happened next, instead of making some inane remark about being pleased to see that he was putting the encounter in perspective.

'It was weird,' he said, 'but weird shit happens through the mirror. We just have to deal with it.'

'Glad to hear it.'

And after that, Ernie Wright did seem to be dealing with it. I overheard him having an earnest conversation with Leroy Moss, who carried a copy of the Bible in the breast pocket of his flak jacket, about the nature of souls and their indivisibility. He shrugged off Tommy McAfee's jibes. And then, two weeks later, the platoon was given a day of R&R, and he disappeared.

I didn't find out what had happened until the next day, when the military police took charge of Ernest Wright, the man Tommy McAfee had claimed to be Ernie Wright's doppelgänger.

It seemed that Ernie had changed into civilian clothes, hitched a ride out of Emerald City in a contractor's truck, and turned up at Ernest's apartment later that evening. Drunk but lucid, saying he wanted a quiet word, offering cigarettes and a bottle of Four Roses. A gift, he said, for the trouble a couple of weeks back. Ernest had deep misgivings, but he also felt sorry for Ernie, who seemed sad and bewildered and lost. And he was curious, too. So he invited Ernie in and made coffee, and they got to talking. They shared the same parents, but Ernie's had met several years before Ernest's had, Ernie's mother had died giving birth to a still-born baby when he was two, his father had become a serious drunk, and Ernie had joined the Army to get away from the son of a bitch, who had died three years ago, when his liver had finally given out on him.

'I don't miss him,' Ernie said. 'Not one bit.'

Ernest's father—the American Bund's version of Ernie's father—had died in a traffic accident when Ernest was less than a year old. A couple of years later, his mother had remarried, to another teacher in the high-school where she worked.

'That's how you got to be a college professor, uh?'

'There were always books in the house.'

They talked about the town where they had been born, the little house where Ernie had lived with his father until he joined the Army. Ernest and his mother had moved out when he was three, he didn't remember much about it.

'I think there was a cherry tree in the front yard,' he said.

Ernie smiled. 'It was still there, last time I looked. Same tree, different lives.'

'Two different trees, really,' Ernest said. He told Ernie how he'd won a scholarship and come to New York to teach and study literature; Ernie told him a little bit about his so-called career in the army, fighting in a sheaf wrecked by nuclear war, and now policing the streets of New York.

'I never really knew my Mom,' he said. 'And my dad was a mean drunk who beat me 'til I got big enough to beat him. But you had a real family. You have a college degree, all those books . . . '

'If you knew what it was like, growing up here, under the thumb of the Dear Leader and his psychopathic sons and his secret police, you might not think it was so great,' Ernest said. He'd been tense and nervous all through their conversation, growing more and more resentful about the intrusion. 'Look, it was nice to talk to you. Strange, but nice. But I have to go to work tomorrow.'

'Me too. Out on the streets. Hey, I was just wondering,' Ernie said with ponderous casualness, 'about your mother. Is she still alive?'

That was why he'd come there, of course. It wasn't anything to do with Ernest, who was at best a brother he'd never known. No, Ernie Wright was chasing the ghost of his long-dead mother.

He looked for a long time at a snapshot Ernest reluctantly gave him, asked if she was still living in their home town. Maybe he could look her up some time, he said, and grew agitated after Ernest said that he didn't think that this was a good idea. Ernie blustered, said that he barely remembered his mother, all he wanted was to see how she had turned out, what was the harm? Sharp words were exchanged. Ernie started to paw through papers on the table Ernest used as a desk, drew his pistol when Ernest asked him to stop. Ernest panicked, threw coffee in Ernie's face, and the pistol went off. The shot barely missed Ernest. There was a struggle, another shot. That one hit Ernie in the thigh, nicking his femoral artery. There was a lot of blood. Ernest went to the apartment next door, which had a phone, and called an ambulance, but it took two hours to arrive because there were road blocks everywhere. Despite the best efforts of Ernest and his neighbours Ernie Wright bled to death on Ernest Wright's old Persian carpet.

Ernest Wright told me all this in a bleak interrogation room in Camp X-Ray, the holding facility for suspects in bombings or shootings, people caught trafficking weapons and explosives, curfew violators, and anyone else who had gotten into some kind of trouble with the occupying army. He'd been arrested on suspicion of murder by the local police, but they'd handed him over to us after they had discovered that the dead man in his apartment was a soldier. My commanding officer had advised me not to visit him, but it had happened on my watch and I felt responsible. I wanted to know what had happened so that I could figure out what I had done wrong. Also, I had read the transcript of Ernest Wright's interrogations, I had talked to the local police who had handled the case, and I was convinced that he was innocent.

When I told him this, he thanked me for my concern, and for my offer to give supporting testimony should his case come to trial. He told me the story while smoking several of the cigarettes I had brought, and at the end lit a fresh one and said, 'There's a writer who described time as a garden of forking paths. Whenever someone makes a decision, it doesn't matter how small, it splits time into two. So there's this time, here and now, and another time where you decided not to help me.'

I told him that I was familiar with the concept. By this time, I had read *A Brief Guide to Other Histories* several times from cover to cover, trying to find something that would help me understand what had happened.

'An infinite series of paths, some divergent, some convergent, some running in parallel,' Ernest Wright said. 'Until a year ago, I thought it was just a story. A philosophical conceit. But then your people made themselves known when the revolution started. You sent troops through their Turing gates and helped defeat the Dear Leader. You told us that their agents had been visiting our history secretly before

that, helping set up the revolution. You told us that you wanted to help us built a better America. But what you're really doing is shaping us in your image.'

'We really do want to help you.'

'Your path is only one of an infinite number of paths. And no one path can claim to be better or more privileged than any other. All are equal.'

'Except we have the Turing gates,' I said.

'Which gives your history the ability to interfere with other histories, other Americas. But it doesn't give your history moral superiority. You brought us freedom. Democracy. Fine. We're grateful for it, but we're not beholden. We have the right to make from that freedom what we will, whether you approve of it or not. If we're forced to become nothing more than a pale imitation of your version of America, what kind of freedom is that?'

I told him that he sounded a little like the deadenders, and he shook his head. He was thinner than I remembered, but because his head had been shaved and he had lost his moustache it seemed to me that he looked a lot more like Ernie Wright now. Or my memory of Ernie.

'The deadenders believe that they can restore the Bund if they can push you back through the mirror. We want to restore democracy, but on our own terms. It's like your friend. He didn't really understand that we were two completely different people. Strangers. My mother was not his mother,' Ernest Wright said. 'And this is not your history.'

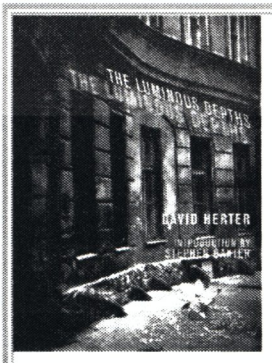
That was in 1974. I was twenty-four, back then. So innocent, so foolishly hopeful. Now, just turned thirty, I'm a published writer with five short stories and a novel under my belt. I've already used parts of this story in the novel, although in my version Ernie Wright doesn't end up bleeding out on the floor of Ernest Wright's apartment, shot by his own pistol. Instead, he finds out where Ernest Wright's parents are living and goes AWOL and hitches back to the American Bund's version of his home town. He spends a day watching Ernest Wright's mother, trying and failing to get up the courage to talk to her, finally realising that he has nothing to say to her because she isn't in any way like his mother, that nothing in Ernest Wright's life could explain what had gone wrong in his own. Although this version worked well enough within the frame of the novel, although it was true to Ernie Wright's need to understand and reach a reconciliation with his own history, although it clarified real events and gave them a neat ending, it was a contrivance. I was never satisfied with it, and felt guilty too, at the way I'd trivialised Ernest Wright, used him as a bit player, a ghostly reflection whose only function was to give Ernie Wright the information he needed to make his pilgrimage. This is as close to the truth as I can make it, and there's no neat ending, no bittersweet resolution.

Ernest Wright was released back to the local authorities after two months in Camp X-Ray. He didn't make bail, and was stabbed to death in a prison riot before his case came to trial. Todd Cooper was killed in a fire-fight a couple of months later, and Dave Brahma was badly wounded. The same day, Bobby Sturges injected his foot with a Syrette of morphine and shot off his big toe, a million-dollar wound that was his ticket back to the Real. I wrote it up as an

accident; the kid had never gotten over shooting up that car. Then Leroy Moss was killed when a rocket-propelled grenade hit his APC. I was sitting next to him and spent two months in hospital while doctors worked to save my leg and shrapnel, some of it bone fragments from Leroy Moss, surfaced in different parts of my body. Some of it is still in there.

Tommy McAfee reupped, served another year, and survived without a scratch. After my novel was published, he phoned me late one night. He was drunk, and wanted to talk about old times. He told me that he had a bunch of stories I could help him make into a book as good as mine. I listened to him ramble on for a while, letting him vent whatever it was my novel had stirred up, making the right kind of noises, and when he finally hung up I realised that he'd hit on something useful, and started making notes for this story.

We are what we do, and what's done to us: if *A Brief Guide to Other Histories* was right about one thing it's this. And because what happens to us in war is more intense than ordinary life, it marks us more deeply, changes us more profoundly. Every soldier who comes back from war is haunted by the ghosts of the comrades who didn't make it, the people he killed or saw killed. By the things he did, and the things he should have done. And most of all by the innocent kid he once was, before the contingencies and experiences of war took that innocence away. I have summoned up my ghosts here, and tried to lay them to rest. But it seems to me now that all of us who passed through the mirror into different histories have become like ghosts, lost in the infinite possibilities of our stories, ceaselessly searching for an ideal we can never reach.

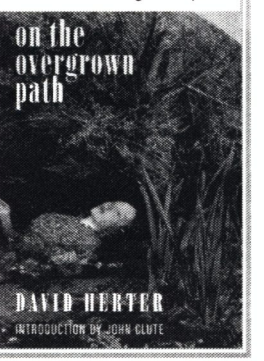


Two Novellas from David Herter

Author of the acclaimed, stylish novels *Ceres Storm* and *Evening's Empire*

Mystery, Murder, Magic, and Nazis: *On the Overgrown Path* and its sequel, *The Luminous Depths*, shine a light on past and forgotten Czechoslovak Republic between the wars.

The series will be concluded by a full-length novel in late 2009. Please check the PS website for details.



"A little before the end of the last century, Robert Silverberg invited me to contribute to an anthology of stories set at the turn of the millennium. The foofaraw surrounding the Millennium Dome and plans for the New Years' party to end all New Years' parties was well under way (remember surfball and the River of Fire? Yeah, neither do I), and seemed a logical destination for tourists from the future. I'm kind of fond of this odd little story, not least because it includes one of my few accurate predictions: that thieves would use the distraction of the end of the millennium to break into a museum and make off with a work of art (in reality, it happened in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, rather than the Tate, but it was close enough for me). The anthology was slated to be published in France and the USA, but only ever appeared in France; this is the story's first time in print in the language in which it was written."

Searching For Van Gogh At The End Of The World

Paul McAuley

"Are you sure this is New York?"

"That is where I told index to take us."

"The first time you told the index to take us to New York, Seven, we ended up a thousand years adrift."

"The coordinate system is trickier than I was led to believe, but I was able to correct the error, was I not? And just in time, too. I think that the indigens of that primitive era wished to remove our heads."

"Nonsense. They were over-excited by our sudden appearance, that's all. At least no one seems to be taking much notice of us here."

"That is because we are where we are supposed to be, Fifteen. Look at the index. This is definitely the end of the Second Millennium."

"Yes, but are you *sure* this is New York? I mean, shouldn't it be on an island?"

"You are thinking of Shanghai."

"And the buildings should be taller."

"Or Singapore."

"I really do think that the buildings should be taller, Seven."

"There are tall buildings across the river. And if you would only look at the index, you would see that it is quite definite as to the date."

"I thought all the buildings would be tall. 'The cloud-capp'd towers of Manhattan'."

"The index says—"

"I don't care what it says, Seven! You don't know how to make it work properly, and our master warned us that its records are not always accurate. And why is it so dark? Surely we were supposed to arrive in daylight. This must be one of the Dark Ages."

"I believe that was the era we just left, the one where the indigens were brandishing sharp-edged agricultural instruments

with fell intent. Do you think that these people are carrying weapons?"

"Stop worrying about the indigens. They are all far too busy damaging their brains with chemicals to bother with us. You think too much, Seven."

"I cannot help it. It is the way I was made. If you don't believe the index, Fifteen, we could always go back through the portal, just to make sure."

"Not until I know where we are. Look at that man! I think he's vomiting. Yes, that really is vomit. Amazing. There must be something very badly wrong with this era if its inhabitants have to take brain-damaging chemicals to get themselves through the day, especially when they suffer such horrible side-effects. Or perhaps that man belongs to some kind of crazy religious cult that believes vomiting puts you closer to God."

"They are ingesting drugs because they are celebrating the end of the—Wait! Fifteen, wait for me! What are you doing?"

"Excuse me. Sir, excuse me. Where is the Metropolitan Museum?"

"The wha'?"

"The Metropolitan Museum. I believe it is on Fifth Avenue."

"That's a great dress you almost wearing, doll. Have a drink. It's the end of the century. You and me, we'll drink to the end of the century."

"Please remove your hand from my breasts, sir. I don't believe that it is appropriate behaviour, even in this horrible era. Seven, you had better make him stop. I think he's attempting sexual congress."

"Ow! Ow! Tell fucking Sherlock Holmes to let go!"

"That's enough, Seven. You have already broken his arm. I think he's got the idea."

"You fucking bitch. You fucking crazy bitch. I'm calling the police."

"Sir, there is no need to make a fuss. A little misunderstanding between our cultures can surely—"

"Fuck you, Sherlock Holmes. Police! Police! I tol' you, leave me the fuck—"

"Oh dear."

"I think you've broken more than his arm now, Seven."

"I'll tuck him out of the way. There. Now, I believe that we should remove ourselves from the scene, Fifteen, as quickly as we can. I think that we have attracted attention."

A little later, the man and the woman have fought through the dense crowds to the top of a stone bridge. They lean together breathlessly in the lee of a bus shelter. People stream past on either side. It is two hours before midnight. On barges moored midstream, technicians are checking the timed fuses of the public munitions, but plenty of rockets and roman candles are shooting out from the crowds along either bank and exploding over the river's black water. Camera flashes make random constellations. Music thumps from brightly lit pleasure boats.

The man puts his hand to the small of his broad back and straightens and takes a deep breath and says, "I told you that your dress is inappropriate for this era, Fifteen."

"It is quite in keeping. Unlike your cloak and your, what do you call it?"

"It is a stovepipe hat. And the cloak is an Inverness Cape. Both are accurate reconstructions."

"As is this dress."

"Yes, but shouldn't you be wearing undergarments too?"

"Not according to the wardrobe thing."

"I am beginning to suspect that the wardrobe thing has a sick sense of humour, Fifteen. Judging from the people around us, it would appear that covering of genitals and breasts may be mandatory in this era."

"Let them look."

"Also, your wig is a trifle askew."

The woman adjusts it. It is very long, and its almost luminous purple violently contrasts with the silver discs that have been wired together to form her very skimpy minidress.

The man says, "I believe that it may have been your attire that so excited the indigenous inhabitants of the Dark Age."

"That really doesn't matter now. We must find the museum before it starts to burn."

"If this is the Hudson River, and we are looking south, then the main part of Manhattan must be across the river."

"I think we are looking north. And in any case, Seven, I'm still not sure that this river is the Hudson River."

"If you do not believe me, then we can return to the portal and try again."

"No. There's the Grandmother Paradox for one thing, and for another, we can't keep using the index to hack the portal. Jade might realise that we are not who we are supposed to be."

"As if running for our lives from a mob of angry peasants had not already raised her suspicions."

"Our rapid exit from 1000 AD can be explained away as *joie de vivre*. But if we keep going back and forth, we'll alert the monitors, and one of them is bound to ask us if we need help. And then our real identities will be exposed, and our master will have lost his wager."

"I have a bad feeling, Fifteen. I feel that our master has not adequately prepared us for the task."

"We'll do our best, Seven. That is all we can do. We'll cross the river and find Fifth Avenue. It should be easy enough if we're where we're supposed to be. New York is based on a simple grid pattern."

The bridge is packed. People who have already taken up positions to watch the end-of-millennium firework display defend their folding chairs, windbreaks, portable TVs and picnic tables with ferocious determination, forcing those who are attempting to cross the river into the middle of the road.

The man and the woman are halfway across the bridge when the man shouts out excitedly. "A thief, Fifteen! I have found a thief!"

He holds the arm and the throat of a slender young man who is crushed against him by the pressure of the crowd. The young man's face is white with pain.

"If you hold his throat with just a little less force, Seven, he might be able to speak."

"This is just a mistake. No need for any trouble."

"He had his hand in my pocket, Fifteen. I would not have known, except the index squealed when he touched it."

"Just let me go, okay? You'll never see me again."

The man says, "But this is a most excellent coincidence, young man! We are also thieves. We are part of your brotherhood."

"Brotherhood?"

"Guild. Clan. Union. Association. Sir, we call on you for assistance."

"Look, brother, I don't know what you're talking about. I made an honest mistake. I thought your pocket—Ow! Ow! Okay, let go, I admit it. I'm a dip. You caught me fair and square."

"A dip?"

"A dip, a lifter, a pick-pocket. What are you going to do about it?"

The man says, "We are also thieves. We call on the hospitality of your guild."

"I'm working alone here, okay?"

"You do not belong to a guild?"

"Look, brother, go easy on the wrist, okay? I need it to make a living. I wouldn't be doing this, but I couldn't get a job after university and I have to pay back my student loan. You caught me fair and square, but why not let me go and call it even? I swear that after this night I'll go straight. Or do you want to spend the last hour of the Millennium filling in a report at a police station?"

"You will help us," the man says decisively.

All three are moving step by step towards the shore, pushed along inexorably by the dense crowd. The young man has to twist his head to look up at his captor.

"You're working too? In those get-ups?"

"Our costumes are not appropriate? You see, Fifteen, I warned you about the wardrobe thing. It has a sick mind."

"Your girlfriend's Emma Peel, and you're Sherlock Holmes. Right? Except you should have a deerstalker, not that top hat."

"I have already heard a reference to Sherlock Holmes. But I do not know of Emma Peel."

"You don't mind her, you know, flaunting herself?"

"It is her idea, not mine."

"I am quite happy with my costume. You're sure this is a good idea, Seven? How can he help us?"

"To begin with, he can show us where the Metropolitan Museum is located."

"The Metropolitan Museum as in the Metropolitan Museum of New York? The Met?"

"Just so, young man. Why are you laughing?"

"You'll have to get a plane, but there aren't any more scheduled flights to the States until tomorrow. If the Millennium Bug doesn't fuck up the computers, of course."

"This is not, then, New York. You see, Seven! I was right all along!"

"If it is not New York, where is it?"

"Where are you from, brother? What drugs are you on?"

"Please humour me, sir. Or I may have to apply pressure to your throat again."

"No. No, it isn't New York. It's London. This is Waterloo Bridge. That's the Thames. Those are the Houses of Parliament, and that big piece of junk on the other side of the river, all lit up by laser beams, that's the Millennium Wheel."

"London as in London the capital of Europe?"

"London as in the capital of England."

"Several thousand miles east of New

Business
0113
GIVE WAY
SOLD OUT

York, Seven. That's why it's so dark! We are in the wrong time zone!"

"There is no need to shout, Fifteen."

"And that's why there aren't enough tall buildings!"

"Yes, yes. I do understand."

"You guys aren't really on drugs, are you?"

"Of course not," the man says. "It would interfere with our mission."

They have at last reached the other side of the river, although the Embankment is scarcely less crowded than the bridge. The young man looks left and right, as if thinking of running, then says, "Okay, I'll buy it. Tell me about this mission of yours."

Thirty minutes later, the three have given up trying to make their way along the river, and are hurrying through the huge, noisy funfair that is pitched along the Mall, all the way up to the gates of Buckingham Palace.

"Do look, Fifteen," the man says. "I do believe that those are the fabled law officers of this troubled era."

"I see them. You would have seen plenty of them by the river, too, if you hadn't been fussing with the index."

"I was checking it because of your persistent questions, Fifteen."

"Or killing the drug-crazed indigen."

"Their throats must be more fragile than ours." The man is struck by a sudden notion. "I am a murderer, Fifteen! I am a fugitive from justice!"

"Don't stare at the filth, brother," the young man says, and hunches into his black leather jacket when one of the policemen glances at the big man in the top hat and cape.

"The filth?"

"Old Bill. The pigs. The police."

"He's right, Seven. You're hardly blending in with the indigens."

"I guess you don't have any police where you come from."

"There are monitors. But they are machines, and unlike your law officers cannot hang you high or engage you in duels to the death."

"Duels? You really don't have much of a clue, do you?"

The woman says, "We were given extensive conditioning."

"Yes, and you're walking around with no knickers on."

"That's the fault of the wardrobe thing."

"And if you don't have any police where you come from, I suppose you have any laws, either."

"There are customs," the big man says. "There are the protocols of public and private spaces. There is a consensus."

"But what you want to do, the thing you have to do to win the bet, isn't that the consensus?"

"We are doing it for our master. It is he who made the wager against Jade."

"Who is the host of a party to celebrate the Third Millennium. Which is connected to the Second Millennium by some kind of time gate." The young man laughs, and claps his hands together in delight.

"The portal connects a number of eras, for the amusement of the guests."

"You really are celebrating the Third Millennium?"

"Jade has thrown a party because she is interested in the myths of the Christian Era. That is why her party is linked through the portal to celebrations in the deep past. You might say that, just for this one night, 3000 AD has spread through the primitive eras of the past. Of course, only an antiquarian like Jade is interested in antiquated numerology. She is enamoured of the ancient. That is why she accepted our master's wager so eagerly."

"You're telling him too much, Seven."

"I've got to admit, it's a great little story. And you're both a couple of what, androids?"

"We are both human. We were made this way. Our master made very careful preparations before he made his wager with Jade."

"Clones, then."

"Not exactly."

"Whatever. I know, I know, I wouldn't understand if you tried to explain. Come on. We'll cut across St. James's Park."

As they near the river again, they can hear the noise of the crowds echoing down the mostly empty streets.

The woman says, "Are you sure this place has what we need?"

"I bet the Tate has more of them than the Metropolitan Museum of New York. You can take your pick. You know, if you don't mind me saying so, it's the one part of your story that's a bit clichéd. I mean, people from the future almost always seem to want to steal—"

"You know of others like us?"

"Hey, go easy, brother. You don't know your own strength."

"Seven knows exactly what he is doing. Answer the question."

"I was talking about stories. Science fiction. Sci-fi. *The Outer Limits*? *Dr. Who*? I guess you don't know. Anyway, I watched a lot of those TV shows when I was banged up. Excuse me, when I was in jail. Enough to know that you people from the future all come here wanting the same thing."

"Ah, you were unfortunate enough to be incarcerated in the prison hulks of the Thames."

"Prison hulks? You got your centuries mixed up again, brother."

"You were incarcerated, nevertheless."

"Well, yeah."

The woman looks at him and says, "Before or after university?"

"Okay, okay, I admit the university story was a ploy to get some sympathy. But I'll be straight with you now, seeing as we're partners. That is, if you can get inside. If you aren't a couple of nut jobs. If you really are from the future."

"I fail to understand why you do not believe us."

"You don't have much of a sense of humour, do you, brother?"

"He can't help it," the woman says. "He was made that way."

There's a fence of tall iron railings at the rear of the art gallery. The big man takes out a tiny silver box and points it at the railings. There's a pleasant, soothing hum, and lengths of iron drop into dust, opening a round hole in the fence.

"Bloody hell," the young man says. "A disintegrator ray!"

"It neutralises the bonds between atoms," the woman says.

"Like I said. Can it fix the alarms, too? This place has plenty of alarms."

"We can deal with them if you show us where they are."

When they have found one of the sensor boxes of the security system, the big man blows a handful of silver dust into it and says, "This will take a little while to do its work."

The young man flinches as fireworks boom in the darkness nearby. "What does it do? Can't you just, I don't know, blast the wires with your disintegrator ray?"

The big man says, "The dust is very clever. It will analyze the structure of the alarm and neutralise it."

The woman says, "Our technology must seem like magic to you."

"I've seen better on TV."

"I do not trust this man, Fifteen. He shows no sign at all of future shock."

"This TV seems to be a window into the future, Seven. Besides, I think he still believes that we're either liars or insane."

"Even so. I think we should go on without him. He has served his purpose."

"Hey. Hey! Put me down, brother! Hey! I got you here, you're going to kill me?"

"Seven won't damage you too badly. Just enough to knock you out. You can do that, Seven, can't you?"

"I will attempt to use less force on our associate than on the unfortunate man who accosted you, Fifteen."

The young man talks rapidly, his voice constricted because one of Seven's large hands is at his throat. "I thought we were partners. In the same gang, the same guild. You need me. What about when you get inside? It's a big place. Do you know exactly where to go? Even with the alarms out there will still be security guards. You won't have much time to find what you want."

Seven relaxes his grip and says, "He is right, Fifteen."

The young man straightens his jacket. "Where's the harm? You get what you want. I get something too. A Turner or a Constable. Something better than a souvenir postcard, anyway. Jesus. Just to prove I'm on your side, you can have your disintegrator ray back."

"How did you—"

"When you were throttling me. Don't sweat it, brother. Hey, look at the box. It's lit up like a Christmas tree. Does that mean your magic dust has fixed the alarms?"

"What will we do, Fifteen?"

"Let him help us, I suppose. But I still don't trust him."

"You two never heard of the expression 'honour amongst thieves'? Come on. Use that disintegrator ray. We don't have all night."

The man in the cape uses his tiny silver box to make a hole in a basement door. Before he steps through, the young man takes off his leather jacket and knocks out the flames that have caught in the wood. "We don't want a fire," he says. "Or at least, not yet."

The woman says sharply, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you told me you planned to take stuff from the Metropolitan Museum in New York because you think it will burn down tonight. So strictly speaking you're not thieving: you're on a salvage

mission. The Tate here isn't scheduled to burn down, but you'll have to cover your tracks."

"He may be right, Fifteen."

"I don't know. It won't happen unless we cause it happen. It sounds like a Grandmother Paradox."

"You mean like when you go back, kill your grandmother before she has your father, so you couldn't have been born to go back and kill her? Look, relax. It's just another thing I saw on TV."

"This TV is far too educative for my liking," Seven says to Fifteen, as they follow the young man inside.

The young man shines a small flashlight this way and that as he leads the two time travellers through storage basements where pictures hang in great racks, to a service door that opens into the dark, shuttered restaurant. "You wait here," he says, and races away up the curve of a flight of stone stairs.

"I still think you should have knocked him out."

"We must cleave to the ideal of thieves' honour, Fifteen."

"I don't—"

"Hush. He returns."

"Piece of cake. The guards are all at the front desk, drinking whisky and watching TV instead of their security cameras, the poor sods. What a night to be working, huh? You two come along now. I know just where to go."

They creep like mice through dark, lofty rooms hung with paintings. The noise of the crowds along the river can be faintly heard.

"There it is. What do you think?"

Even in the faint, wavering light of the torch, the petals are as bright as orange flames around the sunflower's gorgeous yellow disc.

"It's the real deal. How are you going to get it out?"

Seven lifts a long metal tube from inside his cape.

"That's good. And I guess you know that each painting is rigged up to an alarm system."

"Of course. We will use the dust."

"You guys have pretty much thought of everything," the young man says, and punches a small red box by the door.

The faint tinkle of glass is immediately drowned by the tremendous clang of the fire alarm. The young man shouts over the noise: "You're wrong about the Metropolitan Museum! Jade told me to tell you that it won't burn down for another century!" And then he laughs and sprints away into darkness.

Seven and Fifteen chase after him, almost run straight into the guards, and double back in dismay. Seven disintegrates a hole in a fire door and then they are running across a wide, floodlit lawn towards the railing.

Halfway down the street, Seven stops and plants his hands on his knees and takes great whooping breaths. There is no sign of the young man.

"We can't stop here, Seven!"

"I was not made for running, Fifteen. You go on."

"Go on? Where would I go on to?"

"Then I think we must risk using the portal one more time." Seven reaches into his pocket for the index, and then with a

growing look of alarm pats at all his pockets.

"I have a confession to make, Fifteen."

"He has the index."

"I am afraid so."

"Which means we can't use the portal."

"We will have to wait until those of Jade's guests who chose to come here begin to return to the main part of the party."

"We will have to throw ourselves on their mercy. Our master's plan will be revealed."

"It may be worse than that."

"How could it possibly be worse?"

"Did you not hear what the young man said about the Metropolitan Museum? I fear that he may have been an agent of Jade's. I fear that Jade knew that our master was preparing to make a wager, and made preparations of her own. I fear that her research into this era was more thorough than our master's."

"You think too much, Seven."

"I cannot help it. It is the way I was made. Consider this. The index warned me when he tried to steal it on the bridge, but it did not warn me the second time. I fear he allowed the index to warn me the first time so that he could gain our confidence."

"At least he didn't get the painting."

"No. Not at the Tate. But I think he has already moved on a hundred years, to the Metropolitan Museum."

"Oh."

"Indeed. Ah. I believe that it must be midnight."

Overhead, the sky explodes in falling flowers of fire as the whole world rushes into each other's arms.

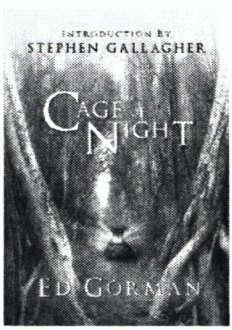
"These people really are crazy," the woman says. "It's like the end of the world."

Sirens wail, growing louder and louder. Two white vehicles suddenly fling themselves around a corner in the road. Lights flash cheerily on their roofs.

The woman says uneasily, "Is this part of the celebrations?"

"Oh dear. I do believe that the pigs have arrived."

The vehicles screech to a halt. Policemen tumble out into the street, and the man and the woman make a run for the future.



COMING SOON FROM ED GORMAN AND PS

Twenty-one-year-old Spence returns to his hometown after two years in the Army and falls in love with Cindy Brasher, Homecoming Queen and town goddess to a long line of jealous men.

A string of robberies puts Spence at odds with his obsessive love for Cindy. One by one Spence's rivals are implicated in horrorific crimes. Spence wonders how much Cindy knows and why she wants him, like her past boyfriends, to visit the old well in the woods . . .

"Where do writers get their ideas? In the case of this little alien invasion story, it was from the pages of the New Scientist*: an article about a very real theory about an extreme case of the well-established effect that observers have on collapsing superimposed quantum states. A useful reminder that real science is a lot weirder than predicting what the internet will look like in ten years time . . . "*

The Thought War

Paul McAuley

Listen:

Don't try to speak. Don't try to move. Listen to me. Listen to my story.

Everyone remembers their first time. The first time they saw a zombie and knew it for what it was. But my first time was one of the first times ever. It was so early in the invasion that I wasn't sure what was happening. So early we didn't yet call them zombies.

It was in the churchyard of St Pancras Old Church, in the fabulous, long lost city of London. Oh, it's still there, more or less; it's one of the few big cities that didn't get hit in the last, crazy days of global spasm. But it's lost to us now because it belongs to them.

Anyway, St Pancras Old Church was one of the oldest sites of Christian worship in Europe. There had been a church there, in one form or another, for one and a half thousand years, and although the railway lines to St Pancras station ran hard by its north side it was an isolated and slightly spooky place, full of history and romance. Mary Woolstonecraft Godwin was buried there, and it was at her graveside that her daughter, who later wrote *Frankenstein*, first confessed her love to the poet Shelley, and he to her. In his first career as an architect's assistant, the novelist Thomas Hardy supervised the removal of bodies when the railway was run through part of the churchyard, and set some of the displaced gravestones around an ash tree that was later named after him.

I lived nearby. I was a freelance science journalist then, and when I was working at home and the weather was good I often ate my lunch in the churchyard. That's where I was when I saw my first zombie.

I can see that you don't understand much of this. It's all right. You are young. Things had already changed when you were born and much that was known then is unknowable now. But I'm trying to set a mood. An emotional tone. Because it's how you respond to the mood and emotions of my story that's important. That's why you have to listen carefully. That's why you are gagged and bound, and wired to my machines.

Listen:

It was a hot day in June in that ancient and hallowed ground. I was sitting on a bench in the sun-dappled shade of Hardy's ash tree and eating an egg-and-cress sandwich and thinking about the article I was

writing on cosmic rays when I saw him. It looked like a man, anyway. A ragged man in a long black raincoat, ropy hair down around his face as he limped towards me with a slow and stiff gait. Halting and raising his head and shaking back ropes from his face and looking all around, and then shambling on, the tail of his black coat dragging behind.

I didn't pay much attention to him at first. I thought he was a vagrant. We are all of us vagrants now, but in the long ago most of us had homes and families and only the most unfortunate, slaves to drink or drugs, lost souls brought down by misfortune or madness, lived on the streets. Vagrants were drawn to churchyards by the quietness and sense of ancient sanctuary, and there was a hospital at the west end of the churchyard of Old St Pancras where they went to fill their prescriptions and get treatment for illness or injury. So he wasn't an unusual sight, shambling beneath the trees in a slow and wavering march past Mary Godwin's grave towards Hardy's ash and the little church.

Then a dog began to bark. A woman with several dogs on leads and several more trotting free around her called to the little wire-haired terrier that was dancing around the vagrant in a fury of excitement. Two more dogs ran up to him and began to bark too, their coats bristling and ears laid flat. I saw the vagrant stop and shake back the ropes from his face and look all around, and for the first time I saw his face.

It was dead white and broken. Like a vase shattered and badly mended. My first thought was that he'd been in a bad accident, something involving glass or industrial acids. Then I saw that what I had thought were ropes of matted hair were writhing with slow and awful independence like the tentacles of a sea creature; saw that the tattered raincoat wasn't a garment. It was his skin, falling stiff and black around him like the wings of a bat.

The dog woman started screaming. She'd had a clear look at the vagrant too. Her dogs pranced and howled and whined and barked. I was on my feet. So were the handful of other people who'd been spending a lazy lunch hour in the warm and shady churchyard. One of them must have had the presence of mind to call the police, because almost at once, or so it seemed, there was the wail of a siren and a prickle of blue lights beyond the churchyard fence and two policemen in their yellow stab vests came running.

They stopped as soon as they saw the vagrant. One talked into the radio clipped to his vest; the other began to round everyone up and lead us to the edge of the churchyard. And all the while the vagrant stood at the centre of a seething circle of maddened dogs, looking about, clubbed hands held out in a gesture of supplication. A hole yawned redly in his broken white face and shaped hoarse and wordless sounds of distress.

More police came. The road outside the churchyard was blocked off. A helicopter clattered above the tops of the trees. Men in hazmat suits entered the park. One of them carried a rifle. By this time everyone who had been in the park was penned against a police van. The police wouldn't answer our questions and we were speculating in a fairly calm and English way about terror-

ism. That was the great fear, in the long ago. Ordinary men moving amongst us, armed with explosives and hateful certainty.

We all started when we heard the first shot. The chorus of barks doubled, redoubled. A dog ran pell-mell out of the churchyard gate and a marksman shot it there in the road and the woman who still held the leashes of several dogs cried out. Men in hazmat suits separated us and made us walk one by one through a shower frame they'd assembled on the pavement and made us climb one by one in our wet and stinking clothes into cages in the backs of police vans.

I was in quarantine for a hundred days. When I was released, the world had changed forever. I had watched it change on TV and now I was out in it. Soldiers everywhere on the streets. Security checks and sirens and a constant low-level dread. Lynch mobs. Public hangings and burnings. Ten or twenty menezesings in London alone, each and every day. Quarantined areas cleared and barricaded. Invaders everywhere.

By now, everyone was calling them zombies. We knew that they weren't our own dead come back to walk the Earth, of course, but that's what they most looked like. More and more of them were appearing at random everywhere in the world, and they were growing more and more like us. The first zombies had been only approximations. Barely human in appearance, with a brain and lungs and a heart but little else by way of internal organs, only slabs of muscle that stored enough electrical energy to keep them alive for a day or so. But they were changing. Evolving. Adapting. After only a hundred days, they were almost human. The first had seemed monstrous and pitiful. Now, they looked like dead men walking. Animated showroom dummies. Almost human, but not quite.

After I was released from quarantine, I went back to my trade. Interviewing scientists about the invasion, writing articles. There were dozens of theories, but no real evidence to support any of them. The most popular was that we had been targeted for invasion by aliens from some far star. That the zombies were like the robot probes we had dispatched to other planets and moons in the Solar System, growing ever more sophisticated as they sent information back to their controllers. It made a kind of sense, although it didn't explain why, although they had plainly identified us as the dominant species, their controllers didn't try to contact us. Experiments of varying degrees of cruelty showed that the zombies were intelligent and self-aware, yet they ignored us unless we tried to harm or kill them. Otherwise they simply walked amongst us, and no matter how many were detected and destroyed, there were always more of them.

The most unsettling news came from an old and distinguished physicist, a Nobel laureate, who told me that certain of the fundamental physical constants seemed to be slowly and continuously changing. He had been trying to convey the urgent importance of this to the government but as I discovered when I tried to use my contacts to bring his findings to the attention of ministers and members of parliament and civil servants, the government was too busy dealing with the invasion and the consequences of the invasion.

There was an old and hopeful lie that an

alien invasion would cause the nations of Earth to set aside their differences and unite against the common enemy. It didn't happen. Instead, global paranoia and suspicion ratcheted up daily. The zombies were archetypal invaders from within. Hatreds and prejudices that once had been cloaked in diplomatic evasions were now nakedly expressed. Several countries used the invasion as an excuse to attack troublesome minorities or to accuse old enemies of complicity with the zombies. There were genocidal massacres and brush fire wars across the globe. Iran attacked Iraq and Israel with nuclear weapons and what was left of Israel wiped out the capital cities of its neighbours. India attacked Pakistan. China and Russia fought along their long border. The United States invaded Cuba and Venezuela, tried to close its borders with Canada and Mexico, and took sides with China against Russia. And so on, and so on. The zombies didn't have to do anything to destroy us. We were tearing ourselves apart. We grew weaker as we fought each other and the zombies grew stronger by default.

In Britain, everyone under thirty was called up for service in the armed forces. And then everyone under forty was called up too. Three years after my first encounter, I found myself in a troop ship at the tail end of a convoy wallowing through the Bay of Biscay towards the Mediterranean. Huge columns of zombies were straggling out of the Sahara Desert. We were supposed to stop them. Slaughter them. But as we approached the Straits of Gibraltar, someone, it was never clear who, dropped a string of nuclear bombs on zombies massing in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. On our ships, we saw the flashes of the bombs light the horizon. An hour later we were attacked by the remnants of the Libyan and Egyptian air forces. Half our fleet were sunk; the rest limped home. Britain's government was still intact, more or less, but everyone was in the armed forces now. Defending ourselves from the zombies and from waves of increasingly desperate refugees from the continent. There was a year without summer. Snow in July. Crops failed and despite rationing millions died of starvation and cold. There were biblical plagues of insects and all the old sicknesses came back.

And still the zombies kept appearing.

They looked entirely human now, but it was easy to tell what they were because they weren't starving, or haunted, or mad.

We kept killing them and they kept coming.

They took our cities from us and we fled into the countryside and regrouped and they came after us and we broke into smaller groups and still they came after us.

We tore ourselves apart trying to destroy them. Yet we still didn't understand them. We didn't know where they were coming from, what they were, what they wanted. We grew weaker as they grew stronger.

Do you understand me? I think that you do. Your pulse rate and pupil dilation and skin conductivity all show peaks at the key points of my story. That's good. That means that you might be human.

Listen:

Let me tell you what the distinguished old physicist told me. Let me tell you about the observer effect and Boltzmann brains.

In the nineteenth century, the Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzmann developed the idea that the universe could have arisen

from a random thermal fluctuation. Like a flame popping into existence. An explosion from nowhere. Much later, other physicists suggested that similar random fluctuations could give rise to anything imaginable, including conscious entities in any shape or form: Boltzmann brains. It was one of those contra-intuitive and mostly theoretical ideas that help cosmologists shape their models of the universe, and how we fit into it. We were once at the centre of the universe, but then Copernicus put the Sun at the centre instead, and we gradually moved off to the side. We know now that we inhabit an undistinguished planet of an average star in a not very special galaxy in a group of a million such, and that group of galaxies one of millions more. We are typical. Ordinary. And because we are ordinary, our universe is ordinary too, because there is no objective reality beyond that which we observe. Because, according to quantum entanglement, pairs of particles share information about each other's quantum states even where distance and timing means that no signal can pass between them. Because observation is not passive. Because our measurements influence the fundamental laws of the universe. They create reality.

But suppose other observers outnumbered us? What would happen then?

The probability of even one Boltzmann brain appearing in the fourteen billion years of the universe's history is vanishingly small. But perhaps something changed the local quantum field and made it more hospitable to the appearance of Boltzmann brains. Perhaps the density of our own consciousness changed the quantum field and attracted Boltzmann brains as the mass of a star changes the gravitation field and attracts passing comets. Or perhaps the inhabitants of another universe are interfering with our universe. Perhaps the zombies are their avatars, Boltzmann brains that pop out of the energy field and change our universe to suit their masters simply because they think differently and see things differently.

This was what the old physicist told me, in the long ago. He had evidence, too. Simple experiments that measured slow and continuous changes in the position of the absorption lines of calcium and helium and hydrogen in the sun's spectrum, in standards of mass and distance, and in the speed of light. He believed that the fundamental fabric of the universe was being altered by the presence of the zombies, and that those changes were reaching back into the past and forward into the future, just as a pebble dropped into a pond will send ripples spreading out to either side. Every time he checked the historical records of the positions of those absorption lines, they agreed with his contemporaneous measurements, even though those measurements were continuously changing. We are no longer what we once were, but we are not aware of having changed because our memories have been changed too.

Do you see why this story is important? It is not just a matter of my survival, or even the survival of the human species. It is a matter of the survival of the entire known universe. The zombies have already taken so much from us. The few spies and scouts who have successfully mingled with them and escaped to tell the tale say that they are demolishing and rebuilding our cities. Day and night they ebb and flow through the

streets in tidal masses, like army ants or swarming bees, under the flickering auroras of strange energies. They are as unknowable to us as we are to them.

Listen:

This is still our world. That it is still comprehensible to us, that we can still survive in it, suggests that the zombies have not yet won an outright victory. It suggests that the tide can be turned. We have become vagrants scattered across the face of the Earth, and now we must come together and go forward together. But the zombies have become so like us that we can't trust any stranger. We can't trust someone like you, who stumbles out of the wilderness into our sanctuary. That's why you must endure this test. Like mantids or spiders, we must stage fearful courtship rituals before we can accept strangers as our own.

I want you to survive this. I really do. There are not many of us left and you are young. You can have many children. Many little observers.

Listen:

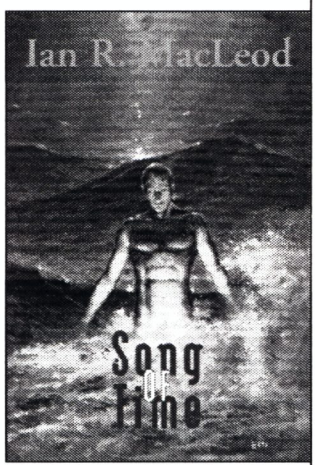
This world can be ours again. It has been many years since the war, and its old beauty is returning. Now that civilisation has been shattered, it has become like Eden again. Tell me: is a world as wild and clean and beautiful as this not worth saving? Was the sky never so green, or grass never so blue?

A New Novel from PS and Ian R. MacLeod

A man lies half-drowned on a Cornish beach at dawn in the furthest days of this century. The old woman who discovers him, once a famous concert violinist, is close to death herself . . . or a new kind of life she can barely contemplate. Does death still exist at all, or has it finally been obliterated? And who is this strange man she's found? Is he a figure returned from her past, a new messiah, or an empty vessel? Is he God, or the Devil?

Filled with love and music, death and life, mind-stretching ideas and sheer, simple humanity, spanning the world from the suburbs of Birmingham to the streets of a new-Renaissance Paris via the ruins of post-apocalyptic India,

Multi-award winning author Ian R MacLeod here creates some of his most powerful scenes, and his most extraordinary, and yet most believable, characters. If you care about the future, if you care about good story-telling, *Song of Time* is a must-read.



Slipcased Hardcover £50.00 [$100.00] • Hardcover £20.00 [$40.00]

"This is the fourth story in a series that plays with the idea of humankind being given the opportunity to go the stars right now. I'm sure some of us would jump at the chance, even if it turned out that we'd be limited to pre-owned planets and asteroid reefs around a handful of red dwarf stars. What would we take with us? What would we do when we got there? How would it change us? Two stories—'Dust' and 'Winning Peace'—are set a couple of hundred years from now; 'City of the Dead' and 'Adventure' (just out in Lou Anders' anthology, Fast Forward 2*) are set in the day after tomorrow, but on worlds far from Earth and full of the relics of histories not our own. I hope to spend more time in the First Empire very soon."*

City Of The Dead

Paul McAuley

How Marilyn Carter first met Ana Datlovskya, the Queen of the Hive Rats: late one afternoon she was driving through the endless tracts of alien tombs in the City of the Dead, to the west of the little desert town of Joe's Corner, when she saw a pickup canted on the shoulder of the rough track, its hood up. She pulled over and asked the woman working elbow-deep in the engine of the pickup if she needed any help; the woman said that she believed that she needed a tow truck, this bloody excuse for a pickup she should have sold for scrap long ago had thrown a rod.

'I am Ana Datlovskaya,' she added, and stuck out an oily hand.

'Marilyn Carter,' Marilyn said, and shook Ana Datlovskaya's hand.

'Our new town constable. That incorrigible gossip Joel Jumonville told me about you,' the woman said. She was somewhere in her sixties, short and broadhipped, dressed in a khaki shirt and blue jeans and hiking boots. Her white hair, roughly cropped, stuck up like ruffled feathers; her shrewd gaze didn't seem to miss much. 'Although he didn't mention that you have a dog. He is a police dog? I met one once, in Port of Plenty. At the train station. It told me to stand still while its handler searched me for I don't know what.'

The black Labrador, Jet, was standing in the loadbed of Marilyn's Bronco, watching them with keen interest.

'He's just a dog,' Marilyn said. 'He doesn't talk or anything. We can give you a lift into town, if you need one.'

'No doubt Joel told you that I am the crazy old woman who lives with hive rats,' Ana Datlovskaya said to Marilyn, as they drove off towards Joe's Corner. 'It is true I am old, as you can plainly see. And it's true also that I study hive rats. But I am not crazy. In fact, I am the only sane person in this desert. Everyone else hopes to make fortune by finding treasure, or by swindling people looking for treasure. *That* is craziness, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'I don't mind in the least, because that's not why I'm here,' Marilyn said.

She'd become town constable by accident. She'd stopped for the night in Joe's Corner and had been sitting in its road-

house, minding her own business, nursing a beer and half-listening to the house band blast out some twentieth-century industrial blues, when a big man a few stools down took exception to something the bartender said and tried to haul him over the counter by his beard. Marilyn intervened and put the big guy on the floor, and the owner of the roadhouse, Joel Jumonville, had given her a steak dinner on the house. Joel was an ex-astronaut who like Marilyn had fought in World War Three. He also owned two of the little town's motels, ran its radio station and its web site, and was, more by default than democracy, its mayor. He and Marilyn got drunk together and told war stories, and by the end of the evening she'd shaken hands on a contract to serve as town constable for one year, replacing a guy who'd quit when a scrap of plastic he'd dug up in one of the tombs had turned out to be a room temperature superconductor.

It wasn't exactly how she'd imagined her life would turn out when she'd won a lottery place on one of the arks.

This was in the heady years immediately after the Jackaroo had arrived in the aftermath of World War Three, and had given the survivors a basic fusion drive and access to a wormhole network linking fifteen M-class red dwarf stars in exchange for rights to the rest of the Solar System; a brief, anarchic age of temporary kingdoms, squabbling emirates, and gloriously foolish attempts at building every kind of Utopia; an age of exploration, heroic ambition, and low farce. Like every other lottery winner, Marilyn had imagined a fresh start, every kind of exotic adventure, but after she'd arrived in Port of Plenty, on the planet of First Foot, short of cash and knowing no one, she'd ended up working for a security firm, which is what she'd been doing before she left Earth. She guarded the mansions and compounds of the city's rich, rode as bodyguard for their wives and children. Some had earned vast fortunes founded on novel principles of physics or mathematics wrested from discarded alien machineries; others were gangsters feeding on the underbelly of Port of Plenty's fast and loose economy. Marilyn's last job had been with an Albanian involved in all kinds of dubious property deals; after he'd been killed by a car bomb, she'd had to get out of Port of Plenty in a hurry because his family suspected that the assassination had been an inside job. She'd drifted west along the coast of First Foot's single continent and ended up in Joe's Corner, but, as she told Ana Datlovskaya, she didn't plan to stay.

'When the year's up I'm moving on. I have a whole new world to explore. And plenty more besides.'

'Ha. If I had a euro for every time I'd heard that from people who thought they were passing through but couldn't find a reason to leave,' Ana Datlovskaya said, 'I'd be riding around the desert in style, instead of nursing that broken-down donkey of a pickup.'

Ana was a biologist who'd moved out to the western desert to study hive rats, supporting her research with her savings and the sale of odd little figurines. Like Marilyn, she was originally from London, England, but their sex and nationality were about all they had in common—Marilyn had been born and raised in Streatham, her mother a nurse and her father a driver on the Under-

ground, while Ana's parents had been Russian exiles, poets who'd escaped Stalin's postwar purges and had set up residence in Hampstead. Still, the two women quickly became friends. Ana was a prominent member of Joe's Corner's extensive cast of eccentrics, but she was also an exemplar of the legion of stout-hearted, sensible, and completely fearless women who before World War Three had explored and done every kind of good work in every corner of the globe. Marilyn had met several of these doughty heroines during her service in the army and had admired them all. The evening she gave Ana a lift into town they had a fine time in the roadhouse, swapping war stories and reminiscing about London and how they'd survived World War Three, and on her next free day Marilyn was more than happy to make a fifty kilometre trip beyond the northern edge of the City of the Dead to visit Ana's desert camp.

By then, Joel Jumonville had told Marilyn a fair number of tall tales about the Queen of the Hive Rats. According to him, the old woman had once shot a bandit who'd tried to rob her, and cut up his body and fed it to her hive rats. Also, that the little figurines she sold to support herself, found nowhere else in the City of the Dead, were rumoured to come from the hold of an ancient spaceship she'd uncovered, she kept a tame tigon she'd raised from a kitten, and she'd learned how to enter hive rat gardens without being immediately attacked and killed. Joel was an inveterate gossip and an accomplished fabulist, so Marilyn also took his stories with large pinches of salt, but when she pulled up by Ana's shack, on a bench terrace cut into a stony ridge that overlooked a broad arroyo, she was amazed to see the old woman pottering about the edge of a hive rat garden. The garden stretched away down the arroyo, crowded with the tall yellow blades of century plants. Columns of hardened mud that Marilyn later learned were ventilation chambers stood here and there, hive rat sentries perched on their hind legs at intervals along the perimeter, and there was a big mound with a hole in its flat top that no doubt led to the heart of the nest.

Jet went crazy over the scent of the hive rats. By the time Marilyn had calmed him down, Ana was climbing the path to her shack, cheerfully helloing them. 'How nice to see you, my dear. And your lovely dog. Did you by any chance bring any tea? I ran out two days ago.'

Sitting on plastic chairs under a canvas awning that cracked and boomed in the hot breeze, they made do with stale instant coffee and flat biscuits, tasting exactly like burnt toast, that Ana had baked using flour ground from cactus tree bark. There wasn't any trick to walking amongst the hive rats, the old woman told Marilyn. She had worked out the system of pheromonal signals that governed much of their cooperative behaviour, and wore a dab of scent that suppressed secretion of alarm and aggression pheromones by sentries and soldiers, so that the hive rats accepted her as one of their own.

Ana talked a long streak about hive rat biology, explaining how their nests were organised in different castes like ants or bees, how they made their gardens. This garden was the largest known, Ana said, and it was unique not only because it was a monoculture of century plants, but because there was an elaborate system of irrigation ditches

and dykes scratched across the arroyo floor. She showed Marilyn views from camera feeds she'd installed in the kilometres of tunnels and shafts and chambers of the nest beneath the garden: workers gnawing at the car-sized tuber of a century plant; an endless processions of workers toiling up from the deep aquifer, their bellies swollen with water; one of the fungal gardens that processed the hive rats' waste; a chamber in which a hive rat queen, fed and groomed by workers one-tenth her size, extruded blind, squirming pups with machine-like regularity. Unlike other nests, this one housed many queens, Ana said; it had never split into daughter colonies.

'When I know you better, perhaps I'll tell you why. But enough of my work. Tell me about the world.'

Marilyn gave Ana the latest local gossip, and ended up promising to do a supply run for the old woman, who said that she would be grateful not to have to bother with dealing with other people: she was far too busy with her research, which was at a very interesting stage. So Marilyn took a dozen little figurines back to Joe's Corner, smoothly knotted shapes fashioned from some kind of resin that when handled induced a pleasant, dreamy sensation that reminded her of her habit, when she'd been eleven or twelve, of standing at the bathroom sink with her hands up to the wrists in warm water, staring into the fogged mirror, wondering what she would become when she grew up. She sold them to the Nigerian assayer in Joe's Corner, bought supplies and picked up several packages from an electronics supplier along with the rest of Ana's mail, and on her next free day took everything out to the old woman's camp.

After a couple of supply runs, Ana gave Marilyn a tiny brown bottle containing a couple of millilitres of oily suppresser scent, telling her that she could use it to check out tombs that happened to be in the middle of hive rat gardens. 'Foolish people try to poison or smoke them out. And they usually get bitten badly because the rats are smarter than most people think. They know how to avoid poison, and their nests are extremely well-ventilated. But if you wear just a dab of suppresser, my dear, you can walk right into those tombs, all of them untouched by looters, and pick up any treasures you might find.'

Marilyn promised she'd give it a try, but the bottle ended up unopened in the junk-filled glove compartment of her Bronco. For one thing, she wasn't convinced that it would work, and she knew that you could die from infection with flesh-eating bacteria after a single hive-rat bite. For another, she didn't really need to supplement her income from sale of scraps looted from tombs. Her salary as town constable was about a quarter of what she'd received for guarding the late unlamented Albanian businessman, but she had a rent-free room in the Westward Ho! motel and ate for free in Joel's roadhouse most nights, and for the first time in her life she was able to put a little money by for a rainy day.

It occurred to her around this time that she was happy. She had a job she liked, and she liked most of the people in Joe's Corner and could tolerate the rest, and she liked the desert, too. When she wasn't visiting Ana Datlovskaya, she spent most of her free time pottering around the tombs of the City of the Dead, exploring the salt-flats and arroyos and low, gullied hills, learning

about the patchwork desert ecology, plants and animals native to First Foot and alien species imported from other worlds by previous tenant races. Camping out in the desert at night, she'd lie in her sleeping bag and look up at the rigid patterns of alien constellations, the two swift moons, the luminous milk of the Phoenix nebula sprawled across the eastern horizon. Earth was about two thousand light years beyond the nebula: the wormhole network linked only fifteen stars, but it spanned the Sagittarius arm of the Galaxy. How strange and wonderful that she should be here, so far from Earth. On an alien world twice the size of Earth, where things weighed half as much again, and the day was a shade over twenty hours long. In a desert full of the tombs of a long-vanished alien race . . .

One day, Marilyn was out at the northern edge of the City of the Dead, sitting on a flat boulder on a low ridge and eating her lunch, when Jet raised up and trotted smartly to the edge of the ridge and began to bark. A few moments later, Marilyn heard the noise of a vehicle off in the distance. She finished what was left of her banana in two quick bites, walked over to where her dog stood, and looked out across the dry playa towards distant hills hazed by dusty air and shimmering heat. The hummocks of ancient tombs in ragged lines amongst drifts of sand and rocks; silvery clouds of saltbush and tall clumps of cactus trees; the green oases of hive rat gardens. The nearest garden was only a kilometre away; Marilyn could see the cat-sized, pinkly naked sentries perched upright amongst its piecework plantings. Beyond it, a thin line of dust boiled up, dragged by a black Range Rover. As it drew nearer, the hive rat sentries started drumming with their feet, a faint pattering that started Jet barking. Soldiers popped up from the mound in the centre of the garden, two or three times the size of the sentries, armoured with scales and armed with recurved claws and strong jaws that could bite through a man's wrist, running towards the Range Rover as it drove straight across the garden. It ploughed through them, leaving some dead and dying and the rest chasing its dusty wake all the way to the garden's boundary, where they tumbled to a halt and stared after it as it headed up a bare apron of rock towards the ridge.

Marilyn walked over to her Bronco and took her pistol from her day bag and stuck it in the waistband of her shorts and walked back to Jet, who was bristling and barking. The Range Rover had stopped at the bottom of the short steep slope. A blond, burly man stood in the angle of the open door on the far side, staring up at Marilyn as a second man climbed out. He had a deep tan and black hair shaved close to his skull, was dressed in black jeans and a white short-sleeved shirt. Black tattoos on his forearms, black sunglasses that heliographed twin discs of sunlight at Marilyn as he said, 'How are you doing, Marilyn? It's been a while.'

It was one of the men who'd worked for the security firm back in Port of Plenty. Frank something. Frank Parker.

'I'm wondering why you came all the way out here to find me, Frank. I'm also wondering how you found me.'

Marilyn was pretty sure that this wasn't anything do with the Albanians, who liked to do their own dirty work, but she was also pretty sure that Frank Parker and his blond

bodybuilder friend were some kind of trouble, and a smooth coolness was filling her up inside, something she hadn't felt for a long time.

'I guess you don't feel like coming down here, so I'll come up,' Frank Parker said, and began to pick his way up the stony slope, ignoring Marilyn's sharp request to stay where he was, going down on one knee when his black town shoes slipped on the frangible dirt and pushing up and coming on, stopping only when Jet started to bark at him, knuckling sweat from his forehead and saying, 'Feisty fellow, ain't he?'

'He's a pretty good judge of people.' Marilyn told Jet to sit, said to Frank Parker, 'I'm waiting to hear what you want. Maybe you can start by telling me what you're doing out here. It's a long way from Port of Plenty.'

'I wouldn't mind a drink of water,' Frank Parker said, and took a couple of steps forward. Jet rose up and started barking again and the man held up his hands, palms out, in a gesture of surrender.

'I'm sure you have a bottle or two in that expensive car of yours,' Marilyn said. She was watching him and trying to watch his friend down by the Range Rover at the same time. Her Glock was a hard flat weight against the small of her back and she stepped hard on the impulse to show it to Frank Parker. If she did, it would take things up to the next level and there'd be no going back.

'I bring greetings from another old friend,' Frank Parker said. 'Tom Archibold. He'd like to invite you over for a chat.'

'What's Tom doing out here?'

Like Frank Parker, Tom Archibold had been working for the same security firm that had been employing Marilyn when her client had been blown to bloody confetti. She was trying her best to keep the surprise she felt from her face, but Frank Parker must have seen something of it because his smile broadened into a grin. 'Tom told me to tell you that he has a little job for you.'

'You can thank Tom for me, and tell him that I already have a job.'

'He needs your advice on something is all.'

'If he wants my advice, he's welcome to visit me when I get back to town tomorrow. My office is right in the middle of our little commercial strip. You can't miss it. It has a sign with "Town Constable" printed on it hung right above the door.'

'He kind of needs you on site,' Frank Parker said.

'I don't think so.'

'We really would like for you to come right away. It's about your friend Ana Datlovskya,' Frank Parker said, and took a step towards Marilyn.

Jet barked and lunged forward, and Frank Parker reached behind himself and jerked a pistol from his belt, Marilyn shouting *no!*, and shot Jet in the chest. Jet dropped flat and slid down the slope, and Frank Parker turned to Marilyn, his eyes widening behind his sunglasses when she put her Glock on him and told him to put his weapon down.

'Do it right now!' she said, and shot him in the leg when he didn't.

He fell on his ass and dropped his pistol. Marilyn stepped forwards and kicked it away, saw movement at the bottom of the slope, the man behind the Range Rover raising a machine pistol, and threw herself flat as a short burst walked along the edge of

the ridge, whining off stones, smacking into dirt, kicking up dust. Marilyn raised up and took aim, and the man ducked out of sight as the round spanged off the window post beside him. She got off two more shots, aiming for the tyres, but the damned things must have been puncture-proof. The Range Rover started with a roar and reversed at speed, its open door flapping. Marilyn braced and took aim and put a shot through the tinted windshield, and the Range Rover spun in a handbrake turn and took off into the playa, leaving only dust in the air.

Frank Parker was holding his thigh with both hands, blood seeping through laced fingers, face pale and tight with pain. 'You fucking shot me, you bitch.'

'You shot my dog. But don't think that makes us even.'

Marilyn picked up his pistol and told him to roll over on his stomach, patted him down and found a gravity knife in an ankle scabbard. She told him to stay absolutely still if he didn't want to get shot again, and crabbed down the slope to where Jet lay, dusty and limp and dead. She carried him up the slope to her Bronco, set him in the well under the shotgun seat. Frank Parker had sat up again and was clutching his thigh and making threats. She told him to shut up and pulled the q-phone from its holster under the dashboard, but although she tried three times she could raise only a faint conversation between two people who seemed to be shouting at each other in a howling gale in a language she didn't recognise. She tried the shortwave radio, too, but every channel was full of static; that wasn't unexpected, as radio reception ran from patchy to non-existent in the City of the Dead, but she'd never before had a problem with the q-phone. A little miracle that fused alien and human technology, it was worth more than the Bronco and shared a bound pair of electrons with the hub station in Joe's Corner, and should have given her an instant connection even if she was standing on the other side of the universe.

Well, she didn't know why the damn thing had decided to throw a glitch, but she was a long way from town, and Ana was in trouble. She found her handcuffs in the glove compartment and walked over to Frank Parker and tossed them into his lap and told him to put them on. As he fumbled with them, she asked him why Tom wanted to talk with her, and what it had to do with Ana Datlovskya.

Frank Parker told her to go fuck herself, closed his eyes when Marilyn cocked her pistol.

'I can knock off plenty of pieces of you before you die,' she said. She was angry and out of patience, and anxious too. 'Or maybe give you to the hive rats down there. I bet they're still pissed off after you drove straight through their garden.'

After a moment, Frank Parker said, 'We've taken over Ana Datlovskaya's claim.'

'Taken it over? What does that mean? Have you bastards killed her?'

'No. No, no. It's not like that.'

'She's alive.'

'We think so.'

'She is or she isn't.'

'We think she's alive,' Frank Parker said. 'She got out into the damn garden and ducked into a hole. We haven't been able to get near it.'

'Because of the hive rats. Did anyone get eaten?'

'One of us got bitten.'

'Tom wants me to persuade her to come out.'

The man nodded sullenly. 'Word is, you're her good friend. Tom thought you could talk some sense into her.'

Marilyn thought about this. 'How did you know where to find me? This is my day off, I'm driving around the desert, no one in town knows where I am. Yet you drive straight towards me. Were you following me?'

'You have a q-phone. We have a magic gizmo that tracks them.'

'Does this magic gizmo also stop q-phones working?'

'I don't know. Really, I don't,' Frank Parker said. 'I was told where to find you, and there you were. Look, the old woman is sitting on something valuable. You can have a share of it. All you have to do is talk to her, persuade her to give herself up. Is that so hard?'

'We walk away afterwards, me and Ana.'

'Sure. We'll even cut you in for a share. Why not? Help me up, we can drive straight there—'

'What is it you want from her? Those figurines?'

'It's something to do with those rats. Don't ask me what. I wasn't privy to the deal Tom made.'

'I bet. Think you can walk over to my pickup?'

'You shot me in the fucking leg. You're going to have to give me a hand.'

'Wrong answer,' Marilyn said.

Frank Parker flinched and started to raise his cuffed hands, but she was quicker, and rapped him smartly above his ear with the grip of her pistol and laid him flat.

He started to come round when she dumped him in the loadbed of the Bronco, feebly trying to resist as she tied off the nylon cord she'd wrapped around his calves. 'You're fucked,' he said. 'Well and truly fucked.'

Marilyn ignored him and went around to the cab and took out the q-phone and tried it again—still no signal—then put it in the plastic box in which she'd packed her lunch, and piled a little cairn of stones over the box. She didn't really believe that Frank Parker had tracked her with some kind of magic gizmo, but better safe than sorry.

Marilyn drove west along the gravel flats of the playa and then north, into a low range of hills. She parked in the shade of a stand of cactus trees and at gunpoint forced her prisoner to climb down and limp inside one of the tombs that stood like a row of bad teeth along the crest of the hill. She told him to stay right where he was, and pulled a shovel from the space behind the Bronco's seats and dug a grave and lined the grave with flat stones and wrapped Jet in plastic sheeting and laid him at the bottom.

She'd found him six months ago, chained to a wrecked car behind a service station on the coast highway, half-starved, sores everywhere under his matted and filthy coat. When the service station owner had tried to stop her taking him, she'd knocked the man on his ass and dragged him back to the wreck and chained him up and left him there. She'd spent two weeks in a motel further on down the road, nursing Jet back to health. He'd been a good companion ever since, loyal and affection-

ate and alert, foolishly brave when it came to standing up to dire cats, hydras, and hive rat soldiers. He'd died defending her, and she wasn't ever going to forget that.

Although she'd attended a couple of dozen funerals during her stint in the army, she could remember only a few of the words of the Service for the Dead, so recited the Lord's Prayer instead. 'I'll come back and give you a proper headstone later,' she said, and filled in the grave, piled more stones over the mound, and went to see to her prisoner.

Frank Parker was squashed into a corner of the tomb, staring at the eidolons that drifted out of the shadows: monkey-sized semi-transparent stick figures that whispered in clicks and whistles, gesturing in abrupt jerks like overwound clockwork toys. They haunted about one in a hundred of the tombs. Perhaps they were intended to be representations of the dead, or their household gods, or perhaps they were some sort of eternal ceremony of mourning or celebration or remembrance: no one knew. And no one knew how they had been created, either; they were not affected by the removal of every bit of rotten 'circuitry' from the tomb they haunted, by scouring its interior clean, or even by destroying it. According to Ana Datlovskaya, they were manifestations of twists in the quantum foam that underpinned space/time, which as far as Marilyn was concerned was like saying that they'd been created by some old wizard out of dragon's blood and dwarfs' teeth.

Marilyn had grown used to the eidolons; they reminded her of old men at bus stops in London before the war, rubbing their hands in the cold, grumbling about the weather and the price of cat meat. Talking to themselves if no one else was about. But they definitely spooked Frank Parker, who watched them closely as they drifted through the dim air like corpses caught in an underwater current, and flinched when Marilyn's shadow fell over him.

'I'm going to fix up your wound,' she said. 'I don't want you dying on me. Not yet, at least.'

She cut off the leg of the man's jeans and salted the wound—a neat through-and-through in the big muscle on the outside of his thigh—with antiseptic powder and fixed a pad of gauze in place with a bandage. Then they had a little talk. Marilyn learned that Tom Archibold had been working for a street banker who'd bought out the gambling debts of a mathematician in Port of Plenty's university. When the mathematician had come up short on his repayments, Tom had had a little talk with him, and had discovered that he'd been corresponding with Ana Datlovskaya about exotic logic systems, and had been helping her write some kind of translation programme.

'This is the bit you're going to have trouble believing,' Frank Parker said. 'But I swear it's true.'

'You'd better spit it out,' Marilyn said, 'or I'll leave you here without any water.'

'Tom believes that the old woman found the wreck of a spaceship,' Frank Parker said. 'And she's trying to talk to the part of it that's still alive.'

Just two hours later, Marilyn Carter was lying on her belly under a patch of the thorny scrub that grew amongst Boxbuilder

ruins on top of the ridge that overlooked the arroyo and the giant hive rat garden. Ana Datlovskaya's tarpaper shack was a couple of hundred metres to the left and somewhat below Marilyn's position. Three Range Rovers were parked beside it. A burly man with a shaven head stood close to one of the Range Rovers and the blond bodybuilder Marilyn had chased off was scanning the hive rat garden with binoculars, a hunting rifle slung over his shoulder. Seeing them together now, Marilyn realised that she'd seen them before. In town a couple of weeks ago, sitting at the counter in the diner. She'd paid them little attention then, thinking that they were just a couple of travellers passing through; now she realised that they must have been on a scouting mission.

The blond man fitted the stock of his rifle to his shoulder and took aim. Marilyn tracked his line of fire, saw a sentry standing chest-high in a hole. Then dust kicked up in front of it and it vanished as the sound of the shot whanged back from the bluffs beyond.

Well, she already knew they were mean. She hoped they were dumb, too.

The swollen sun was about an hour away from setting. Ana had once told Marilyn that because it huddled close to its cool red dwarf sun, First Foot should have been tidally locked, always showing one side to its sun, just as the moon always showed one side to Earth. The fact that there were sunrises and sunsets on First Foot was evidence of some stupendous feat of engineering that had otherwise left no trace, Ana had said: some forgotten race must have spun the planet up like a child's top, giving it a rotational period of ten hours that over millennia had slowed to almost twice that.

The old woman loved to talk about the alien tenants—Boxbuilders, Fisher Kings, Ghostkeepers and all the rest—who had once inhabited the planets and moons and reefs of the fifteen stars linked by the wormhole network. Speculating on why they had come here and what they had done, whether they'd simply died out, or had been wiped out by war, or if they had moved on to somewhere else. To other stars, or to other universes. She'd told Marilyn that some people believed that the Jackaroo collected races as people collected pets, and disposed of them when they lost the lustre of novelty; others that the previous tenants had all been absorbed into the Jackaroo, to become part of a collective, symbiotic consciousness. Anything was possible. No one had ever been aboard one of the Jackaroo's floppy ships, and no one knew what the Jackaroo looked like because they visited Earth only in the form of avatars shaped roughly like people. No one had much idea about the physical appearance of any of the previous tenant races of the wormhole network, either. None of them, not even the Ghostkeepers, who had built the City of the Dead and many other necropolises, had left behind any physical remains or sculptures or pictorial representations. Academics argued endlessly over the carved murals in the so-called Vaults of the Fisher Kings, but no one knew what the murals really represented, or even if the patterns and images discerned by human eyes weren't simply optical illusions. All we really know, Ana liked to say, is that we know nothing at all. At least eight alien races lived here before we came, and each

one died out or vanished or moved on, and left behind only empty ruins, odd scraps, and a few enigmatic monuments. But if we can find out the answers to those questions, we might be able to begin to understand why the Jackaroo gave us the keys to the wormhole network; we might even be able to take control of our fate.

Ana was full of strange notions, but she was also a tough desert bird who knew how to look after herself. Marilyn had had no trouble believing Frank Parker's story that the old woman had taken off into the garden and climbed down into the nest to escape Tom Archibold and his men, and it certainly looked like they were hunkered down, waiting for her to come out and surrender. They couldn't go after Ana because they'd be taken down by the hive rats, and as far as Marilyn knew the hole on top of the mound was the only way Ana could get in and out. It was a stand off, and Marilyn was going to have to go in and try to save Ana before things escalated. It was her job, for one thing. And then there was the small matter of doing right by poor Jet.

Marilyn crawled backwards on elbows and knees until she was certain that she wouldn't be skylighted when she stood up. The Boxbuilder ruins ran along the top of the ridge like random strings of giant building blocks, their thin walls and roofs spun from polymer and rock dust by a species that had left hundreds of thousands of similar strings and clusters on every planet and reef and moon linked by the wormholes. Marilyn picked her way through the thorny scrub that grew everywhere amongst the ruins, and walked down the reverse side of the ridge to her Bronco, which she'd parked on a stony apron three kilometres south of the arroyo. She checked the shortwave again—still nothing but static—and lifted out her spare can of petrol and took rags from her toolbox and set off to the east.

She twisted strips torn from the rags around catchclaw and cloudbush plants, soaked them in petrol, and set them alight. Fire bloomed quick and bright and the hot wind blew flames flat amongst the dry scrub and it caught with a crackling roar. Marilyn walked along the track towards Ana's shack with huge reefs of white smoke boiling up into the darkening sky behind her. A harsh smell of burning in the air, and flecks and curls of ash fluttering down. There was a stir of movement amongst the Range Rovers, someone shouted a challenge, a spotlight flared. Marilyn raised her hands as three men walked towards her, two circling left and right, the third, Tom Archibold, saying, 'I was wondering when you'd turn up.'

'Hello, Tom.'

'You set a fire as a diversion, and then you walk right in. What are you up to?'

'The fire isn't a diversion, Tom. It's a signal. In about two hours, people from Joe's Corner will be turning up, wondering who set it.'

Tom grinned. 'You think a bunch of hicks can make any kind of trouble for us? I'm disappointed, Marilyn. You used to be a lot sharper than that.'

'Frank Parker said you needed my help. Here I am. Just remember that I came here voluntarily. And remember that you have about two hours. Maybe less.'

'Where is Frank?'

'I shot him, not seriously, after he shot my dog. He'll be okay. I'll tell you where to find him when this is over.'

'He won't make any kind of hostage, Marilyn. He fucked up, I could care less if he lives or dies, much less about exchanging the old woman for him.'

'How about if I help you get whatever it is you came here for?'

Tom Archibold studied her for a few moments. He was a slim man dressed in a brown turtleneck sweater and blue jeans. Black hair swept back from his keen, handsome face, a Bluetooth earpiece plugged into his left ear. At last, he said, 'What do you expect in return?'

'To walk away from this with Ana.'

'Why not? I might even throw in a few points from the money I'm going to make.'

He said it so quickly and casually that Marilyn knew at once he intended to kill her as soon as she was no longer useful to him. She'd guessed it anyhow, but now that she was in his power she felt a strong chill pass through her.

She said, 'Is Ana still inside the nest?'

'Yeah. She ran off into the garden—into the hole atop that mound,' Tom said, pointing across the dusky arroyo. 'We couldn't follow her because of the damn rats. We've been picking off any that show themselves, but there are any number of them, we can't get close.'

'You want me to talk her out of there.'

'If she's still alive. We kind of winged her.'

'You shot her?'

'We shot *at* her, when she ran. To try to make her stop. One of the shots might have gotten a little too close.'

'Where do you think you hit her?'

'The right leg, it looked like. It can't have been serious. It knocked her down, but she managed to crawl into the hole.'

'You were supposed to take her prisoner, but she got away, you wounded her . . . It's all gone bad, hasn't it?'

'We have you.'

'Only because I wanted to come here. Don't you forget that. I'm curious, by the way. Why involve me at all?'

Tom smiled. 'Either you're bluffing, pretending to be ignorant to see if I'll let something slip, or you aren't really the old woman's friend. Let's sit down and talk.'

After the blond bodybuilder had quickly and thoroughly patted Marilyn down, she and Tom sat on Ana's plastic chairs and Tom asked her every kind of question about Ana's research. She answered as truthfully as she could, but it quickly became clear that Tom knew a lot more about most of it than she did. He knew that Ana and the mathematician in Port of Plenty had been working up computer models of the hive rats' behaviour, and that they had been developing some kind of artificial intelligence programme. He also knew that Ana had discovered that the behaviour of the hive rats was strongly influenced by pheromones, but he didn't seem to know that Ana had synthesised pheromone analogs.

When he had run out of questions, Marilyn said, 'I can help you, but I think I need to talk to your client first.'

'What makes you think I have a client?'

'You wouldn't have gone to all this trouble to chase a rumour about a crashed spaceship. It isn't your style, and I doubt that you have the kind of cash to pay for an operation like this. After all, you stumbled on Ana's research when you were working as a debt collector. So you're working for someone. That's the kind of people we are,

Tom. We put our lives on the line for other people. I believe that he's sitting in one of those Range Rovers,' Marilyn said. 'The guy guarding them hasn't budged since I turned up, and you have a Bluetooth connection in your ear. That will only work over a very short range here, and my guess is he'd been using it to listen in to us, and feed you questions. How am I doing?'

Tom didn't answer at once. Marilyn wondered if he was listening to his client, or if she'd pushed him too far, if he was reconsidering his options. At last, he said, 'How can you help us?'

'I know the trick Ana used to get inside the nest without being killed and eaten.'

Another pause. Tom said, 'All right. If you go in there and bring her out, you can speak to my client. Deal?'

'Deal.'

' You're in for a surprise,' Tom said. 'But right now, you had better tell me how you're going to walk in there.'

'I need something from Ana's shack.'

The hot air inside the shack smelled strongly of Ana Datlovskaya and the smoking oil lamp that was the only illumination. A woman lay on Ana's camp bed. Julie Bell, another of Marilyn's former colleagues. She was unconscious. Her jeans had cut off at the knees and bandages around her calves were spotted with blood and the flesh above and below the bandages was swollen red and shiny.

'You should get her to a hospital right now,' Marilyn told Tom. 'Otherwise she's going to die of blood poisoning.'

'The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get out of here. What's that?'

Marilyn had opened the little chemical icebox and taken out a rack of little brown bottles. She explained that they contained artificial pheromones that Ana had synthesised. She held up the largest, the only one with a screw cap, and said that a dab of this would allow her to follow Ana down into the nest.

'I don't think so,' Tom said. 'If that shit really works, we can do it ourselves.'

'It won't work on men. Only women. Something to do with hormones.'

'Bullshit,' Tom said, but Marilyn could see that he was thinking as he stared at her. Trying to figure out if she was telling the truth or making a move.

'Why don't you try it out?' she said, and handed it to him.

Tom volunteered the blond bodybuilder. The man didn't look very happy as, in the glare of the spotlights on top of two of the Range Rovers, he edged down the path towards the edge of the hive rats' garden. The sun had set now and stars were popping out across the darkening sky, obscured in the east by the smoke of the fire Marilyn had set. When the blond man reached the bottom of the path, sentries popped up from holes here and there amongst the tall century plants, and he turned and looked up at his boss and said that he didn't think that this was a good idea.

'Just get on with it,' Tom said.

Standing beside him, Marilyn felt a sick eagerness. She knew what was going to happen, and she knew that it was necessary.

The man cocked his pistol and stepped forward, as if onto thin ice. Sentries near and far began to slap their feet, and the ground in front of the bodybuilder collapsed as soldiers heaved out of the gravelly sand, snapping long jaws filled with

pointed teeth. The man tried to run, and one of the soldiers sprang forward and seized his ankle. He crashed down full-length and then two more soldiers were on him. He kicked and punched at them, screamed when one bit off his hand. More soldiers were running through the shadows cast by the century plants and Tom pulled his pistol and aimed and shot the body-builder in the head, shot at the soldiers as they tore at the body. Dust boiled up around it as it slowly sank.

The surviving goon, the one who'd been guarding the Range Rovers, invoked Jesus Christ, and Tom turned to Marilyn and hit her hard in the face with the back of his hand, knocking her down. She sat looking up at him, not moving, feeling a worm of blood run down her cheek where his signet ring had torn her skin.

'You're going down there,' Tom said.

'I need the pheromone first,' Marilyn said.

'Right now,' Tom said. 'Let's see how fast you can run.'

Marilyn had rubbed the suppresser scent that Ana had given her over her arms and face before she'd walked up to the shack and surrendered; the stuff she'd told Tom was a pheromone that would guarantee safe passage, but only for women, had been nothing more than the base solution of neutral oil, and gave as much protection from the hive rats' aggression towards trespassers as a sheet of paper against a bullet. She wasn't at all certain that it would keep her safe now that the hive rats had been stirred up, but she reckoned she had a better chance with the rats than with the two men silhouetted above her in the glare of the spotlights as she walked down the path.

The spotlights lit up a wide swathe of the garden like a theatrical set, stark and hyperreal against the darkness of the rest of the arroyo. The blades of century plants that towered above Marilyn, growing in sinuous lines and clumps between irrigation ditches, glowed banana yellow. The churned patch of dirt that had swallowed the blond bodybuilder was directly ahead. Marilyn stepped past it, feeling that her skin was about a size too small, remembering how she'd felt moving from position to position in the ruins of the outskirts of Paris, trying to pinpoint a sniper that had shot three of her squad. A hive rat sentry was watching her from its perch on a flat slab of rock, pink skin glistening, an arc of small black eyes glittering above its tiny undershot mouth. She took a wide detour around it and spotted others standing under the century plants as she made her way towards the mound.

The mound was ten metres high, shaped like a small volcano or the entrance to the lair of monster-movie ants, smooth and unmarked apart from a trail of human footprints. She trod carefully up the slope, aware of the hive rats scattered across the garden and the two men watching her from the bench terrace. At the top, a flat rim circled a hole or vent a couple of metres across. Marilyn stepped up to the lip, saw spikes hammered into the hard crust, a rope ladder dropping into darkness. Hot air blew past her face. It stank of ammonia and a rotten musk. She called Ana's name, and when nothing came back shouted across to Tom Archibold and told him that she was going in.

He shouted back, said that she had thirty minutes. He sounded angry and on edge.

The death of his goon had definitely spooked him, and Marilyn hoped that he was beginning to worry that a posse from Joe's Corner might soon turn up.

'I'll take as long as it needs,' she said, and with a penlight in her teeth like a pirate's cutlass started to climb down the rope ladder into the hot stinking dark.

The shaft went down a long way, flaring out into a vault whose walls were ribbed with long vertical plates. Marilyn shone the penlight around and saw something jutting out of the wall a few metres below, a wooden platform little bigger than a bed, hung from a web of ropes. Ana Datlovskya sat there with her back to the wall, her face pale in the beam of the penlight and one arm raised straight up, aiming a pistol at Marilyn.

'Tell me you have arrested those fools.'

'Not yet,' Marilyn said, and explained how she had taken one man prisoner, how another had been badly bitten and a third had been killed by the hive rats after she had tricked him into wearing only the base solvent. 'There are only two left. Three, if their client is hiding inside one of those Range Rovers. I managed to convince them that your suppresser only works for women. Can I come down? I feel very vulnerable, hanging here.'

Ana told her to be careful, the platform was meant for only one person. When Marilyn reached her, she saw that the old woman had cut away one leg of her jeans and tied a bandage around her thigh. Rusty vines of dry blood wrapped her skinny bare leg. She refused to let Marilyn look at her wound, saying that it was a flesh wound, nothing serious, and she refused the various painkillers Marilyn had brought, too.

'I have a first-aid kit here. I have already treated myself to a Syrette of morphine, and need no more because I must keep a clear head. I climbed down powered by adrenaline, but I don't think I can climb back up.'

'Is there any other way out of here?'

'Unless you are very good at digging, no.'

Ana sat on a big cushion with her injured leg stretched out straight. Her face was taut with pain and beaded with sweat. There was a laptop beside her—not the notebook she kept in her shack but a cutting-edge q-bit machine that used the same technology as Marilyn's q-phone, phenomenally fast and with a memory so capacious it could swallow the contents of the British Library in a single gulp. Ledges cut into the wall held boxes of canned food and bottled water, a bank of car batteries, a camping stove: a regular little encampment or den.

'I think you had better tell me why Tom Archibold and his client are so interested in you,' Marilyn said.

She was planning to climb back out and talk to Tom and his client, stretch things out by pretending to negotiate with them until help arrived. Although she couldn't be sure that anyone in town would have noticed the smoke from the fire before night had fallen, or that they'd link it to the fact that she hadn't returned from her day-trip to the desert, that she might be in trouble . . .

Ana said, 'They did not tell you?'

'They told me you found a spaceship.'

'And you thought they were lying. Well, it's true. Don't look so surprised. We have spaceships, yes? So did the other tenants. The ones who lived here before us. And one

of them crashed here, long, long ago. It was not very big, smaller than a car in fact, and all that's left of it are scraps of hull material, worth nothing. I send a piece to be analysed. Someone has already found something identical on some lonely rock around another star, took a patent out on its composition.'

'So it's worthless. That's good. Or it will be, if we can convince the bad guys that you don't have anything worth stealing.'

Ana shook her head. 'I should not have trusted Zui Lin.'

'This is your mathematician friend.'

'I needed help to construct the logic of the interface, and the AI programme, but I confided too much to him. You see the goggles, on the shelf? Put them on and take a look below us. They do not like ordinary light, it disrupts their behaviour. But they show up very well in infra-red.'

Marilyn fitted the goggles over her eyes. The platform creaked as she leaned over the side, holding onto the rope ladder for support. Directly below, grainy white clouds were flowing past each other. Hive rats. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Moving over the floor and lower parts of the wall of the chamber in clusters that merged and broke apart and turned as one like flocks of birds on the wing . . .

Behind her, Ana said, 'There was a war. A thousand years ago, ten thousand . . . My friend does not think of time as we do, in days or in seasons, as something with a linear flow. So it is not clear how long ago. But there was a war, and during the war a spaceship crashed here.'

'The hive rats were on it? Is that where they came from?'

'No. If there were living things on the spaceship, they died. You remember, we talked about where the former tenants of this shabby little empire went to?'

'They died out. Or they went somewhere else.'

'This species, they transformed. They made a very large and very rapid change. At least, some of them did. And those that changed and those that did not change fought . . . The spaceship was a casualty of that war. It was badly damaged and it crashed. What survived was its mind. It was something like a computer, but also something like a kind of bacterial colony. Or a virus culture. I have tried to understand it, but it is hard. It was in any case self-aware. It was damaged and it was dying, so it created a copy of itself and found a platform where the copy could establish itself—a hive rat colony. It infected the hive rats with a logic kernel and a compressed version of the memory files that had survived the crash, and over many years the seed of the logic kernel unpacked and grew as the colony grew. It needs to be very big because it must support many individuals that do nothing but act as hosts for the ship-mind. The dance you see down there, that is the mind at work.'

'There must be hundreds of them,' Marilyn said.

It was oddly hypnotic, like watching schools of fish endlessly ribboning back and forth across a reef.

'Many thousands,' Ana said. 'You can see only part of it from here. Each group processes a number of sub-routines. The members of each group move endless around each other to exchange information, and the different groups merge or flow past each other to share information too.

The processing is massively parallel and the mathematics underlying it is fractally compact, but even so, the clock speed is quite slow. Still, I have learnt much.'

Marilyn sat back and pulled off the goggles. 'Ana, are you trying to say that you can talk to it?'

'At first it tried to talk to me. It made the figurines, but they were not successful. They are supposed to convey information, but only arouse emotions, moods. But they inspired me to work hard on establishing a viable method of communication, and at last, with the help of Zui Lin, I succeeded.'

Ana explained that her laptop was connected to a light display set in the heart of the nest. When she typed a question, it was translated into a display that certain groups of rats understood, and other groups formed shapes which a programme written by Zui Lin translated back into English.

'It takes a long time to complete the simplest conversation, but time is what I have, out here. I should have showed you this before. It would make things easier now.'

'You didn't trust me. It's all right. I understand.'

'I did not think you would believe me. But now you must.'

Ana looked about a hundred years old in the beam of the penlight.

'I think you had better give me your gun,' Marilyn said. 'Maybe I can get the drop on Tom Archibold and his goon. If it comes to it, I'll kill them.'

'And his client, too.'

'Yes. If it comes to it.'

'You may find that hard,' Ana said.

'You know who he is, don't you?'

'I have a good idea . . . ' Ana took Marilyn's hand. Her grip was feeble and feverish but her gaze was steady. 'I also have a way of dealing with those men, and their client. I have everything you need, down here. I would have used it myself if I hadn't been hurt.'

'Show me.'

After Marilyn had climbed out into the glare of the spotlights, the smell of smoke, and the gentle rain of ash from the fire to the east, she held up the q-bit laptop and said loudly, 'This is what you came for.'

'Come straight here,' Tom Archibold shouted back. 'No tricks.'

'I've done my part. I expect your client to stick to the agreement. I want him to tell me himself that he'll take this laptop and let me and Ana go free. That you'll all go back to Port of Plenty and you won't ever come after us. Otherwise, I'll sit out here and wait for my friends to come investigate the fire. They can't be far away, now.'

There was a long silence. At last, Tom said, 'My client says that he has to look at the evidence before he decides what to do.'

'Good. He can see that it's exactly as advertised.'

Marilyn crabbed down the side of the mound and walked out across the garden. Sentries stood everywhere, making a low drumming sound that raised the hairs on the back of her neck, and crevices were opening all around, full of squirming motion. It occurred to her that Ana's suppressor might not protect her once the entire colony was aroused, but she steeled herself and stopped a dozen metres from the edge of the garden. On the bench terrace above, Tom told her come straight up the path, and she said that he had to be kidding.

'I can talk to your client from here.'

'Easier all round if you come up,' Tom said. 'If I wanted to shoot you, Marilyn, I would have already done it.'

'Bullshit,' Marilyn said. 'You haven't shot me because you know there's no way you could try to retrieve this laptop without being eaten alive.'

She had to wait while Tom disappeared from view, presumably to confer directly with his client. Tom's surviving goon stood above, watching her impassively; she stared back at him, trying not to flinch at the stealthy scrabbling noises behind her. And then two figures joined him. One was Tom Archibold; the other was a tall mannequin that moved with stiff little steps.

Tom's client was a Jackaroo avatar.

Marilyn had seen them on TV back on Earth, but had never before faced one. It was two metres tall, dressed in a nondescript black suit, its pale face vaguely male and vaguely handsome. A showroom dummy brought to life; a shell woven from a single molecule of complex plastic doped with metals, linked by a version of q-bit tech to its Jackaroo operator, who could be in orbit around First Foot, or Earth, or a star at the far end of the universe.

In a rich baritone, it questioned Marilyn about the copy of the ship-mind lodged in the hive rat colony, and watched a slideshow of random photographs on the laptop.

'The ship-mind has migrated to that device,' it said, at last.

'Ana made a copy of the kernel from which it grew, and found a way of running it in the laptop,' Marilyn said. Her arms ached from holding it up.

'There is a copy in the device and a copy in the hive rat colony. Are there any others?'

'Not that I know of,' Marilyn said, hoping that neither the Jackaroo nor Tom Archibold would spot the lie.

'You will give us the laptop in exchange for your life.'

'My life, and Ana's. You don't have much time,' Marilyn said. 'People will be here any minute, drawn by the fire. And they'll be wondering why I haven't called in, too.'

'How do I know you won't come after me?' Tom said.

'You have my word,' Marilyn said.

'You will let the two women live,' the avatar told him. 'I want only the copy of the ship-mind, and you want only your fee.'

Tom didn't look happy about this, but told Marilyn to walk on up the path.

'Tell your man to put up his gun,' she said.

Tom gave a brusque order and the goon stepped back. Marilyn pressed the space bar of the laptop and closed it up and started up the path, walking slowly and deliberately, trying to ignore the scratching stir across the garden at her back. Trying to keep count in her head.

When she reached the top of the path, Tom stepped forward and snatched the laptop from her, and the goon grabbed her arms and held her.

'There's a lot more to it than the stuff on the laptop,' Marilyn said. 'I can tell you what the old woman told me. Everything she told me during our long conversations.'

'The ship-mind is all I want,' the avatar said.

'They went somewhere else,' Marilyn said. She was still counting inside her head.

'Is that why you're interested in them? Or are you frightened that we'll learn something you don't want us to know?'

The avatar swung its whole body around so that it could look at her. 'Do not presume,' it said.

She knew she had hit a nerve and it made her bolder. And the count was almost done. 'I was just wondering why you broke your agreement with the UN. This world and the other places—they're where we can make a new start. You aren't ever supposed to come here. You're supposed to leave us alone.'

'In ten years or a hundred years or a thousand years it will come to you as it came to the others,' the avatar said.

'We'll change,' Marilyn said. 'We'll become something new.'

'From what we have seen so far, it is likely that you will destroy yourselves. As others have done. As others will do, when you are less than a memory. It is inevitable, and it should not be hurried.'

Marilyn's countdown reached zero. She said, 'Is that why you're here? Are you scared we'll learn something we shouldn't?'

The avatar stiffly turned and looked at the laptop Tom held. 'Why is that making a noise?'

'I can't hear anything,' Tom said.

'It is at the frequency of twenty-four point two megahertz,' the avatar. 'Beyond the range of your auditory system, but not mine.'

Tom stepped towards Marilyn, asking her what she'd done, and there was a vast stir of movement in the garden below. In the glare of the spotlights and in the shadows beyond, all around the stalks of the stiff sails of the century plants, the ground was moving.

Ana had once told Marilyn that the hive rat nest contained more than a hundred thousand individuals, a biomass of between two point five and three hundred metric tons. Most of that seemed to be flooding towards the bench terrace: a vast and implacable wave of hive rats clambering over each other, six or seven deep. A flesh-coloured tide that flowed fast and strong between the century plants and smashed into the slope and started to climb. A great hissing high-pitched scream like a vast steam engine about to explode. A wave of ammoniacal stench.

Tom Archibold raised his pistol and aimed it at Marilyn, and the avatar stepped in front of him and in its booming baritone said that it wanted the woman alive, and snatched the laptop from him and wheeled around and began to march towards the Range Rovers. The goon pushed Marilyn forward, but a living carpet of hive rats was already rippling across the ground in front of them and when they stopped and turned there were hive rats behind them too, two waves meeting and climbing over each other and merging in a great stream that chased after the avatar as it stepped stiffly along. The goon let go of Marilyn and ran, and hive rats swarmed up him and he batted at them and went down, screaming. Tom raised his pistol and got off a single round that whooped past Marilyn, and then he was down too, covered in a seething press, jerking and crawling, and then he lay still and the hive rats moved on, chasing after the laptop that the avatar carried.

Ana had released a pheromone into the nest that made the hive rats believe that they were being attacked by another nest, and painted the laptop with a scent that

mimicked that of a hive rat queen. This had drawn most of the hive rats in the nest to the surface, and they had begun their attack when the laptop had started to play the sound file Marilyn had activated: a recording of a hive rat queen distress call. The nest believed that one of its queens had been captured, and was rushing to her defense.

Marilyn stood still as rats scurried past on either side of her, scared that she'd be bitten if she stepped on one. The avatar wrenched open the door of the nearest Range Rover and bent inside, and a muscular stream of hive rats flowed over it. The avatar was strong and its shell was tough. It managed to start the Range Rover and the big vehicle shot forward, packed with furious movement and pursued by the army of hive rats. It ploughed through the plastic chairs and the awning, swerved snakewise past the shack, and drove straight off the edge of the bench terrace and slammed down nose first into the garden below.

The flood of hive rats washed over it and receded, streaming away, sinking into holes and burrows. Marilyn stepped carefully amongst the hundreds of hive rats that were still moving about the bench terrace, collecting up the injured and dying. Tom Archibold and his goon were messily dead. So was Julie Bell, inside the shack. In the Range Rover, the avatar was half-crushed between the steering wheel and the broken seat. Its suit had been ripped to shreds and its shell had been torn open by the strong teeth and claws of soldier hive rats, and it did not move when Marilyn dared to lean into the Range Rover, searching for and failing to find the laptop—the hive rats must have carried it off to their nest.

The avatar wouldn't or couldn't answer her questions, began to leak acrid white smoke from the broken parts of its shell. Marilyn snatched up a briefcase and beat a hasty retreat when the avatar suddenly burst into flame, burning in a fierce flare that set the Range Rover on fire, too, a funeral pyre that sent hot light and dark smoke beating out across the garden as the last of the hive rats scurried home.

When the posse from Joe's Corner arrived, late and loud and half-drunk, Marilyn was setting up a scaffold tripod over the hole in the top of the mound. She gave Joel Jummonville and the three men he'd brought with him the last of her suppressor, and they reluctantly followed her across the garden and helped her rig up a harness; then she climbed down the rope ladder and helped Ana Datlovskya into the harness and Joel and his men hauled the old woman out by main force. Ana passed out as soon as she reached the top. The men carried her across the garden and drove her off to the clinic in Joe's Corner, and Marilyn drove Joel to the tomb where she had stashed her prisoner, Frank Parker.

Frank Parker lawyered up and parlayed a deal. Marilyn had to agree to drop most of the charges against him in exchange for a lead that pointed the UN police in Port of Plenty to a room in a hotbed motel near the city's docks, where Tom Archibold had stashed Zui Lin. The mathematician had been interrogated by the avatar, and confirmed most of Marilyn's story. The UN provisional authority on First Foot made a formal protest about the avatar's presence, and in due course received apologies from the Jackaroo, who blamed a rogue element

and made bland assurances that it would not happen again.

Ana Datlovskya was in a coma for two weeks, and nearly died from blood loss and infection. Reporters set up camp outside the clinic; Marilyn arrested two who tried to sneak into her room, and deputised townspeople to set up an around-the-clock watch.

When Ana recovered consciousness, she told Marilyn her last little secret. Marilyn and Joel Jummonville drove out to the arroyo and paced off distances from Ana's shack and dug down carefully and retrieved the plastic-wrapped box with Ana's papers and a q-bit hard drive that contained not only a copy of all her work on the hive rats, but also a back-up of the hard drive of the laptop lost somewhere under the hive rat garden.

Marilyn and Joel drank from ice-cold bottles of beer from the cooler they'd brought along, standing side by side at the edge of the bench terrace and looking out at the simmering garden down in the arroyo. It was noon, hot and peaceful. Every blade of century plant stood above its shrunken shadow. Hive rat sentries stood guard on flat stones in front of their pop holes.

'I can almost see why she wants to come back,' Joel said.

Ana had told Marilyn that she still had a lot of work to do. 'I had only just begun a proper conversation with the ship-mind before I was so rudely interrupted. Now I will have to start over again. Things may go more quickly if Zui Lin sticks to his promise and comes out here to help me, but it will be a long time before we know whether or not the Jackaroo avatar told you anything like the truth.'

Marilyn warned the old woman that people were already talking about her work with the hive rats and the ship-mind, showed her a fat fan of newspapers that had made it their headline story. 'You're famous, Ana. You're going to have to become used to that.'

'I will be beleaguered by fools looking for the secret of the universe,' the old woman said. She looked frail and shrunken against the clean linen of the clinic bed, but her gaze was still as fierce as a desert owl's.

'The Jackaroo thought that the ship-mind knew something important,' Marilyn said. 'Something that might help us understand what happened to the other tenant races. What might happen to us.'

'As if we can learn from the fate of other species, when we have learnt so little from our own history,' Ana said. 'Whatever the ship-mind knows, and I do not yet know it knows anything important, we must make our own future.'

Marilyn thought about that now, when Joel Jummonville asked her what she was going to do next.

'Why I ask, you're going to be rich,' Joel said. 'And the last constable, he ran out when he struck it rich with that room-temperature superconductor.'

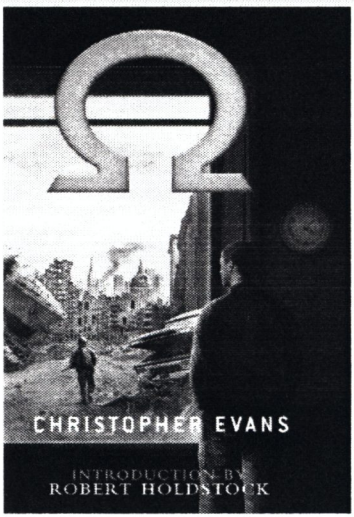
The briefcase Marilyn had pulled out of the avatar's Range Rover had contained a little gizmo that not only tracked and disrupted q-phones, but could also eavesdrop on them—a violation of quantum mechanics that was like catnip to physicists. Marilyn had a patent lawyer, a cousin of the town's assayer, working full time in Port of Plenty to establish her rights to a share of profits from any new technology derived from reverse engineering the gizmo. Mari-

lyn planned to give half of anything she earned to Ana; so far all she had was a bunch of unpaid legal bills.

She took a slug of beer and studied the shimmering hive rat garden, the sentries standing upright and alert beneath the great sails of the century plants. 'Oh, I think I'll stick around for a little while,' she said. 'Someone has to make sure that Ana will be able to get on with her work without being disturbed by tourists and charlatans. And besides, my contract has six months to run.'

'And after that?'

'Hell, Joel, who knows what the future holds?'



Omega: an apocalyptic rumour from the Eastern Front. Omega: something that will alter all the strategic calculations of the Earth's great military blocs. Omega: the code name for a weapon that may well bring doomsday with it.

But if Omega is indeed the agent that will destroy the world, that world is not our own. For this is a timeline in which World War Two never truly ended: a timeline in which Hitler died in a plane crash, Britain joined Germany in its battle against Communist Russia, and the present is an age of intermittent, but deadly, armed conflict between the USSR, the European Alliance, and the USA. The frontier regions are radioactive wastelands, nuclear winter threatens catastrophe, global confrontation could erupt again any time—and that's before Omega is taken into account . . .

Omega is the first adult novel by Christopher Evans in a decade, and perhaps his best so far. This is alternate history of a brilliantly unusual kind.

Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

Now accepting orders for four-issue subscriptions

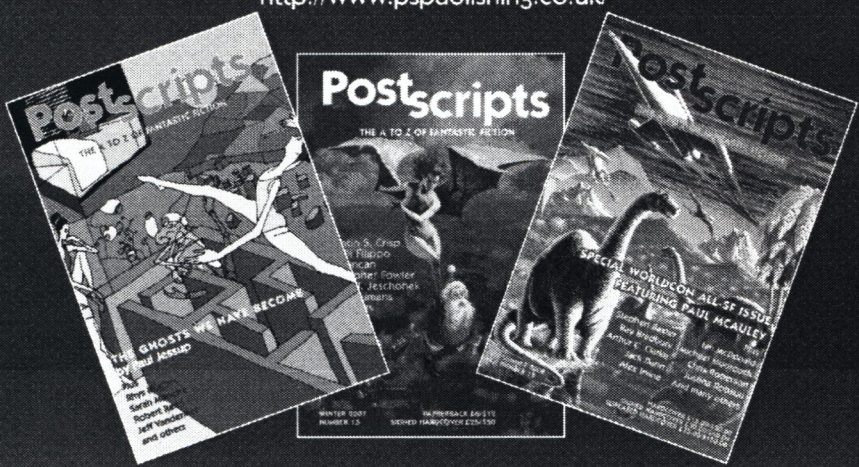
Each issue features approximately **60,000** words of fiction (SF, Fantasy, Horror and Crime/Suspense), plus a guest editorial, interviews, and occasional non fiction.

The magazine is published as a regular newsstand-type edition for £6 or $12 (postage £2 for the UK and £4/$8 for the rest of the world); and a signed, 150-copy hardcover edition for £25 or $50, post-free to anywhere. Occasional larger issues will be £12/$25 for the unsigned edition (the signed will remain at £25/$50). These bumper editions will, however, be sent to subscribers at no extra cost.

Unsigned edition
UK £26 postage paid
Rest of the world
£30 / US$60

Signed edition
UK £100 postage paid
Rest of the world
£110 / $220

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



CHARLES STROSS

From the author of Accelerando, The Atrocity Archives, The Jennifer Morgue and Halting State comes a new novel in the grand tradition of Asimov and Heinlein...

SATURN'S CHILDREN

July 2008. Hardback. £15.99

orbit

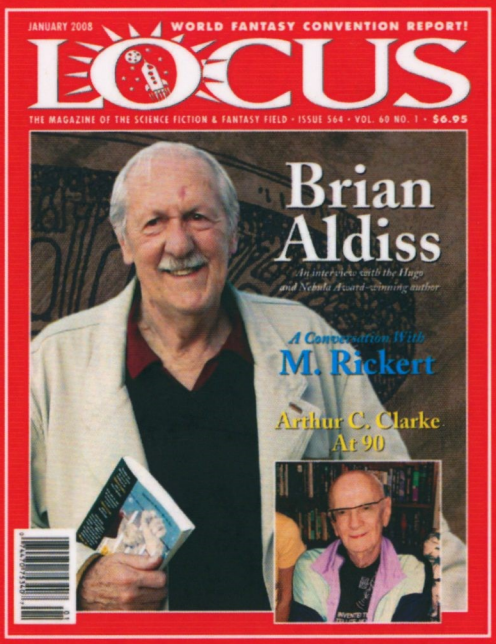
WWW.ORBITBOOKS.NET

The UK's No1 SF/F Publisher

LOCUS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY FIELD

Covering the science fiction field for 41 years
28-Time Hugo Winner



Monthly: Up-to-date publishing news, book reviews, author notes on marriages, births, and other milestones, complete lists of all SF/fantasy/horror published in the US & UK, interviews with well-known and up-and-coming authors

Quarterly: Forthcoming US & UK books: an advance listing of upcoming titles for the next nine months

Annually: Year-in-Review: a comprehensive analysis of the field; Annual Recommended Reading List; results of the Locus Poll & Survey

Special Features: SF around the globe, spotlights on horror and young-adult fiction, convention coverage including full Worldcon coverage with the Hugo Winners, lots and lots of photos, and much, much, more.

"*Locus* is still the only magazine I read from cover to cover. It is also the only magazine which makes me drop everything when it arrives..." *–Sir Arthur C. Clarke*

Subscribe Now!

Institutions: $4.00 extra per year

Single copy price: $6.95 (+ postage)

UNITED KINGDOM & EUROPE
(Air Speeded)
__£26.00 for 6 issues
__£49.00 for 12 issues
__£82.00 for 24 issues

USA
__$34.00 for 6 issues (Periodical)
__$60.00 for 12 issues (Periodical)
__$108.00 for 24 issues (Periodical)
__$40.00 for 6 issues (1st class)
__$68.00 for 12 issues (1st class)
__$124.00 for 24 issues (1st class)

All subscriptions are payable in US funds to **Locus Publications, PO Box 13305, Oakland CA 94661, USA** or in pounds to our British agent **Fantast Three, 32 Burch Close, Kings Lynn, Norfolk PE30 4UJ, UK**. For credit card orders (Visa, MasterCard, or JCB card), visit our website at <**locusmag.com**>. Please allow four to six weeks for your first issue to arrive. Note: All international editions air speeded in envelopes.